

usa today bestselling author  
**tamie dearen**

# i Love Rock 'N' Roll



underground granny matchmakers book one

# **I LOVE ROCK AND ROLL**

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UNDERGROUND GRANNY MATCHMAKERS  
BOOK 1

TAMIE DEAREN

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About the Author

Books by Tamie Dearen

*To my hubby, who never loses his sense of humor*

This is the first book in the Underground Granny Matchmakers, a lighthearted, fun-filled romantic comedy series about finding love (with a little help from grandma).

Enjoy!

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“Ms. Rivers is here for her audition.” Patti’s awkward tone caught my attention, and my muscles tensed.

Not that I wasn’t uptight before. I knew my grandma had ulterior motives when she sent Harmony Rivers’ contact information over. For the past year, Grandma Bette’s attack on my bachelorhood had been relentless. I should’ve hired a tester for the chocolate chip cookies she gave me yesterday—she’d probably laced them with a love potion. These days, I dreaded her phone calls, wondering which sweet-single-girl-from-church she’d attempt to match me with next.

Last week, I’d finally confronted her. “I know what you’re doing, Grandma Bette. And it’s not going to work. I’m not interested in getting married.”

“It’s high time one of my grandsons got married and gave me a great-grandchild. You’re all in your thirties now, and I’m not getting any younger, you know. Your cousins are too wild to settle down, so that leaves you.”

“What about Race? He’s only a year younger than me.”

Race was my half-brother, but we grew up together. Grandma Bette was our mom’s mother. Mom seemed content enough with our lives, seldom interfering or offering advice. But Grandma Bette was another story.

“Ha! I have something else in the pipes for Race.” She’d pursed her lips. “Besides, he’s tied up with his music career.”

As usual, I'd swallowed my resentment. It wasn't Race's fault he'd accidentally recorded a hit song that had rocketed him to the top of the charts and garnered the adoration of millions of screaming fans. And it wasn't like he didn't pay me a fortune to be his manager. But Race had never stopped to think of all I'd sacrificed to keep his life and career in order and clean up his messes. And believe me, there'd been plenty of messes... especially lately.

The truth was I hadn't had much of a music career when his took off. But with my current obligations, there was no chance that would ever happen to me. Not as long as I was babysitting my irresponsible rockstar brother.

Hence the reason I'd become my grandmother's chosen target for her matchmaking, with the production of progeny as the admitted goal. But this time, I had a plan. I was going to take the hand I'd been dealt—the wild card my grandmother was offering—and make a big play.

I'd thought of a way to get my grandmother off my back, control my brother's wild behavior, and free up time to pursue my own music, all in one bold move.

It was going to work. It had to. But the plan's success hinged on one woman—the one I hoped would free me from my prison. The woman who was about to walk into this room and audition for a concocted job as a backup singer in my brother's band. The woman whose innocent smile and squeaky clean resume had the potential to work a miracle on my brother's soiled reputation.

The woman whose arrival currently had my personal assistant looking like someone had asked her to swallow a bowl of live worms.

“What is it, Patti?” My stomach clenched, waiting for her answer. Whatever the problem, I'd find a solution. The big hurdle had been getting my brother on board with the plan. He'd finally agreed in principle, though he'd insisted he wouldn't commit until he met her. In fact, he was on his way over at that very moment.

“She’s a little...” Patti paused, scrunching her nose. “... wet.”

“Wet?” I stood and moved around my desk.

“And muddy.”

I stifled a groan. Why couldn’t one thing in my life go off without a hitch?

“Okay, send her in.” My mind raced. “And when my brother gets here, try to stall him.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Patti said, with her usual sarcasm. She wasn’t in on the plan, but she was too sharp not to suspect something was afoot. To her credit, she hadn’t even questioned me when I’d told her to set up the lone audition for a backup singer we clearly have no need for.

Patti disappeared, and a few seconds later Harmony Rivers limped into the room, in all her drowned-rat glory. She was splattered with mud, down to the tips of her shoes. Her dark auburn tresses were drenched, dripping to make dark patches on her light green top. Her wet clothes stuck to her, emphasizing her curves in a way that was hard to ignore. She had on those stretchy pants—the kind that would’ve shown off her long legs even if they’d been dry. Only the bright blue purse, dangling from a strap on her shoulder, seemed to have escaped whatever watery catastrophe that had befallen her.

Then my gaze met her startling eyes, and my throat constricted. Her picture hadn’t done her justice. Forest-green with blue-gray stars around the pupils, those eyes could’ve kept me entranced for hours. The slight smudging of black mascara under her lower lashes only made her look more enticing. Like a waif who needed protecting.

Not that she was short. She was actually pretty tall, especially with her heels. Still, something about her called out to me. Maybe it was the way she was trembling. She’d obviously been through some kind of trauma. She needed a knight in shining armor, and I was the man for the job.

*No, no, no! This can’t happen. I can’t be attracted to her. I need my brother to take her off my hands, or I’ll be stuck in his*

*shadow for the rest of my life.*

A drop of water clung to her thick eyelashes, and I found myself reaching out to brush it away. At the last second, I jerked my hand back and stuffed it in my pocket. Except it wouldn't fit. After struggling to jam my fingers inside, I gave up and settled for hooking a thumb over the edge.

Those captivating green eyes were staring at my hand. It must've looked ridiculous, hanging precariously from my pocket. Clearing my throat, I brought the hand up to my head and smoothed my hair. It was my signature cool move.

*It's all good. I'm back in my groove.*



West Garrison wanted nothing to do with me. I could tell by his stunned expression, his jerky movements, and the way he scuttled backwards against his desk to put some distance between us. But I couldn't give up without even trying. I'd flown all the way from Nashville to LA for this audition. Not to mention depleting my savings to buy the plane ticket.

If I didn't get this gig, I'd be back to ramen noodles every night. I might even lose my apartment. I'd have to give up and go home with my tail between my legs. Dry Gulch, Texas—the home of the Fighting Stinkbugs. Dad would be thrilled. I'd rather have splinters under my fingernails.

I searched my sleeve for a dry piece of fabric to blot the water running down my forehead. *Why had there been water in the street, anyway? Wasn't there some song about how it never rains in California?*

My legs were shaking, but it wasn't from nerves. Well, at least that wasn't the only reason. One of my heels was broken, and it was taking all my strength to stay balanced. Leaning my weight on the good shoe, I grabbed my sopping wet hair in both hands and twisted, squeezing the water out. Only when I followed his gaze to the distinct puddle forming on the gleaming wood floor did I realize my mistake.

“Sorry!” I scanned the room for a towel. There weren't any. No surprise. Who kept a towel in an office? I dropped to my knees and let the water seep into my leggings. “There. That got most of it sopped up.”

Satisfied, I climbed to my feet, only to find him staring like a broken nutcracker—eyes wide, mouth hanging open. He still hadn't spoken, but that was okay. As long as he hadn't officially rejected me I still had a chance.

"It wasn't my fault," I said.

He blinked a few times. I could only hope he was listening instead of planning how best to usher me out. Or maybe he was thinking of calling the loony bin to have them come for me with a straitjacket.

"It was my shoes." Standing precariously on one foot, I lifted the other to show him the broken, dangling heel on my precious, red-soled Jimmy Toos. Now splattered with mud. Like the rest of me.

"You see, I was an hour early for my audition. So the taxi driver dropped me off where I could do some window shopping. But there weren't any prices in the display, so I was curious and went inside to snoop. But as soon as I touched a dress—I was only trying to find a price tag—the sales lady snatched it and shoved me into a fitting room with it. And then she added three more dresses. And none of them had price tags! I figured that was a really bad sign, right? They probably cost a fortune. And she must've thought I could afford them because I was wearing Jimmy Toos."

I paused, hoping for some indication he was following along, but all I saw was a small twitch at the corner of his lip. Maybe he was shy, and that was his way of communicating.

"Only my Jimmy Toos aren't real," I whispered, because you had to whisper when you admitted something like that. "They're knockoffs. I bought 'em on a street corner for fifty bucks."

A brief smile flashed across his lips. Just for a second, and then it was gone. But it was there! I was making progress.

"So I made noises like I was trying on clothes for a while, and when the coast was clear, I made a beeline for the door. I heard her calling, 'Miss! Miss!' so I slipped outside and started running down the sidewalk, with her chasing me."

“Let me guess.” He lifted an eyebrow and leaned back against his desk. “She tackled you? And you landed in a mud puddle and broke your shoe?”

For the first time, my brain actually processed what I was seeing. This guy was gorgeous! Tall—way taller than my five feet seven inches—and broad shouldered. Dark hair, slightly too long on top, like he’d been too busy to take time for a haircut. Several days’ growth of beard confirmed that impression, while emphasizing the firm lines of his jaw. His crystal blue eyes seemed to see more than they should. I stared at those mesmerizing eyes so long I almost forgot what I was saying.

“No,” I croaked, peeling my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “She didn’t tackle me. I was running and looking back over my shoulder and stepped on a grate in the sidewalk. My heel got stuck and it broke. Thank goodness I landed in a flower bed, so I didn’t get hurt.”

“Looks like you landed in a dirty water fountain.”

“I do like to make a splash.” I flicked a wet strand of hair behind my shoulder.

His mouth kicked up on one side. “I think you succeeded.”

“Before I could get up, a truck drove by and hit a puddle of water. Naturally, it splashed all over me.”

“Naturally.”

“And it turns out, I’d left my purse in the dressing room, and the lady was bringing it to me.”

He bit his lips to keep from laughing, and then I couldn’t take my eyes off them. He had really nice ones. I wondered what it would feel like to kiss him.

*Wait! What am I doing?*

I couldn’t think something like that about this man. If I got this job, he’d be my boss. And if there was one thing I’d learned in my thirty-one years, you never dated your boss. It was a great way to ruin a relationship and a job at the same time. Anyway, I’d sworn off men after Matt—my former boss

—had done his number on me. That’s when I’d decided to move to Nashville and devote myself to pursuing my music career. For the past four years, I’d done just that.

“My middle name is Grace,” I babbled.

“Is that a joke?”

“No, that’s really my middle name.” I chewed on my lower lip, wishing my mouth had an off button. Or at least a slow-down button so it didn’t work faster than my brain. “Actually, I guess it is a joke, for me to have a name like that. Should’ve been Clumsy.”

“Harmony Clumsy doesn’t flow as well as Harmony Grace. Ah, I know a good alternative. Harmony Gauche.”

Good grief, he was so mouthwatering when he smiled. I almost forgot why I’d come.

“Okay, shall I sing for you?”

West’s brow furrowed as his cell phone buzzed. With a glance, he silenced it. Then those mesmerizing eyes locked with mine, sending my heart on a rollercoaster ride. The kind with a thousand-foot drop, followed by a loop-the-loop. This did not bode well.

“Maybe we should reschedule,” he said, a crease between his brows.

I gave my head a shake, pulling my attention back to reality. “I’m fine. I’m ready to sing, if you’ll give me a chance.”

He was frowning at his vibrating cell phone again.

“You could come back tomorrow, when you’re... dry.”

My return ticket was on the red-eye that night. There was no way I could afford to get a hotel and buy another ticket.

“Please! I’m great at singing wet. I sing in the shower all the time.”

He typed something on his phone and slid it back into his pocket. “I’m sorry, Ms. Rivers...”



Everything was falling apart! All because of a little ill-fated window shopping. This was my big chance—to sing on stage with none other than Race Madden. He wasn't just well-known—he was a mega-star. The opportunity of a lifetime was slipping out of my grasp like a frantic chicken. I had to do something, or that hen was going to fly the coop!

If he heard me sing, he wouldn't be able to turn me down. The rest of my life might've been one long episode of *I Love Lucy*, but my voice had never failed me. Not only did I have God-given talent, but I'd spent years honing my skill. I wasn't a good singer—I was great. Not that you could tell by looking at my bank account. But that was because I'd never gotten the big break I'd needed. Until now.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and belted out the crooning melody of Race Madden's lone ballad. It was the only slow song on the rockstar's debut album, by far my favorite. I didn't stop singing until I got to the end of the haunting chorus, holding the final note and eking out every last bit of emotion.

I cracked an eye open and peeked at West Garrison, the doorkeeper to my career. He loved it! His eyes were dilated, and his Adam's apple bobbed like it was taking a lot of effort to swallow. I stayed perfectly still, but inside I was jumping around like a pogo stick.

Then something changed. His warm gaze turned to ice and dropped to the floor... along with my hopes.



Her voice was enthralling! I'd thought her demo must've been expertly mixed to give that rich sound. But standing six feet away as her velvety voice caressed my innermost being, I knew I'd never be the same. Each note reverberated in the room, lulling me into a trance. As the last silky tone ended, I realized I was holding my breath. I gasped to keep from passing out.

How could anyone's voice sound so sweet and yet so sensual? Then I looked into her innocent green eyes, expectant and hopeful, and I had my answer. Her soul was as clean and pure as her clear, untainted voice. And I realized, with horror, that I would be the lowest kind of creature if I carried through with my plan. I couldn't let my brother get anywhere near this guileless woman. He'd ruin her. Even if she was strong enough not to join his wild partying, he'd rip her heart out and hand it back to her in shreds. Like he had with every other woman he'd dated in the past three years. So many, I couldn't count. What had I been thinking?

I had to send Harmony away. Quickly. Maybe she wouldn't be too upset if I offered compensation for her time and travel.

"Ms. Rivers, I'm sorry, but—"

"Wait! You're not going to hire me? Even after you heard me sing?"

"You're very talented." I stared at my feet. "I'm sure you'll find a better gig."

Her chin quivered, but she forced a brave smile that wrenched my heart.

“Will you at least give me a reference? I hear mud-wrestlers are in demand right now.”

A chuckle escaped my lips. “The singing mud-wrestler. It’s a new angle.”

“Mr. Garrison, I really want this job. I *need* this job. I’ll do anything.”

*You don’t know what you’re asking for.*

“I’m sorry, but we’re just not a good fit for you.”

“I promise I’m a good fit. If you’ve got a glass slipper, I’ll cram my foot into it.”

“What?”

“You know, Cinderella? Glass slipper? Good fit?”

She wasn’t making it easy, but I still had to turn her down. “I can’t really explain, but I promise this is for your own protection.”

“I’m not the kind of princess who needs protecting. Just give me a chance. I won’t cause you any trouble.”

I tried using a logical argument. “You sing country. Race Madden sings rock.”

“You knew my background when you invited me to audition. And I just proved I can change my style. You like my voice—I know you do.”

My face heated. I liked a lot more than her voice. And I was already trying to think of an excuse to reconnect. One that didn’t involve my brother. But first, I had to get her out of there.

“Listen, I’ll reimburse you for your plane ticket.” I gestured toward the door. “Just tell Patti how much, and she’ll write a check.”

“I don’t want money. I want this job.” Folding her arms across her chest, she lifted her chin.

Gifted. Proud. Stubborn. Tough. Witty. Exactly the kind of woman I would've been looking for if I'd been looking. Wouldn't you know it? After months of torturous introductions, the one time my grandmother's matchmaking was spot on, I'd already promised the woman to my wayward brother. God must have a sense of humor.

The door opened and Patti stuck her head in. "Excuse me, Mr. Garrison. We have a little... situation." Her expressions said it all. My brother was out there, and she was having a hard time holding him off.

"Stay here. I'll be back." With a wave to Harmony, I was out the door and hurrying down the hall. I met Race coming my way.

"Patti's trying to keep me out. What gives?" His voice already had an edge of anger.

"Just go home. I made a mistake. This isn't the right woman for the job."

His thick eyebrows—the one feature my half-brother and I have in common—scrunched with suspicion. "Why don't you let me be the judge? In this particular situation, I think my opinion's way more important than yours."

"She's not your type." I lowered my voice so Patti wouldn't hear. "She's too nice."

"You're the one who said we needed a nice girl to fix my reputation," he murmured.

"Yes, but this one's so nice the press will never buy it."

He made a growling noise. "You act like you believe all the rumors about me. You know I don't really do drugs."

I wasn't entirely convinced, but I didn't voice that thought.

"Maybe you don't, but what about Gary, Drake and Paul?"

His face reddened. "You know I can't control what the rest of the band does. They're grown men."

I rubbed my temples with my fingers, trying to quell a growing headache. "We've talked about this a thousand times.

You go with them to all their parties. You're condoning it, even if you don't participate."

"If you'd crawl down from your high horse for one second, you'd see they're coping the best they can. You know zilch about what those guys are dealing with."

"Eh-hem." Behind me, Patti cleared her throat. "Thought you might want to know you're not whispering anymore."

"Keep it down," I rasped, grabbing Race's arm. "Harmony might hear you."

"I don't care!" Race twisted out of my grasp. "I'm done listening to your advice. You're the one who said I needed this woman. Suddenly you're doing a one-eighty? What am I supposed to think? This wasn't even my idea."

"I know. I was wrong. I'll think of something else."

Race tilted his head, his gaze drifting down the hall toward my office door.

"Maybe I'd like to meet this woman."

*Arghh! Over my dead body!*

With great effort, I calmed myself and used my most soothing tone. "Just go home and let me find someone else."

"You don't need anyone else." Harmony's indignant voice came from behind me, and I choked on my own tongue.

Staring over my shoulder, Race's lazy grin indicated her bedraggled appearance didn't put him off. Was he as taken with those spellbinding green eyes as I'd been?

*Maybe he'll balk at the hint of marriage. He's a sworn bachelor.* "This isn't the kind of woman who wants to do a few shows and move on to another job. She's looking for something *permanent*."

"I'll take temporary, if I have to." Harmony folded her hands as she pleaded. "I don't care if my contract is only for one show. You'll love me so much, you'll never want to let me go."

My ribs squeezed. I'd brought a lamb to the slaughterhouse, and now she was pushing her way inside. As a last resort, I tried to scare her off, though I knew it would infuriate my brother.

"Harmony, this gig could ruin your reputation. Haven't you paid attention to the gossip about Race?"

"What are you doing? You're supposed to be on my side!" Race punched a finger at me. "Are you trying to get yourself fired?"

I would've loved to have answered yes, but I couldn't hurt him like that. I knew how much he needed me. We both knew it. He just didn't know how much I hated the job.

"Please give me a chance, Mr. Garrison." Harmony's hand came to rest on my arm, sending heat radiating through my entire system. I turned, backing away from her dangerous touch. "Maybe having me around will help his reputation instead of hurting mine."

It was like she was following a script for my original plan. I groaned in frustration.

"I agree." Race gave me a smug smile.

I dragged him down the hallway by his elbow. Somehow, I had to persuade him that involving Harmony in this plot was a terrible idea.

Just as I opened my mouth to present my argument, she started singing. My brother stopped in his tracks; my tugging ineffectual. The drunk expression on his face told me I'd just lost the battle. I threw up my hands, surrendering to the inevitable. Slack-jawed, he moved toward her as if in a trance.

Never mind that the vocal backup position was a farce. Never mind that we hadn't even planned to send her voice through to the audience during the live shows. She'd hooked him with that alluring voice, and now he wanted her. He would decide she was perfect for the plan we'd devised. He would move fast and ask her out. And she would be thrilled at the chance. But Race's relationships never lasted longer than a

month. Which meant this innocent woman would get crushed when he dumped her.

My stupid plan. My stupid fault.

When she finished singing, Race's smile broadened. I wouldn't have been surprised to see saliva dripping from his lupine teeth.

"You're hired," he said.

"Thank you, so much! I promise you won't regret it." Bouncing on her bare toes, Harmony threw her arms around my brother, all her softness pressed against him.

He caressed her back, flashing me a smug grin as I resisted a sudden urge to punch him in the face.

"Yippee!" She swirled in a circle a few times until she slammed against the wall. "Ow! Ow! Ow!" she cried, holding her nose.

"Are you okay?" Race asked.

"I'm fine." Her hand muffled her voice. "Don't worry, I can still sing, even if it's broken."

"Let me kiss it, kiss it, maaay-be..." Race sang the chorus from one of his hit songs.

"And make it better, better, baaa-by..." Her hand dropped as she joined in, a smile lighting her face, despite her watering eyes.

I hated the fact that they sounded good together.

Race bent close to her and murmured, "I'll happily kiss your nose if you'll let me. It might actually help."

Her face pink, she scrambled backwards until her back met the wall, inducing another wince of pain. "No, thanks. I just want the job."

"You've got it," he declared, grinning.

I swallowed my pride and plastered what I hoped was a cheery smile onto my face. "But what about that mud-wrestling gig I was going to get you?"

Her contagious laughter filled the hallway. Chuckling, I vowed to make it happen again. Somehow, I needed to spend more time with her.

Maybe it wouldn't be so awful, after all. What was the worst that could happen? But I knew the answer—Harmony might fall in love with my brother. Who was I kidding? She would definitely fall for him. Like every other woman who'd gotten within ten feet of him. Like the only woman I'd ever cared about.

Because two things were certain in life—death, and living under my brother's planet-sized shadow.





A phone rang, and Patti hurried down the hallway, leaving me with the two men, tension thick between them.

“You may have to pinch me,” I babbled with excitement. “Ignore what I just said—I don’t want to be pinched. But it really is too good to be true. I’m kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. That’s usually a figure of speech, but in my case, one shoe has already dropped, so to speak.”

Race’s lids drooped in his signature sultry look. The one on the cover of his album and the poster half a million teenaged girls had on their walls. His sandy brown hair fell across his face, and he tossed his head to flip it back. Bottomless brown eyes looked me over as an uncomfortable warmth spread through my veins.

“Go out to eat with me,” Race said. It didn’t sound like a request. I’m sure no woman had ever turned him down, so why would he bother to ask? “We can discuss the terms of your contract over dinner.”

At his side, the brooding West Garrison crossed his arms, obviously disgruntled that Race had overridden his decision. When West’s heated gaze connected with mine my mouth went dry. I couldn’t figure out what I’d done to make him dislike me so.

“The *three* of us can talk over dinner.” West stepped forward.

“I don’t need your help.” Race pushed West aside and grinned at me, his gaze dropping to my bare feet. “But I’m

afraid you'll need shoes. You know how it is... 'No shirt, no shoes, no service.'"

I curled my toes, hoping he didn't notice my man-feet.

That's right, I have man-feet. My father's, to be exact, and they aren't pretty. If not for the pink toenail polish, my feet could belong to Fred Flintstone. Why couldn't I have gotten my mother's small, delicate feet? All my good stuff came from Mom—my red hair, my green eyes, my smallish nose. Dad just gave me junk—big wide feet, bony shoulders, and terrible eyesight.

I gestured to my hair and clothes. "I'm not in any condition to go to a restaurant."

It was a good excuse to avoid going out with Race. I wasn't sure whether he was my actual boss or if that title belonged to West. But to be safe, I planned to guard myself against both of them. Nothing beyond a professional relationship.

"Actually," West said, in a tone that sounded like grinding gears on an old pickup truck. "I need to clarify a few things with Race first. So you have plenty of time to go to the hotel and change clothes."

"I didn't bring any luggage. My airline charged extra for every single thing. I'm surprised they didn't make you stick a quarter in to use the toilet on the plane. When I booked my flight, I had never imagined I'd be flying home like this." I pulled my clinging wet shirt away from my body.

"You didn't bring a suitcase?" West asked. "Not even a carry-on?"

I don't think his eyebrows could've gotten any higher on his forehead.

"They charge for carry-ons, too. I only brought my purse with me." I patted the bag hanging on my shoulder. "So I don't have a change of clothes, but I do have an extra pair of underwear in here. Gramma says you should always have a spare pair in case you get in an accident. I'm not really sure why..."

West coughed, but I think he was disguising a chuckle. Race didn't bother to hide it. He laughed out loud. I suppose I gave them too much information, but when I'm nervous or excited, my mouth works faster than my brain.

I decided to be upfront about everything. "Anyway, I can't go to dinner with either of you, because you're my bosses, and I have a hard and fast rule about that. Absolutely no fraternizing with the boss."

"Very wise of you." West nodded, flashing a surreptitious look at Race. "Did you hear that, Race? Absolutely no fraternizing."

"This is just a business dinner." Race waggled his eyebrows. "And anyway, rules are made to be broken."

I knew better than to think Race Madden wanted a relationship with someone like me. Even if I hadn't been dripping and covered in mud splatters, I didn't come close to the beauty of the usual women he dated—the hundreds he seemed to use and discard like plastic dinnerware, according to the celebrity reports. But the man was very flirty. And even more smoking-hot in person than in his pictures. Not that I cared so much about his looks. I was in love with his voice. So the real danger lay with my own willpower. I could easily get a crush on him and lose my focus.

"Harmony has standards," said West. "High standards. You could learn a thing or two from her, Race."

"I'd rather teach her a thing or two."

Race flashed a lazy grin at me. I'm pretty sure my mouth dropped open for a long time while my brain stalled in the air and took a nosedive. Just before I crashed to the ground, West came to my rescue.

"Those who can, do," West said. "Those who can't, teach."

I slapped my hand over my mouth, laughing behind my fingers. I had a terrible tendency to inhale with a snort if I laughed too loudly. So embarrassing.

"What would you know?" Race growled at West. "You haven't been on a date since you hit puberty."

“I know how to treat a woman with respect,” West countered, stepping forward until the two were nose to nose.

“I hope you both brushed your teeth recently,” I muttered. “Otherwise, this could be a stinky situation.”

My comment must’ve broken the tension because their stiff posture dissolved. Race rolled his eyes, and West chuckled.

Patti reappeared with a stack of papers in hand. “Here’s that contract you asked me to draw up yesterday, Mr. Garrison. I assume you want it now.”

I rifled through my purse until I found a pen. “I’m ready to sign.”

Race grabbed the papers and held them over his shoulder. “Here. You can use my back as a desk.”

Ignoring his flexing muscles (I swear, he did it on purpose) I scribbled my name on the line. Yes, I probably should’ve read it first, but I was too excited.

West grimaced like he’d stepped in dog poop. Weird that I found the man attractive, even when he wore a constipated scowl. Too bad he didn’t like me. On the other hand, if he really wanted to get rid of me, he might be willing to help me go out on my own.

But Race liked me, and that was all that mattered. Though his innuendos let me know I’d have to set some strict boundaries if I didn’t intend to become another notch on his bedpost.

This was the beginning of something big. Nothing was going to stop me. Not rain or snow or sleet or hail. Or broken heels or wet hair or a flirtatious rockstar. And especially not a grumpy manager with blue eyes that did some sort of blender-thing on my insides—one who currently appeared to be contemplating murder. No worries, this cat had nine lives. And clumsy as I was, I still had a few left.



“I CALLED EARLIER, and you didn’t answer.” Gramma’s voice blasted my ear. She was a bit hard of hearing, so she always yelled into the phone. “I thought you were dead.”

“I was just on the phone with my landlord.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“Nope. Heart’s still beating, best I can tell.”

“Hope you’re going to get your deposit back. Did you use the vinegar and baking soda and a toothbrush to clean the toilet, like I told you?”

I couldn’t resist teasing her. “Sure did. But how do I clean the toothbrush so I can use it again?”

Gramma gasped. “Harmony, no! Throw that one away and buy a new one.”

“I would, but I can’t afford it.”

“I’ll send some more loan money, so you can buy one!”

“Just kidding, Gramma. I used an old toothbrush and threw it away. And thanks for the loan, by the way. It was a real lifesaver. I blew my savings getting to the audition and had nothing left to buy new clothes. I have to dress all in black for the performances, and I didn’t own a single black outfit.”

The phone slipped off my shoulder where I’d wedged it so I could keep packing. It clattered to the floor, and I snatched it back. “Sorry. Dropped my cell. What did you say?”

“I said, I like the green you wear. It matches your eyes.”

“Maybe it’s time for a change. I might wear too much green. I’ve been told I look like the spawn of Princess Fiona and Kermit the Frog.”

“Scoffers! What do they know? Your green clothes didn’t stop you from getting this job.”

“Maybe because the mud splatter toned down the color.”

“Yeah. Probably gave you a camo look. I’ve heard that’s popular with men.”

“Maybe. But I’ve never seen a picture of Race Madden wearing camo.”

“Forget that guy. What about West Garrison? What was he like?”

“How did you know the manager’s name?”

“You must’ve mentioned it in passing. You know me—my mind is like a steel trap.” She chuckled. “Maybe a little rusted but still pretty snappy.”

“Whatever, Gramma. I’ll probably get dementia before you do.”

Thankfully, I’d avoided her question about West. My intestines still felt tangled when I thought about him. We’d mostly communicated via detached-sounding professional emails. But one day we’d gotten into a text conversation that had felt oddly intimate.

I’d found myself telling him all about my family. My three younger sisters. My Gramma, Loretta, who’d filled in as best she could after we’d lost Mom to cancer. My dad, who believes you need a passport to travel beyond the Dry Gulch city limits. I’d spilled everything like a leaky bucket. But when I’d asked him the same questions, he’d clammed up.

“With my incredible acting skills, you’ll never know when I’m getting forgetful,” Gramma quipped.

“You’ve played every female lead role at the Dry Gulch Community Theater. You ought to get some kind of Oscar for that.”

“And now I’ve graduated to the snarky old lady roles. No acting required. I can just be myself.”

“You’re my idol, Gramma. I want to be just like you when I get older.”

“If you want to stay sharp, you’d better start exercising. That’s the secret.”

“Speaking of secrets, I’m supposed to go out to eat with West, Race and Patti when I get to LA tomorrow, and I didn’t tell them mine.”

“That you only eat Italian, Mexican, chicken-fried steaks, or burgers?”

“I also like fried chicken and rib-eyes,” I defended. “But no, I didn’t want to admit I’m a picky eater. I’m hoping they’ll choose a steak place.”

“Why don’t you just tell them what you like?”

“West already thinks I’m naïve. I don’t want to give him any more ammunition against me. So I made a decision. Starting tomorrow, I’m going to learn to eat all kinds of foods.”

“Hello? Hello? I must have a bad connection. It sounded like you said you were going to eat new foods.”

“I did say that.” Since she couldn’t see me, I stuck out my tongue. “And it’s going to happen. I’m going on a singing tour with Race Madden. That means I have to be sophisticated.”

“And how’s a Nashville country singer from Dry Gulch Texas going to pull that off?”

“Easy. I’m going to wear black and eat exotic food and talk without an accent.”

“Harmony Rivers, you listen to me. You don’t need to change to impress anyone. If West Garrison can’t handle the real you, then forget him.”

“West Garrison doesn’t like me at all,” I said, though I had to admit he’d been more than polite when we were texting.

“Why not?”

“West said I wasn’t a good fit for the band, but Race overruled him. That’s the only reason I got the job. He even asked me out.”

“Oh, no, no, no... You can’t be with that Race boy. He’s too wild. You’re supposed to be with West.”

“Gramma, I think you may be senile after all,” I said. “This is about my career. I’m not going to *be with* either guy. They’re both my bosses, and I’m not making that mistake again. Not after what happened with What’s-His-Name.”

Ever since Matt had dumped me, I'd refused to say his name aloud. Gramma was the only family member who'd joined me in my disdainful name-change.

"What's-His-Name's already ruined your past, dear. Don't let him ruin your future."

She made it sound simple, but it wasn't. Matt had done a number on my ego. I'd been planning the wedding for almost a year when he dropped the bomb that exploded my life. He was bored. Bored! An accountant called me boring. Have you ever heard a sadder assessment? Yes, I had a boring job. But whose fault was that? I was his assistant. Didn't that make him the boring one?

He couldn't imagine spending the rest of his life with me in Dry Gulch. I would've lived anywhere he wanted, but he never bothered to ask. He moved to Austin, and six months later he married the female anchor on the morning news show.

That's when I knew I had to prove him wrong. I headed to Nashville to become a country music star. Except it never happened. And after a while, I started to wonder if Matt had been right about me after all.

Until I got this job. My big break. Success was finally within my grasp. I just had to hold on until it happened.

"The only thing that could ruin my future would be for me to get romantically involved with my boss when I'm on the verge of being discovered. And believe me, that's not going to happen."

"A rolling tumbleweed gathers no grass."

She really was losing it. I corrected her gently. "A rolling stone gathers no moss."

"Ah ha! You said it, not me. I think that means it's time to settle down."

"You tricked me."

"If you can get tricked by your eighty-eight-year-old granny, you deserve it."



“I can’t get tied down now, Gramma. Not when my career is starting to take off.”

“I just want you to have the same happiness I had with your PawPaw. I don’t want you to end up alone.”

Whenever she started talking about PawPaw, I knew she was trying to manipulate me. I kept my guard up.

“There’s plenty of time for that, Gramma. Later. After I make a name for myself.”

“A man like your PawPaw will love you for who you are. It’s unconditional. There’s nothing like it. Your audience loves you for what you give them. It feels great in the moment, but it gets really lonely when you leave the stage.”

“You really don’t regret leaving Broadway to live on a farm in Dry Gulch? Doing community theater when you could’ve been a star?”

“Not for a second. Better to have the love of one good man than the adoration of a million fans.”

*Here she goes again, trying to get me to settle down.*

“You encouraged me to go after my dreams. Now you’re sounding like Dad.”

“I want you to have your dream and get married, too.” Her voice cracked, tugging at my emotions. “And with the right man, you won’t have to choose.”

It could be true. But this time, I was going to make sure I had the dream before I even let myself think about falling in love.

“I’ll think about it.”

“I know exactly what you mean when you say you’ll think about it.” Gramma tsked her disapproval. “I want you to promise me you won’t write off a possible relationship just because a guy is technically your boss. One of my best friends, an actress, ended up married to our director. Their marriage lasted forty-something years, until he passed away.”

I still felt raw from Matt's rejection and the upheaval of my well-planned life. No way I was going to go through that again.

"I can't promise, but I'll try. How's that?"

She let out an Oscar-worthy sigh. "It would be a great way to show What's-His-Name you've truly forgotten him."

Now she had my attention. "Okay. I'll try harder."



“Where are we going to eat?” I was squeezed into the back seat of Race’s convertible. He’d made a point of bragging about having a back seat in his Lamborghini. Some LA pedestrians recognized Race and got excited. They stared at Patti and me, probably wondering who we were. I have to admit, it was a rush. I couldn’t wait to be on stage in front of all those people.

“There’s this great new sushi place,” Race said. “You’ll love it.”

“Awesome.” I tried to mimic his enthusiasm, especially when I noticed West watching for my reaction. I’d never eaten sushi or even seen it in person, but I knew it was raw fish. Though the thought made my stomach churn, I was determined to push through.

This was the beginning of the new me. Harmony Rivers, the popular singing star who loved all kinds of food and all kinds of adventure. I could picture myself, cultured and sophisticated, taking a bite with an expression of rapture and making an erudite comment about the delectable morsel. I would imagine Matt walking in the restaurant, and how shocked he would be to see me eating sushi. I would not think about the possibility of me gagging and spitting a piece of soggy raw fish back on my plate.

Inside the restaurant, I was pleasantly surprised that it didn’t smell like a fish market. That would help considerably. I stared at the lengthy menu, panic rising in my chest. It might

as well have been written in Greek. Asking for help, would reveal my ignorance about sushi. Maybe I could simply copy what someone else ordered.

Patti laid her menu down, having evidently made her choice. “Harmony, will this be your first time to go on tour?”

“Nah, I’ve been on plenty of tours. My elementary school class once spent the entire day touring NASA.”

My timing was perfect. West choked on the sip of water he’d just taken, eyes watering as he coughed. That’s what he got for saying I was an ignorant country bumpkin. Well, he hadn’t used those exact words, but I could tell that’s what he’d been thinking when he’d made little snide comments in his emails.

“Just kidding. I knew what you meant.” I tried to keep a straight face. “No, I haven’t been on a tour, unless you count singing at every single dance hall within sixty miles of Dry Gulch in the course of a six-week period.”

“That definitely counts.” Patti grinned at me. I already liked this woman. How could I not? She’d offered her spare bedroom for me to live in until I got my first paycheck. *And* she’d taken me to get a manicure, a luxury I hadn’t been able to afford since moving to Nashville. “How many dance halls did you sing at?”

“Two.” I ignored their chuckles. I had much bigger problems—what to order. My palms were getting damp. I couldn’t even find a salad choice on the menu. “What are you getting, Patti?”

“I’m going for the Love Boat. It’s a sashimi sampler. That way I can try a lot of different ones.” She leaned close, but whispered loud enough for the guys to hear. “Plus, Race is buying tonight, so it’s the only chance I’ll ever have to get it.”

“I’ll gladly buy you a Love Boat, Patti.” Race tilted his head. “Just you and me, baby...”

“No, thanks. I’m happy with Joel.”

“You’ve been engaged to him for a year, and you’ve never even introduced him to me.” Race folded his menu. “If I didn’t

know better, I'd think you were making him up to put me off."

"But that's impossible," I said. "No woman in her right mind would turn you down."

Race smiled. "Ah-ha! Then you'll go out with me, Harmony?"

"Of course not. I never claimed to be in my right mind. Patti, on the other hand, is perfectly sane. And besides, I met Joel last night. He's very real. And very dreamy."

Joel had been one of those guys I'd thought kind of ordinary-looking when I'd first met him. But by the time I'd watched him treat Patti like an absolute queen for a couple of hours, I was gaga over him. Matt had never even come close to adoring me the way Joel had Patti.

"Frankly, Race, I don't care what you think." Unperturbed, Patti spread her napkin in her lap. "My private life is none of your business. And neither is Harmony's."

"Patti's right." West frowned. "We discussed this, Race. Harmony made it perfectly clear she doesn't want to date her boss. So unless you want to get slapped with a sexual harassment suit, you'd better back off."

"That's right. No dating the boss. Ever." I nodded sharply, hoping to copy Patti's unperturbed expression. I gave up on my menu, deciding to follow Patti's lead. Surely there would be something I liked on a sampler. And maybe it came with a salad and bread. "I'm going with the Love Boat, too."

"The sashimi sampler?" West studied me with a concerned expression. "I expected you to order something like a California roll. The Love Boat is pretty adventurous. Are you sure that's what you want?"

Though I didn't know what foods were included with either of those menu choices, I answered with my confident stage voice.

"That's me. Totally adventurous." I ignored the butterflies in my stomach. "Didn't I quit my job and move to LA to go on a music tour with a bunch of people I don't even know? Can't get much more adventurous than that, right?"

I hid my hands in my lap so no one could see them shaking.

“I’ll be there, and you know me,” Race said. “We don’t have to date, but I’d love to have a friend to talk to. You’ll see how it is. You get such a rush when you’re on stage, and then everything comes crashing down.”

The server came back, and we gave him our orders. I prayed for a strong stomach. Tossing my cookies wouldn’t be a great way to impress these people.

Patti sipped her water, seemingly unaware of the tension between the men across from us. “Race, shouldn’t your newest girlfriend be the one listening to you? Aren’t you with Cami Lyons?”

“We broke it off three weeks ago.” Race’s thick brows shadowed his eyes.

“Oh, I remember reading that. It’s so hard to keep track. Now, who did I see you’ve been going out with recently? I thought I saw a picture of you with a blonde...” Tapping a finger on her cheekbone, Patti looked up toward the ceiling as if she were trying hard to remember. But having spent an evening with her, I knew she seldom spoke a word without sarcasm.

“Two blondes,” West growled. “You probably saw him on the cover of *Fame and Rumors*, with an arm around each one.”

“We went out a few times since then, but we aren’t really dating.” Face clouded, Race dropped his gaze to his lap. “Those girls were like all the others. They were with me because they wanted to be seen. To have their moment in the spotlight. I don’t really have any friends to talk to except the guys in the band. And they’ve got their own problems to deal with.”

He looked so honestly frustrated that my heart squeezed in sympathy. I knew how it felt when no one seemed to understand you, and I immediately wanted to help. Which is probably why friends had dumped their emotional garbage on me my entire life.

“I’ll be your friend, Race. You can talk to me anytime.” I wished my words back the minute they left my mouth.

West groaned, pressing his fingers to his temples. “Harmony, he’s playing with your emotions.”

“That’s not true.” Race’s pleading eyes never left mine as he jabbed an elbow into West’s ribs, eliciting a wince. “I really could use a listening ear. Friends only.”

Race reached across the table and rested his hand on top of mine, but the gesture felt anything but *friendly*. I jerked my hand away, my elbow jostling my glass and sloshing water out. I snatched my napkin, the silverware clattering to the table, and blotted the spilled liquid.

“I think the water in LA has a vendetta against me,” I mumbled. So much for appearing cool and sophisticated.

“Don’t worry about it,” Patti said. “West usually spills food on his tie.”

“I’m afraid that’s true.” West winked.

“Wouldn’t happen if he’d take my advice and leave off the stupid tie,” Race said. “But he’s way too stuffy. Has to dress up all the time.”

Personally, I thought West looked awesome, but I’m a sucker for a guy in a suit. Put him in a tux, and my legs turn to noodles.

“At least I own a suit,” said West.

“I own one.” Race jutted his chin forward. “I wore it to Grandpa’s funeral two years ago.”

“That was mine. I lent it to you, and you never gave it back.”

“It was out of fashion. I donated it to charity.”

“I had to lend you one of my old ones from high school. All my tailored suits would’ve been too tight in the gut for you.”

“You don’t believe him, do you, Harmony?” Race patted his tight belly through his shirt. “You’ve seen pictures of my

abs, right?"

Before I even had time to blush, Patti said, "The entire world has seen pictures of your abs, Race. Not sure why those pictures were necessary."

I didn't understand why they were both picking on Race, but I felt duty bound to defend him. After all, he was paying for my dinner.

"When you're modeling for an underwear ad, you pretty much have to show your underwear," I said. "A rockstar could also be a model, right?"

"Rii-ight," said Patti, rolling her eyes.

"He wasn't modeling underwear," West said. "He put those up on his Instagram page."

"Oh..." Now my cheeks flamed. I grabbed my water glass, gulping to cool myself before my face got ugly red. "Well, Lounger's Underwear should've paid you something. They were all sold out at Wal-Mart last week."

"You were shopping for men's underwear?" Race's mouth kicked up at the corners. "Because of my photos? That's awesome! West, why don't you see if you can get me an endorsement deal with Lounger's?"

"Oh, joy," West replied, his teeth clenched. "I was so hoping for one more thing to put on my plate. I look forward to hours of gazing at pictures of my brother in his underwear."

"Your brother?" I couldn't hide my shock. "You're brothers?"

As I stared at them, I could see a slight resemblance. I'd assumed they had muscular builds because they both lifted weights. And they looked similar across the brow, but their eyes were completely different. Though Race was the heart-throb for millions of women, I found West's swarthier complexion more attractive.

As West dropped his face into his hands, I realized he probably hated being compared to his famous brother all the time. No wonder he hadn't mentioned their relation.



“We’re half-brothers,” Race said. “He’s the stuffy half. I’m the fun half.”

With my lips rolled between my teeth to keep from laughing, I sent West a sympathetic smile. His body language and everything he’d said indicated he wasn’t thrilled being his brother’s manager.

I knew the feeling. My years of working for Matt weren’t very fulfilling. It suddenly occurred to me, if we’d gone ahead with our plans, I’d have been doing that for the rest of my life. The guy might’ve made me feel as important as a dung beetle in the desert, but he’d sort of done me a favor.

Maybe I’d thank him someday....

Nah!

I couldn’t help wishing I could help West find a new job. He was obviously great at what he did. Maybe he just needed to manage a different singer—one who wasn’t stuck on himself like Race was. But let’s be honest. All the singing stars probably had enormous egos.

Then it hit me. Maybe West could be *my* manager. Once I convinced him of my potential to make it with a solo career. He certainly knew the ropes, though his connections were mostly in rock music, rather than country. Race had become a star practically overnight. His first album went platinum. But Race didn’t need West anymore. Maybe Race could find someone new, and West could work with me instead. I could even write some new songs... some that would cross over from country to the pop stations.

*What am I thinking? West doesn’t even like me.*

He didn’t even want to give me a chance as a backup singer. I might find West more physically attractive, but Race was the brother who believed in me.

“Are you with us, Harmony?” Race’s words jerked me back to the present.

“Sorry... what?” I blinked.

“You were in your own world,” Patti said.

“Yeah, I have a tendency to get lost in my mind.”

“Scary place, a woman’s mind,” said West. “I’d be terrified if I were lost in there. I’d need a locator beacon so someone could rescue me.”

“Very funny,” I said. “I’d love to go inside a man’s mind. So empty. The acoustics would be incredible.”

“Reverb,” West said, his gaze catching mine.

*Sigh!* Those blue eyes were pretty. Like a deep, clear lake. And long lashes. Why did guys always get those incredible lashes?

“Tons of reverb. Like an echo chamber,” I added.

West’s mouth kicked up on one side. “True of most men. But my mind is stuffed to the gills.”

“So you’re a hoarder?” Elbows on the table, I rested my chin on my hands.

“Afraid so. Barely even a walking path between stacks.”

“Need an intervention?” I grinned.

“Definitely.”

Two dimples winked into sight. Even white teeth. He was mouthwatering when he smiled.

“My mind isn’t empty,” Race said. “It’s just uncluttered. I get rid of everything that doesn’t matter.”

“Which means he only thinks about women and music,” Patti said.

“That’s not all!” Race wore a highly offended expression. “I also think about money and cars.”

“And food?” I offered.

“Yes, food. And here comes ours right now.” He licked his lips. “This looks amazing.”

The server set a gargantuan platter in front of me. It was a horrifying sight. Nothing but little globs of soft, limp, fleshy meat—assumedly hunks of raw fish—in hues of pink and white. No salad. No potatoes. Not even a measly piece of

bread. I couldn't do it. I'd been a picky eater all my life. Why had I thought it was a good idea to suddenly be adventurous in my diet? Hadn't I done enough to prove myself? Hadn't it been enough to take this singing gig?

Everyone else seemed to be quite excited about digging in, oohing and ahing over the food on the table. I added my own unenthusiastic "yum" to the mix.

West cleared his throat. "Harmony, would you be interested in a swap? Your Love Boat for my California roll? That sampler looks like it might be more than you were expecting, and I'm hungrier than I thought."

I eyed his plate. I had no idea what it was, but it looked better than mine. He had a long tube of something with rice on the outside, like I'd seen in the displays in the grocery stores. It wasn't chicken fried steak and gravy, but it had to be better than quivery slabs of uncooked fish.

I'd failed. I'd wanted to prove myself to my new friends... especially West. He'd assumed I was uncultured and unsophisticated, and now he knew for sure. I looked up, expecting to see derision on his face. But all I saw was a sweet, understanding smile, and it made my heart feel squiggly.

He lifted his plate and held it out toward me. "You don't have to switch if you don't want to. I can always order another roll."

"No, I'm good with swapping." I tried not to look at the gooey pink globs as I passed it over. When his plate was in front of me, my stomach settled down. Maybe I could start being adventurous tomorrow.

I didn't want to garner extra attention from Patti and Race, who appeared to be clueless about the whole ordeal, so I willed West to read my gratitude in my expression. Though, who knew whether my silent message was accurately received.

Following my companions' leads, I picked up my black-lacquered chopsticks and attempted to duplicate the way they manipulated the sticks. Quickly giving up on moving them

separately, I held them together and tried using them like a small flat spoon. It worked to separate the roll into slices, but scooping them up proved impossible. I did manage to jab it into the small ball of green stuff I hoped was some variation of guacamole, and lift the entire glob.

*Victory!*

As I plopped it in my mouth, West said, “That stuff is pretty hot.”

Too late to do anything but swallow, my eyes watered as I chased it down with a long drink of water. Even that wasn’t enough to keep my sinuses from burning.

His concerned gaze studied me as I cleared my throat and gulped more water.

“Not bad,” I rasped.

“But not good, either?” West asked, amusement dancing in his eyes.

“Not any worse than biting into a roasted jalapeño pepper.”

Finally cluing in on the conversation, Patti paused, a droopy piece of raw fish dangling from her chopsticks. “You don’t like sushi?”

“Maybe I do,” I said, mortified that I’d been found out. I feigned nonchalance. “You never know until you try.”

Ironic to be quoting one of Gramma’s favorite sayings. She’d used it in a vain attempt to coax me into trying a “just one bite” of foods I’d refused.

“You should’ve told me,” Race said. “We could’ve gone somewhere else. I only picked this place because it’s new.”

“No worries. I like to try new things.” It wasn’t true, exactly, but I wanted it to be. In my mind, that made it okay to say. I wasn’t telling a lie—I was using positive-thinking to create a new reality, or some such mumbo-jumbo.

“There’s no raw fish in that California Roll,” West offered, gently. “Just rice, avocado, cucumber, and crab meat. I think you’ll like it. Try dipping it in the teriyaki sauce.”

“That actually sounds pretty good. I love teriyaki steak.” Since the gig was up, I switched to a fork, speared a slice and dipped it in the sauce. An amazing explosion of flavor hit my taste buds. I couldn’t help sighing with pleasure.

“You like it?” West asked, clearly anxious, waiting for my response.

At that moment, looking into his concerned eyes, I realized he’d purposefully ordered the California Roll because he thought I might want to trade with him. Such a sweet considerate gesture. He wasn’t demeaning, like I’d thought. Maybe that meant he liked me a little bit after all. I could’ve kissed the man right then and there!

*Hold on, girl! Haven’t you learned anything from all your mistakes? Even if this guy is a whole lot nicer than you thought he was, he’s still your boss.*

*But it was going to be a friendly kiss, I argued with myself. Just to show my gratitude. Nothing more. Strictly professional.*

*Right. And I can get you a great deal on a gorgeous piece of swamp land in Arizona...*

Even my conscience was sarcastic.



Grandma Bette aimed her phone at me. “This is my grandson, West. He’s single, thirty-two, has a college degree and a steady job. His hobby is music.”

“What are you doing?” I took a drink of water, needing help to force down the mouthful of roast that suddenly tasted unappetizing. I hated that she’d summed up my entire boring life in so few words, including the fact that my music was merely a hobby.

She’d roped Race and me into coming over for Sunday night dinner. By “roped” I mean she described her pot roast in mouthwateringly delicious details and we begged her to invite us. We usually had to pay for our supper, in some form or fashion, but we didn’t mind. It was totally worth it. GeeBee could’ve been a world class chef if she’d wanted. Or a baker.

Sometimes she had a list of little chores for us to do around her three-bedroom house in Orange County, part of the LA metroplex. She and grandpa had bought it way back in the day, before the property values soared. GeeBee didn’t mind spending money on luxuries, but household maintenance didn’t fall into that classification. So Race and I had learned to do plumbing and carpentry via YouTube videos and sheer necessity. I’m not quite sure how our other cousins got out of those duties.

But the culinary reward was well worth the price of a little physical labor and helping her with her current technology

challenges—like setting up a new phone or operating her television remote.

Race chuckled and took a sip of water. “Whatever you’re doing, GeeBee, leave me out of it.”

“I’m putting West’s video up on TikTok.”

Water spewed from Race’s mouth, followed by a hacking-wheezing sound.

“You’re on TikTok?” I asked as Race pounded his chest, eyes watering.

“I am. So what?” Her lips thinned, eyes squinting, as if it were absurd for us to question how or why our eighty-eight-year-old grandmother was on the youth-dominated social media platform.

“Okay, I won’t even ask how you got on there, but why are you posting a video of me without my permission?” I comforted myself knowing that no one would likely see what she posted, anyway. I think she had twelve friends on Facebook the last time I’d helped her with her account.

“I guess you’d better give me permission, then. Why don’t you just sign your napkin?” She pointed to the folded paper towel on my plastic placemat, then stood up to put her plate in the sink. She never ate more than three bites of a meal, though she always cooked enough for an entire football team. “I need to find someone new for you. Harmony was the only one I liked out of the last round of applications, but I hear you rejected her.”

I started to say I hadn’t rejected her, but thought better of it and clamped my lips shut.

“Hang on a minute.” Race mopped the water on the table with his napkin. “GeeBee found Harmony?”

“I certainly did,” she said, before I could respond. “And I thought I finally had a perfect match, but I hear West didn’t like her. So it’s back to my TikTok.”

It took a few minutes for that sentence to sink in. Who’d told GeeBee I didn’t like Harmony? The information hadn’t

come from Race or me.

“Not that I’m looking, GeeBee, but why didn’t you match Harmony with me?” asked Race.

“I have plans for you, too. Eventually. But right now, you’re in my Granny-Prayer-Warriors requests, instead.” She turned the water on and began filling the sink with sudsy water.

“What’s that?” he asked, pushing his plate away, his appetite evidently gone, like mine.

“Exactly what it sounds like—all the grannies write in asking each other to pray for their grandkids. Right now, we’re praying for you to *find your way*.” After a scrubbing, she placed the sparkling clean plate in her dishwasher. I’m not sure why she didn’t simply dry it and put it away.

Race’s expression went stormy. Practically a hurricane. From the icy glare he sent in my direction, he probably thought I’d been talking to GeeBee about him, but I hadn’t. I tried to tamp down the crackling tension.

“GeeBee, we appreciate you praying for us,” I said, purposefully including myself in the statement, “but I don’t think either of us want to have you talking about us to your friends on social media.”

“Why not? They don’t know who you are. Just your first names.”

“I’m pretty sure all your friends know who I am,” said Race.

“They aren’t really my friends.” She took a dishrag and started scrubbing the table. “I haven’t even met most of them. We only talk on the phone if we get to know each other. And I never mentioned your music... at least I don’t think I did.”

Race still looked like he was about to explode, so I probed a little further.

“Exactly how many people are in your little prayer group?” I asked.



“I don’t know.” Her lips pursed and twisted to the side. “My last prayer request got about 185 likes.”

I grimaced. A few more than I’d expected but not exactly earth-shattering. “Okay, so maybe you shouldn’t mention our names at all anymore. Even our first names.”

Race added a surly nod.

“But these likes were special, because they were lettered.” Grandma Bette tossed the dishrag in the sink and planted her hands on her hips. “I think maybe the lettered-likes are the ones with comments. I got over 250 of them when I put up a picture of you and asked them to help me find a match for you.”

“Fantastic,” I said, biting my tongue to keep from blowing up at her. “Maybe I should be more specific, GeeBee. Please don’t post anything else about me—no picture, no name, no information, no requests for possible matches, nothing.”

“Well, it’s kind of late to say that, now.” She stuck out a pouty lip, as if it were my fault she’d posted my personal information without asking.

“Let me see what you posted about West.” Race probably hoped he’d feel better about being in her prayer request post when he saw my humiliating matchmaking post. He got up and moved beside her, leaning against the counter, watching as she tapped on her cell phone screen. Her fingers flew. Since when had she gotten so adept at using her phone? Our high-school-aged cousin, Micah, must’ve been tutoring her. I made a mental note to call and give him a warning.

“I have no desire to see it,” I said, even as I flanked her other side. If Race was going to see it, I had to look.

When my image filled the screen, my throat swelled shut. She’d uploaded a photo of me on the back porch, shirtless and sweaty, after having mowed her lawn.

“GeeBee, why’d you use that picture? Why didn’t you use the nice photo I gave you last Christmas? The one in the frame?”

“That one’s in there, too,” she said. “This is a video of all my pictures I had of you. The lawn mowing picture was just the first one.”

“West, did you see how many likes this has?” Race asked, his voice rising to falsetto range.

My eyes fell on the number, and my lungs stopped working. I couldn’t even get enough air to mutter a curse word. Not that I would’ve said it with GeeBee in the room. She might’ve been half my size, but she still would’ve twisted my ear off.

“Right,” she said. “I told you these were lettered-likes. They’re special somehow.”

“Grandma Bette, the K stands for a thousand,” Race said. “This post got 252,000 likes!”

It was good he was explaining, because I was speechless.

“You should see some of the pictures posted in the comments.” Race had snatched her phone away and was gleefully scrolling through the replies. “Whoa! This one’s in a string bikini—emphasis on string.”

“Give me that!” GeeBee grabbed her phone from his hands. “Most of those were shameless hussies. I ignored all of those.”

“Great! Just great!” I flung my hands in the air in frustration. “252,000 people are out there enjoying my humiliation. My reward for being mature is having my entire depressing lack-of-a-love-life plastered on my grandmother’s social media page, complete with a slew of pictures. While my reckless brother gets by with a prayer request and no identifying photos.”

“Is that diesel smoke coming out of your ears, bro?” Race laughed in my face. “I don’t think you’re going to pass the California Emissions Test.”

“Shut up.” I gave him the secret crossed-fingers sign that meant he was welcome to jump in a lake. We’d resorted to subterfuge since childhood, as making an obscene sign would’ve earned a painful correction from GeeBee.

“Be careful. If you lose your temper, GeeBee might find out you’re not so perfect, after all.”

Nothing made my brother happier than to push me until I lost control. I’m not proud of the next words out of my mouth. But he deserved the foul name I called him. And he responded with a similar descriptive noun for me.

Suddenly GeeBee’s hands came up and both of us were squirming and crying, “Ouch!” ears pinched between her deceptively strong bony fingers.

“I won’t have that kind of language in my house. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” we said in unison. While our parents had avoided all forms of corporeal punishment when we were kids, Grandma Bette had always insisted children needed “a firm hand.” And she had two of them she’d used quite frequently. She also hadn’t gotten the notice that we were grown men who no longer needed discipline, and neither of us were brave enough to tell her. At least our cousins got the same treatment. She was an equal opportunity twister.

When she let go, I lifted my hand to soothe my throbbing ear. “Sorry, GeeBee.”

Likewise, Race mumbled an apology. He might be wayward, but he wasn’t stupid. No one could win a confrontation with Grandma Bette.

She fished her phone back out from the pocket of her blue-checked apron. “As I was saying, I don’t bother to read the comments from all those floozies who’re offering to date you. My video was quite clear. I only wanted to hear from other grandmothers who had good single granddaughters.”

“Why?” It was a dangerous question. I didn’t want her sending even more women my way.

“They’re just the best matchmakers,” she said. “Grandmas know their grandkids better than anyone, and they have the wisdom of age.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to release the tension. It didn’t work.

“GeeBee, are we in agreement you won’t post about us anymore on social media? In fact, I think it would be best if you stayed off TikTok altogether.”

For once, Race nodded in agreement.

“Well, I don’t see how I can stop now. My fans would be upset,” she said. “And so would my sponsors.”



DRIVING BACK FROM LUNCH, I attempted, one last time, to dissuade Race from pursuing Harmony. By offering to find a more suitable woman to be Race’s look-good-for-the-public girlfriend. But GeeBee’s earlier assessment of him had put him in a foul mood.

“Why not Harmony?” he asked in a sardonic tone. “Because I’m not perfect marriage material, like you are?”

“We both know I’m not perfect,” I told him. “But you have to admit you’re off the deep end. That’s the whole reason we came up with the plan for you to fake a relationship with a respectable woman, for a change.”

“You came up with the plan, not me.” His mouth took on a stubborn set. “You talked me into it, so I’m going to see it through. I think Harmony is perfect for the job. She’s got that cute all-American-girl look. The press will love her. And my female fans will be jealous, which is still good publicity. She’s squeaky-clean, and our relationship will be all anyone wants to talk about.”

“But you don’t love her.”

“How could I be in love with her? I barely know her.”

“Yes, but you go through women like paper towels. You never get serious enough to consider marriage.”

“Who said anything about love or marriage? That was never part of the plan. I was just supposed to date her for a few weeks. Long enough to win over the media and make them believe I’ve changed my ways.”

He was right. That was exactly what I'd proposed. But that was before I'd met Harmony.

"You have to admit Harmony is super naïve. You'd be a jerk to lie to her and lead her on."

"I don't plan to. I intend to tell her the truth."

"What truth?" My heart pounded in my ears. Was he going to expose me?

"That I want her to be my *fake* girlfriend. I'll tell her she could not only help my reputation but also help me clean up my act. This girl is a Florence Nightingale, and I'm the dying patient who needs her help. If I'm lucky, I won't even have to ask. She'll volunteer to do it."

"What if she turns you down? What if she quits the band?"

"She can't quit, no matter how mad she gets. She needs the job." Race pointed a condemning finger at me. "I have you to thank for that. You picked a woman who was desperate."

"I knew nothing about her finances when I recruited her."

"Don't worry. That subject probably won't come up."

"Okay, but leave me out of it." I practically snarled at him.

"I'll try to leave out your part, but I can't make any promises."

"Let me state for the record that my original idea of you dating a good girl was a mistake." I brushed my hands against each other, figuratively knocking the dirt away. "I wash my hands of this entire affair."

"Ah! Like Pontius Pilate, huh?" Race belted out an accusing laugh. "I think it's too late for that, brother. This whole thing was your idea."

"Yes, until I met her. But now I've changed my mind, and you should do the same."

"No can do, West. Unlike you, I believe in honesty." He slapped his hand over his heart. "Like the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not lie.'"

“It wouldn’t be a lie if you dropped the idea and never mentioned it.”

“Hmmm...” Race cocked his chin to one side. For a second, I thought he might give in. Then he shook his head and grinned. “Nah!”

“You know, one of the first stories in the Bible is about a guy who kills his brother,” I said, balling my hands into fists. “And I’m beginning to sympathize with Cain.”



BETWEEN THE DENTIST’S office running behind schedule and the traffic in LA, I completely missed the rehearsal, arriving as Race came out the door, his arm looped over Harmony’s shoulder, head bent down, his lips close to her ear.

My blood boiled. I knew that trick. Race had used it a hundred times. Maybe a thousand. I should know—he loved bragging about it almost as much as doing it.

“You lean in close and whisper something,” he’d explained, proud of his prowess. “It can be anything, as long as you use a secretive tone of voice. And it gives you the perfect excuse to put your arm around the girl and let your breath tickle her ear. Gives ‘em goosebumps. Works every time.”

Except it didn’t work... not when I’d tried it. With me, the woman usually squirmed away before I got a chance to say anything. Or I spoke, but said something so stupid, she’d start laughing. And laughter evidently prevented the development of gooseflesh or any attraction that might follow.

Not that I’d been surprised. I’d never been smooth when dealing with females. After three different women had pretended to like me simply to gain access to my brother, I’d simply given up.

I stepped in front of Race and Harmony, looking for the tiny telltale bumps. She rubbed her forearms. Not a good sign.

“Hey, guys.” I whipped my suit coat off and draped it over her shoulders. “Are you cold, Harmony?”

Maybe my brother’s ear-whisper technique hadn’t worked on Harmony—maybe she was just chilled. Sure, it was only seventy-two degrees outside, but a guy could hope, couldn’t he?

“Mmmm! Your coat smells good. What kind of cologne do you wear?” She breathed deeply, her eyes closing, a rapturous expression on her face.

“Uhhhh, I’m not sure.” I decided to go home and find that cologne and buy up every bottle in town.

“If you ask me, it stinks.” With his hand on the small of her back, Race guided her around me toward the parking lot. “Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

“Wait.” I followed them. “How did the rehearsal go?”

Poor Harmony had only had this single run-through to get her part down, since the tour bus was scheduled to leave in the morning. It hadn’t been a concern for us, since we’d never intended to project her voice during the actual performance. But being unaware of our plan, she’d probably been extremely uptight about the rehearsal.

“Harmony was incredible,” Race said, his hand moving up her back underneath my jacket, ruffling the fabric. “She’s got an unbelievable range. Meghan says her blend is awesome.”

“Meghan said that?” Meghan, our sound engineer, had been adamantly against adding another voice. I’d only consoled her with the promise that we wouldn’t be adding Harmony’s voice to the outgoing mix. Had she changed her mind?

“Meghan even says we ought to add in a few extra harmonies, here and there. She thinks the audience will love it. And so do I.”

“Wow,” I said, astonished.

“Thanks, Race,” Harmony said, in a breathy tone before addressing me in a curt one. “I guess you’re disappointed I

performed well.”

Her words slapped me in the face.

“Disappointed? Why would I be disappointed?”

“Obviously, you didn’t think I could handle it.”

Her ego must still be injured from when I tried to send her away the day of the audition.

“I never denied you having a fantastic voice.” I hadn’t wanted to give this explanation in front of my brother, but I didn’t have a choice. “But when we met, I realized being associated with Race might spoil your image. I didn’t think it was fair to ruin your career.”

“I appreciate your concern for my career.” If her sarcasm had been snow, there’d have been enough to ski in. “But I already have one overprotective father. I don’t need another one.”

*Ow! That wasn’t the response I’d wanted.*

“I actually warned her about that, myself,” Race said. “I don’t want something bad to happen to her because of me.”

The slug! As if he were really worried about her. He only cared about himself. And it didn’t help that I was talking to their backs as they continued to walk in front of me. I couldn’t even see her expression. Only the lump of my traitorous brother’s hand pressed to her back under the cover of my jacket.

“That’s right,” Harmony said. “And we have it all figured out.”

“You do?” I knew I wouldn’t like their solution.

“Yep. Race is going to clean up his act, and I’m going to be his pretend girlfriend,” Harmony said.

“It was her idea.” Race flashed an almost-smile over his shoulder as they continued to walk toward his car. “I think it’s brilliant.”

“Of course you do,” I said. “What does Harmony get out of the deal?”



“Race is going to listen to my songs—the ones I wrote.” Harmony said. “If I have one that fits, he’ll record it on his next album.”

Something was wrong inside my chest. My heart felt weird. Like it was beating harder than it should. My brother only lacked one song for his next album. He’d hinted he might record one of mine. It could’ve been the break I needed. I should’ve known he didn’t really want me to get exposure as a singing artist or composer. He needed to keep me in my useful, subservient role, out of the public eye.

“I’m happy for you.” I ought to be. I had to be. I couldn’t be so selfish and petty that I begrudged her this kind of opportunity. Especially since she had more raw talent than Race and I combined. She deserved her chance to shine. “But what about that thing you said about not dating your boss?”

We reached Race’s car, and Harmony turned toward me, popping up an index finger. “First of all, Race pointed out that you’re actually my boss, not him. Race said the manager is the person who does the hiring and firing and signs the paychecks.”

Race still had his back to me, but I could picture the snarky expression on his face.

“And second, we’re not really going to date. We’re just going to be affectionate in public—hold hands and such.”

I had to state the obvious. “You do realize everyone will assume you’re sleeping together and using drugs together, right?”

“Race didn’t sleep with all those women he dated.” Her arms folded as she pressed her lips together. Race had made fast work of convincing her of his blamelessness. “And he doesn’t use drugs, either. We’re going to correct those misconceptions.”

I recognized the sinking feeling in my gut—the one that told me it was a lost cause. The roller coaster ride was starting, and it was too late to stop it. We’d just have to hold on and ride it out. I forced a smile onto my face. Looking at Harmony,

I aimed my words at Race. “Okay. Good. Sounds like you have it all figured out. I’m sure my brother will be walking the straight and narrow. Because I know he would never do anything to hurt you.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” His back stiffened. But he rotated to face me, his expression the picture of innocence. “Because I’m not the kind of guy who would do something underhanded to Harmony... like lying to her.”

I swallowed hard. Race had me over a barrel, and he knew it. I couldn’t let Harmony find out I’d contrived her entire audition in a plot to use her to clear Race’s name.

Maybe it wouldn’t be a total disaster. After all, she would get her chance to sing on stage with my famous brother. And she could possibly have one of her songs recorded. And he might’ve schmoozed her a bit, but she’d actually *volunteered* to do the fake-girlfriend thing. Maybe everything would turn out great. She might not fall for Race. She might not get hurt. And her career might take off.

*And I’ll be the same old boring single-guy with a rockstar brother and a TikTok-star grandma.*



**D**ear Diary...

I didn't have a diary, but I'd always thought I ought to. In fact, I'd collected dozens of little journals with a variety of covers, from flowered prints to leather-bound, each with a sentence or two, at most, jotted on their pages. With a new phase of life beginning, I felt obligated to try journaling again. Especially since I'd found an adorable new journal in the hotel gift shop, with little inspirational quotes and scriptures sprinkled throughout the pages, enticing me to write so I could discover the next one.

*Dear Diary,*

*Tonight I sang on stage in front of a bajillion people, yelling and screaming with excitement. They weren't screaming for me, but it felt like they were. It was magical! Better than the best kiss I've ever had. Though, come to think of it, that isn't saying much...*

I closed the book and tucked it inside my oversized purse, bright green in contrast to my black leggings and top. Singing with Race Madden and The Hatters in concert had been grander than anything I could've imagined, even though we were performing rock instead of country music. It was a high and as addicting as a drug.

"You did great out there." Meghan, sporting her usual brightly colored garb and hair, retrieved her personal things from the small space that had served as our women's dressing room for us and the other two female crew members. "And

Race was in a good mood just now, so he must've thought it went well."

"Thanks for saying that. It felt incredible. A dream come true for me." My conscience nagged me for letting Meghan believe that Race and I were dating. Technically, it was true, I supposed. It all depended on your definition of the word. We were dating, but we weren't romantically involved. And I was determined to keep it that way. I wanted to help him, but this job was way too important to throw it away by falling for my boss.

"Hey, you should sit in the back of the bus tomorrow. Play a game with us. Watching movies for hours will make your mind go numb. And Race won't get jealous. If he does, he can just take you on the plane, right?"

Race had already offered for me to ride with him on the charter flight. I was the one who'd insisted I ride in the bus with the rest of the crew. I didn't want to alienate myself from the others or make them believe I thought I was better than them. That way it wouldn't be a big deal when our temporary relationship ended.

"Thanks. I might play a game or two. But I'm also going to spend some time working on my music." Especially now that Race might record one of my songs. None of the ones I'd already composed would work—I was certain of that. They were all too specific to the country genre. No, I had to write a new song during my spare time. A rock song. Or maybe I could talk him into recording another ballad, since that was closer to my style.

Surely it wouldn't be too hard to get a great song written. I'd have lots of spare time on the long bus rides. Besides, singing in front of all those people had left me with such a high that I was more inspired than ever.

"Okay. Just didn't want you to feel you have to sit all by yourself up there. I can get the guys to tone down their language. It'll be good for them."

"Please don't say anything to them." My cheeks got warm. "They probably already think I'm a prude."

“No, they just think you’re a nice girl. In fact, Anton and Guy are pretty upset you’re with Race. They’re afraid he’s going to ruin you.”

“Tell them not to worry. I’m tougher than I look. And stubborn, too.” I grinned. “It could be Race who changes, instead of me.”

“You don’t know Race like we do.” In the mirror, I saw her gnawing on her lower lip, black lipstick coming off on her teeth. In my opinion she was strikingly beautiful, an incredible assessment, since her bright purple hair, head shaved on one side, was definitely not my style. “I have to tell you something. This is so hard to say...”

“What is it?” I watched as she fidgeted with the buttons on her shirt. “Listen, if you’re going to tell me you murdered someone, please don’t. I’m not great at keeping secrets. I always forget it’s a secret and blurt it out. Could mean life in prison for you. On the other hand, I’m not great at remembering details, either. So you’re probably safe, whatever it is.”

Meghan smiled. “I haven’t murdered anyone, though I’ve considered it a few times. Mostly when the roadies are throwing my equipment around.”

“Remind me never to touch your stuff.”

“It’s just that...” She twisted her mouth to the side. “Well, we haven’t had a female vocalist before. And after I talked to West, I thought... I don’t know what I thought. I wanted to give you a heads up, because you’re a lot nicer than I expected.”

“What did you expect? Did West say I was a shrew or something?”

“I’m pretty sure he hadn’t even met you when he spoke to me. All he told me was we were going to be *trying you out*.” She made quotation marks with her fingers. “He gave me the impression the gig was a temporary thing.”

“What do you mean by temporary?” My heartbeat picked up speed, going from normal to catastrophic heart attack pace.

“I don’t know. He didn’t specify.” She tucked her hair behind her ears, an earnest expression on her face. “But when I heard you and Race were dating, it all clicked.”

“What clicked?”

“Race has gone out with a lot of women, including every single female who’s ever been a part of this crew. And their jobs always ended with the relationship.” Her gaze dropped. “I’m afraid that’s what’s in store for you, too.”

My throat swelled shut. Had I screwed everything up with this cockamamie plan to redeem Race Madden?

“What about you?” I asked. “You said he’s dated every girl in the crew, and you’re still here.”

“Every *single* girl. He never asked me out because I have a fiancé. At least, I had one. When we broke up, I made sure Race never found out. I mean, who can say no to Race Madden, right?”

“And how long do his relationships usually last?”

She shrugged. “A couple of weeks.”

Great. I had quizzed him about his relationships before offering to be his fake girlfriend. He’d sworn, contrary to his reputation, that he’d never gotten physical with the girls he’d dated. But I hadn’t thought to ask him if my job would be secure after the eventual breakup.

“My contract goes to the end of the twelve-week tour.”

“I’m guessing they’ll pay out the contract, but I doubt they’ll let you keep singing.”

“Awesome. Absolutely awesome. Ughh!” I threw my tissue at the trashcan. It bounced on the rim and tumbled to the floor. “Typical. I can’t get anything right.”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.”

“I hate men. All of them.”

“Tell me about it, sister. Turns out my fiancé had already bought a ring for a different woman when he asked for mine back. Said he couldn’t afford two ring payments.” She pulled

up a chair and sat down beside me, still talking into the mirror. “Listen, I could be completely wrong. Maybe he’ll be able to handle having you around after you break up. Like I said, you’re a lot nicer than most of the women he’s dated.”

“Thanks for that. But you haven’t seen me before I have my coffee in the morning.”

“Kind of like Godzilla?”

“Worse.”

“Me, too. If we ever end up sharing a hotel room, one of us might not make it out alive.”

“Maybe we could film it. I’ll use the profits to buy my return plane ticket when I get fired.”

“Good idea.”

I sucked in air, expanding my diaphragm, and blew it out slowly. “It’s probably just as well I’m going to get fired when Race breaks up with me. Better than getting fired for tripping and falling on stage in the middle of a concert.”

“That won’t happen.” She chuckled.

“Actually, it could. Don’t tell anyone, but you wouldn’t believe the number of times I’ve twisted myself into a tangle of microphone cords and ended up sprawled on the stage. I’m super clumsy. Especially when I’m nervous.”

“But you did fine tonight.” Her eyes were wide, probably imagining all the disasters that could’ve happened during the concert and planning a safer place for me to stand during the next one.

“That’s because I kept both feet glued to the floor and just danced with my upper body. It probably looked like I was having convulsions, but at least I didn’t fall.”

“You might’ve looked a little awkward.” Her mouth kicked up on one corner. “Way to sacrifice your pride to protect the equipment.”

“Anything for you, Meghan.” I reached into my stretchy leggings pocket and pulled out a small silk bag. To my

surprise, the contents didn't come with it.

"I also had my lucky marbles with me." I held out my hand, displaying the empty red sack with a ripped seam. "Well, this used to have marbles in it. They're down in the bottom of my pocket now."

"Lucky marbles? Some kind of superstition?"

"Twenty of them. I've had them since I was a kid. I had A.D.D., so I fiddled with them and it helped me stay calm. Having my marbles always equaled a good day. Now I keep them with me all the time."

"I get it. It's a head thing."

"Right." I slid the bag back into my pocket. "I purposefully wore a long draped shirt so I could have these on stage."

She lifted a brow. "Isn't that a little dangerous? I mean, since you're already a little... uh..."

"Clumsy," I offered. "That's true, but I was really careful."

"Even if you were careful, that could've been a disaster."

"I guess they were lucky enough that nothing happened. But, don't worry... I won't do it again. I'll get a new bag and keep them backstage in my purse, like I normally do."

"Good." I could see the relief on her face.

"Maybe they aren't so lucky, since it looks like I'm going to lose my job."

"I hope you don't. I didn't think I'd like having a female voice in the mix, but I do." Meghan reached for her backpack.

"Maybe Race won't fire me when we stop dating. Especially since I'm not planning to get physical with him."

She let out a harsh laugh. "If you're not planning to sleep with him, you probably won't last a week."

"He knows about it, already." I'd made a commitment to help his reputation, and I intended to carry through. Even if it meant I was going to get kicked out of the gig before the tour



was over. So if my job was to persuade people Race was a changed man, I might as well start with his crew. “He agreed to abide by my boundaries. In fact, he said he wanted it that way.”

“He did?” Meghan’s jaw went slack. “Oh, wow! You know what this means? Grandma Bette must’ve gotten to him.”

“What does his grandmother have to do with this?” I’d met her when she’d shown up the morning the bus left with a colossal box of baked goodies for the crew. Everyone seemed to love her, and she knew them all by name. She’d even known mine.

“I know she seems like a sweet little old lady who would jump if she saw a bug, but she’s one tough cookie. Once she gets to know you, she says exactly what’s on her mind. She doesn’t give a flip what anyone thinks about it. And that includes letting Race know she disapproves of his *wild ways*. He must’ve finally taken her advice.”

“That could be it.” I nodded. “I have a grandmother who’s kind of like that. Except she doesn’t even pretend to be a sweet little old lady. She’s always been a force of nature.”

“My grandma would never stick her nose into my business.” A wrinkle formed between her brows. “But Grandma Bette is nosy enough to make up for it. Like she’s entitled to an opinion about the lives of every person in the crew. Or maybe it’s just that we let her think that so she’ll keep bringing homemade cookies.”

“No doubt.” My mouth watered, remembering my first bite of the heavenly dark chocolate brownie I’d sampled the day we’d left. “I’d listen to hours of lectures if I could get another one of those brownies.”

“Exactly! And everything she bakes is amazing. Everything. It’s like she’s our drug supplier, and we’ll do anything to make her happy.”

“I honestly think you might be right. Because it was Race’s idea to clean up his act, not mine.”

“It’s a miracle. And if he really changes, it’s scary the kind of power that woman has.” Meghan’s hand went up to the shaved side of her head. “I hope she doesn’t come after me next. She’s always made little comments about my hair.”

The door opened and Cassie stuck her head in. “Hey!” she yelled over the noise in the background. “Race said to hurry. He’s waiting for you at the back exit. I think he wants you to run the gauntlet with them.”

“The gauntlet?”

“Yeah. The press and the fans are waiting outside. Usually, Race goes through with the other vocalists. Earns big points with the crowd. Plus, they get a lot of social media posts from it. The guys are all waiting.”

Cassie’s head withdrew and the door clicked closed. My knees started shaking, even worse than when I’d been on stage. “I’m not ready to meet the press. I look awful.”

The heavy mascara I’d applied before the concert was smeared under my eyes, a big black circle in the thick stage makeup. I looked like someone had beaten me up. “You think I could sneak out another way?”

“Here.” Meghan found the makeup bag and pulled some kind of wet wipes from its depths. “Just use a couple of these to wipe that goop off, and you’ll look fine.”

“Thanks.”

Sure enough, all the black came off, along with most of the thick base, which left me with my normal pale complexion. And I suddenly realized the entire world would be comparing me with Race’s past gorgeous girlfriends. No way I could come out anywhere but the bottom of that list. What had I been thinking? This wouldn’t help my career—it would ruin it.

“Maybe I should quit. Get it over with. No use making a fool out of myself in front of the entire world.”

“That’s one thing you don’t have to worry about. He won’t make you look bad, no matter what.” Meghan tugged me to my feet by my elbow. “Race has never dragged a woman’s name through the mud. He takes the blame and the flack for

every breakup, and leaves ‘em looking like angels. Well, at least he does his best. Some of those women were devils, no matter how big you paint their halos.”

“Okay, then.” I slung my purse strap over my shoulder. “Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg.”

I sucked in air so fast I had a coughing fit. “Don’t say that! With me, you literally have to wish me luck. Last time someone told me to break a leg, it happened.”

Meghan grimaced. “Sorry. Good luck.”

I jammed my hand into my pocket, fingering the loose marbles. Something told me I was going to need all the luck I could get.



I tugged on my brother's shirtsleeve to get his attention. "You shouldn't make Harmony go out there with you. No need to start a frenzy about your relationship before we clear up the last fiasco."

"I've got it nailed down. All the deets. No need to worry, bro. You withdrew, remember? Washed your hands of the whole affair with Harmony. So I'll handle it from here."

"Shut up." I lowered my tone to a hoarse whisper, checking behind us for eavesdroppers. But the site's cleanup crew were ignoring us. "I thought we agreed not to mention that."

"Pretty sure you begged me to keep it to myself, but I'm not sure you ever made it worth my while."

"If I push you in front of a car, would that be murder or manslaughter? Because right this minute, twenty years in prison would so be worth it."

"It'd be murder. Second degree, if it's a fit of passion. But seeing as you've never been passionate about anything in your entire life, that makes it first degree murder."

"I spend all my passion trying to keep the press from getting wind of your escapades."

"You really believe all that stuff you read about me, don't you?" He flashed me a glower with genuine anger. "You and GeeBee, both."

"I'm the one trying to help you—"

“Even my own family doesn’t give me the benefit of the doubt. The truth is, my only big sin is to go to parties and stay sober and be sure my friends make it home safely.”

“Which is why I want to improve your public image. To show the world you aren’t really a drug addict.” I’d seen photos that suggested otherwise, but I kept my mouth shut about it.

“And I don’t sleep around. You probably don’t believe that, either.”

“Have I ever accused you of sleeping around?” I sidestepped his argument. I hadn’t accused him, nor had I defended him. “But you were doing some nasty stuff for about three months. And the public has a long memory.”

“Only when Everly broke up with me.”

“Come on, Race.” My voice was tight with impatience. “After all this time, you still act like you weren’t at fault. Everly wasn’t the only one to blame. You changed when you became a big star. You went on tour and she saw you with all those other women. What was she supposed to do? Sit at home and wait for you? Hope that after you sowed your wild oats, you’d come back and ask her to marry you?”

“You have no idea what happened. None.” He speared me with his furious glare. “But remember this moment. Because one day you won’t be sitting in the judgment seat. You’ll be in my position, and someone you care about will believe the worst about you. When that happens, let me know how it feels.”

“Race!”

He gave me a cold shoulder, turning toward Harmony’s call. She had a green jacket on over her otherwise elegant black outfit. Her green eyes sparkled as she smiled at Race, but she barely spared me a passing glance.

“This is the fun part.” Race waved toward the door. “I’ll do the talking. All you have to do is smile and look beautiful.”

“I can do the smile part. Not sure about the other.” She tugged the front of her jacket across her. “This blazer is a little

ratty. I didn't realize anyone important would see me in it."

"You look great," said Race.

But I read her apprehension in her stiff posture and the tremble of her chin. Couldn't Race see it? She felt like a lamb going to the slaughter. Somehow, I had to help her.

"Maybe I should go first and make a statement of some kind. Then you guys could just walk straight through without stopping."

"I can handle it." Race ignored me, only addressing Harmony. "The guys got tired of waiting and went on. So it's just us. Our security detail is standing right outside the door. We'll just walk out, and I'll make a quick statement. Then we'll smile and wave and make our way through. No biggie. It's mostly fans wanting to get selfies."

She jammed her hand into her pants pocket. "Are you sure you don't want to wait a few weeks before we make an announcement?"

"He's trying to counteract a bad article that came out in *Performer Weekly* a few days ago," I said. "He thinks a new girlfriend will do the trick."

"No one asked you." Race threw me a look of disdain. I sent back a mirror image.

"It's okay." She squared her shoulders to the door and flipped her hair behind her. "Let's go and get it over with."

Why was he forcing her? Couldn't he see how anxious she was?

"You don't have to do this." I put a hand on her arm. "You can go out the side exit with Meghan and the rest of the crew. Race doesn't need you with him to speak to the press."

"It's the photo op that matters, and you know it. They'll forget all about that article when these pictures hit the media." Race pushed between us, knocking my hand away.

"Please don't fight. I'll be fine." She wagged her finger in his face. "But don't forget our agreement."

He grabbed her hand and laced it with his. It was almost tender. I wanted to believe he cared enough to keep from hurting her. “How could I forget? You wrote it down and made me sign it.”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” I said. “He signs stuff all the time. Never bothers to read it.”

His mouth crooked up on one side. “I’ve got people for that.”

“Yeah.” The punch I landed on his arm was a bit too hard to be playful. “Slaves. Like me.”

“Let’s go.” He dragged her out the door, and I followed close behind. The flash of camera lights blinded my eyes.

My image often appeared behind Race’s in his publicity shots, though they seldom identified me. I was okay with that. The last thing I wanted was to be famous for nothing more than being related to Race Madden.

Shouts and screams, male and female, almost drowned out the reporters who fired questions at Race.

“What do you have to say about Eliza Meyer’s claim?”

“Are you the father of the baby?”

“Will you be paying child support?”

My stomach jumped into my throat. What were they talking about? This must’ve been a brand-new development. It certainly hadn’t been in the *Performer Weekly*’s article.

No time to worry about what might or might not be true. Time to do damage control. I shoved my way between Race and Harmony to face the swarm of reporters. “Mr. Madden has no comment.”

“It’s not my kid.” The camera lights flashed, revealing his red face, blood vessels about to burst on his temples. “Eliza’s just after my money, and she’s not getting it.”

My gut churned. This wasn’t going well. Race wouldn’t make any points by throwing insults at his ex-girlfriend, even if they were true.

“Did you know she was pregnant when you broke off the relationship?”

“If you’re not the father, who is?”

“Is this your new girlfriend?”

“Does Eliza know you’ve already moved on?”

The reporters kept shooting questions. Aggressive ones. Aimed to rile him up and make him say more stupid things. My brother had amazing talent and a lot of outstanding qualities, but a controlled temper wasn’t one of them. And our prior argument had primed him for a meltdown.

I lifted my voice to be heard above the din. “I’m sure we’ll get this mistake straightened out.” Snatching Harmony’s wrist, I jerked her hand out of her pocket and pulled her forward. “Go! Go! Straight ahead! To the limousine.”

She cried out, something about marbles. The next thing I knew, I was down on the sidewalk, pain radiating from my right hip, where I’d hit. Someone else yelled and toppled down, a shoulder impacting my stomach.

“West!” Race called my name and reached a hand toward me, hefting me to my feet. “Let’s go!”

All around, people were shouting and wobbling, their hands thrashing in the air. Several more dropped to the ground. We’d taken two steps toward the car when Race teetered, his arms flapping like a bird. I caught his shirt and steadied him until he regained his balance.

In the chaos, the reporters’ questions stopped. Linking arms, the three of us ran the rest of the way down the roped-off walkway lined with security guards while exuberant fans waved over their shoulders.

“Good thing everybody started sliding around back there. It let us dodge their questions and get away clean.” I climbed into the back seat behind Race, wincing as I sat down. “Except for a sore bum.”

“Felt like loose gravel. Buckle up.” His expression stormy, I knew Race was still furious at the reporters’ questions. He



tapped on the glass divider to get the driver's attention. "Let's go, before they swamp the car."

Sure enough, a reporter was knocking on my window as the limo sped away.

"It was my marbles. My pocket ripped and they fell out." Harmony's whole body drooped. I had to cheer her up.

"Dare I ask, why you had marbles in your pocket?" I pointed to my bruised bottom. "Let me guess... you were trying to cripple me?"

"No, that was an added bonus." A smile ghosted across her lips. "I had them with me for luck. Guess they weren't so lucky."

"So you lost your marbles. Literally."

She grinned. Victory!

"No, I *actually* lost them."

"But you lost them in the literal sense of the word. Isn't that what literally means?" I took my tie off and unbuttoned my top button, stashing my tie in the coat pocket.

"That's the literal definition of literally. But now we use *literally* as a hyperbole. So you don't say *literally* unless you're exaggerating."

"So you're saying, if it literally happened, you say *actually*, and if it didn't happen, you say *literally*?"

"You guys are making my head hurt." Race squinted his eyes shut. "I can't believe Eliza accused me of getting her pregnant."

An awkward silence fell. I was surprised Race had brought it up with Harmony around.

"You can always get a DNA test. But maybe we should let our attorneys deal with her instead. A DNA test would be big news, and if it showed that you were the father—"

"I'm not the father!" His hand wadded the front of my shirt. "If my own brother thinks the worst of me, it's no surprise the media does, too."

I didn't even push his hand away. Better for him to get his aggression out, even if he ripped a nice dress shirt.

"How do you know for sure you're not the father? It's only been a few weeks since you broke up, right?"

He yanked me close, glaring into my face. "I never slept with her."

I swallowed, considering his claim. The two had dated for less than three weeks. It was possible he was right. "Are you sure? Because—"

"I'm sure!" He shoved me back, releasing his grip. "Not that you'll ever believe me, but I haven't slept with any of them."

"None of them?" I couldn't keep the doubt out of my voice. "If you're telling the truth, why didn't you say so a long time ago?"

As if suddenly remembering her presence, he flipped his gaze to Harmony and back to me, muscles bulging along his jawline. "I don't have to explain myself to you. It's not like you believe me, anyway."

"Okay, let's say you're telling the truth. And let's say you had your own crazy personal reason for letting the media trash your character. Why would you trash the reputations of all those women you dated?"

He glanced at Harmony again. "The women I dated—they didn't think sleeping with me would be a slur on their reputations. Kind of the opposite."

"Well, that's your problem, right there." Harmony pursed her lips, like GeeBee used to do when she was scolding us. "You've been dating the wrong kind of women. You need to start going out with nicer ones."

"That's you. That's why we're going out."

"Yes, but we're only fake-dating." Her eyebrows bent low, like she meant business. "And by the way, I'm doing this as a favor. But only if I'm not risking my job. I don't want to get

fired like all the rest of your crew did when you stopped dating them.”

She looked *mad as a hornet*. Not that I’d ever seen a hornet in real life, but I knew from GeeBee’s use of the phrase they were angry. I wasn’t about to tell Harmony I’d been the one who’d quietly paid out the contracts for Race’s discarded girlfriends who’d been part of the crew. It was all part of cleaning up my brother’s messes.

“How did... Who told you—”

“Are we agreed?” She stuck out her hand.

“Sure.” Race shook it. “But—”

“So now we have to find you a nice girl to go out with. For after we’re done with our fake dating.”

“No nice girl wants to be with me,” said Race.

I murmured the answer in a tone too low for Harmony to hear. “GeeBee could find someone for you.”

“Shut up,” Race whispered from the side of his mouth.

“There’s plenty of nice girls who’d love to go out with you,” Harmony said.

“Not really.” His lower lip protruded. “I had to bribe you just to get you to pretend.”

“Only because you’re my boss. Otherwise, I might’ve said yes if you’d asked me to go out.”

“Really? Do you mean it?”

That sad puppy-dog expression. He had it down to a tee. Harmony was buying his sappy spiel. Why couldn’t I learn to do that?

“This is the dumbest conversation anyone ever forced me to listen to. *Literally...*” I reached for the control to turn on the radio. “And *actually*, too.”



**D**ear Diary,

*It's been two weeks since the marble incident, and Race and I are going on our first official date.*

It was only my second entry. I told you I wasn't very good at journaling. Where do people find the time to write in those things? I did leave a few blank pages in case I got inspired to go back and add something.

I'd made it through three shows without knocking very much of the sound equipment to the stage floor. That was definitely a win worth celebrating. And the tour bus wasn't scheduled to leave until Monday morning. So I'd said yes when he asked me. After all, we were supposed to be an item, even though the press hadn't realized it yet. They'd been too preoccupied with the pregnant-ex-girlfriend news to notice me.

I, for one, believed Race when he'd sworn he hadn't been sleeping with any of those women he'd dated. But I wasn't sure West had been convinced. I suspected that not having his brother's whole-hearted belief in him bothered Race more than West realized. And I intended to broach the subject with Race at dinner. I thought it would do him a world of good to talk about it.

Nervous as I was, the distraction would serve me well. Race had warned me there was a good chance the media would spot us together tonight. If so, the paparazzi would have

a field day. Race didn't seem concerned in the least. I suspected he might've even tipped them off.

I was slightly terrified that I would make a spectacle of myself. Because by now, you know what happens when I'm nervous. So do a bunch of reporters with bumps and bruises from slipping on my not-so-lucky marbles.

By some miracle, I had yet to take a tumble on the stage during a concert.

*Not yet. Knock on wood. Or metal. Or leather. Or anything else I can reach.*

"Why are you knocking on everything in the limo?" Race's eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Maybe because I'm riding in a limo, which means everyone is going to stare when I get out."

"So what? You look awesome!"

"No, I look like ordinary me. You're the one who looks awesome. Which is fine. Don't get me wrong. It's not like I'm jealous. It's just that people won't be looking at you, even though you look awesome. They'll be looking at me, wondering why on earth someone who looks as awesome as you is with someone who looks as ordinary as me."

I reached up to be sure my hair hadn't fallen straight. My new soft spiral curls and my artfully applied makeup were courtesy of my roommates, Cassie and Meghan. Usually, we had private hotel rooms. But sometimes, like tonight, space was limited. And it was a good thing, since they were a lot more talented with makeup than I was. They'd fixed my face so I looked a lot better than usual but somehow didn't appear overdone.

I found my hand lifted in his, my fingers pressed to his lips. "You look beautiful. And you have everything backwards."

"I do?" I jerked my hand away to feel frantically for the tag of my shirt to see if it was in the front of my neck.

“No.” He grabbed my hand again. “Your shirt isn’t backwards. Your thinking is. The way it works is I have this stupid fame thing, so everyone thinks I look great, even when I look like a dog who’s been left out in the rain. And my fame thing spreads to everyone around me. If I choose to be with you, they judge you as beautiful. It so happens, you look amazing. But the media will call you gorgeous, no matter what.”

“Really? That could solve a lot of issues and really help my nerves, if I can ride the wave of your gorgeousness.”

“Ride away! Plenty of room on this surfboard. Of course, a wipeout can occur at any time. No advance warning. Like it did last week, with the surprise-you’re-gonna-be-a-dad thing.”

“An occasional wipeout, I can handle. Salt water up my nose; pummeled by the waves. No problem. As long as I don’t have a plethora of witnesses.”

“Plethora. That’s a great word.” He was teasing me, but I didn’t care.

“One of my faves.”

“You have others?”

“So many. Comeuppance and brouhaha come to mind.”

“Do you use words like that in the songs you write? The one you want me to sing?”

“I would, but rhymes can be a challenge with those words.”

“Let’s give it a try.” He started singing a line from one of his songs, substituting my word for *crowd*. “Saw you standing there, in the middle of a *brouhaha*. Couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. And my heart was beating...”

I chuckled when he stopped, searching for a rhyming word to go with *brouhaha*. “How about *ooh la la*?”

“Perfect!” He sang again. “And my heart was beating, *ooh la la*.”

That velvety voice. It was so much better in person than through a sound system. Race Madden was super hot, but his appearance didn't do that much for me. His voice, on the other hand, drew me to him like a fox to the hen house. I could easily fall in love with him for his voice. Gramma had said he was too wild for me, but she didn't realize how little of his public personae was actually true.

West's image drifted into my mind. I wondered if he could sing, like his half-brother. The man was a complete mystery to me. One minute, it seemed he couldn't stand the sight of me. The next, he was standing at my door, with a zip-lock bag full of marbles. *My* marbles. He'd evidently gone back to the scene of the crime the next morning and collected as many as he could find so he could return them to me.

After thinking I'd lost my marbles—the lucky ones—forever, I'd been so thrilled I'd almost knocked him down with my impulsive hug. So awkward. He'd patted my back stiffly, probably regretting his good deed. But don't think I didn't enjoy feeling the hard planes of his chest and reveling in his heady scent—a mix of clean and some kind of masculine aftershave.

*Shameless, I know. So sue me! I haven't dated in a year. I have to take pleasure where I can get it.*

On impulse, I'd grabbed my phone and snapped a picture of him holding the marbles. Now I used the picture as my luck charm, leaving the marbles tucked safely inside my purse.

Race jerked me back to the present. "I like these lyrics better than the original. Maybe I'll sing this version Friday night in Boston."

"As long as you don't mind getting crucified by your fans."

The car slowed to a stop. I peered out the window at the sign that read *Leopold's* in elegant lettering. No paparazzi greeted us at the curb. Guess they hadn't gotten wind of Race's plans for tonight. Instead, a young man in a tuxedo opened my car door, offering me a hand.

“This place is really fancy. I’m not going to blend in with the gentry.”

“I don’t blend in, no matter where I go. I’m counting on a small crowd, since it’s Sunday night. Plus, people who can afford to eat here are usually more discreet.”

“Yes, but they all know you have money. I bet a *cocktail drink* at this restaurant costs more than this *cocktail dress* I’m wearing tonight.”

Meghan had barely managed to zip me into it, as I’d gained a few pounds since I’d last worn it. At least there was no way it would slip down and expose something it shouldn’t. In fact, it was so tight across the ribs I could only take shallow breaths. But the empire waist left my stomach free to expand. And who cares about breathing, as long as you can eat. Am I right?

A tuxedo-clad young man offered his hand as I climbed out of the limo, careful to keep my ribs contracted and not further strain the zipper already pushed to its limits. I shivered as the breeze hit me—a brisk sixty-two degrees on this June Chicago evening. Definitely sweater weather for this Texas girl. It wasn’t uncommon for us to have a fire in the fireplace at that temperature. Despite my chill bumps, (or goosebumps, as my Gramma called them) I refused to don the worn green cotton sweater tucked in the crook of my arm. Surely I could sacrifice warmth for a minute or two, rather than further cheapen the look of my outfit.

Race appeared at my side and looped his arm over my shoulder, tucking me against his warmth. I felt like every single person on that street in Chicago was staring at us.

My cheeks flamed as we walked toward the restaurant doorway, and I muttered in a soft voice. “I need to hone my acting skills. I doubt I’ll fool anyone into believing we’re an item.”

“No, you’re perfect.” He bent his head close to my ear. “Remember, this is supposed to be a new thing—me dating a good girl. They’ll expect us to be awkward, right?”



“I hope so. I hope this wasn’t a terrible mistake.”

The door swung open as we approached, powered by a doorman.

“It’s not a mistake. It’s going to be great. You’ll see. We’re only claiming to be friends right now. That alone will shock the media.”

“That’s good. I won’t have to lie.” My throat was so dry my voice came out croaky. “Gramma always said I was a terrible liar. I never got away with anything.”

The hostess’ eyes went wide when they focused on Race.

“Reservation for two. Madden.” Race flashed a smile that probably made the girl’s knees weak. Her hand covered her mouth, stifling a giggle that made me think she was still in her teens. A woman with a clipboard, sporting a sleek black dress, spotted Race and hurried over.

“Mr. Madden, we’re so happy you’re dining at Leopold’s. My name is Melinda. Give us a moment and we’ll find a private table for you.” She turned to the shell-shocked girl. “Angela, can you set a table in the garden room, please?”

As Angela scuttled off to do Melinda’s bidding, Race’s eyes scanned the restaurant. “Oh, no!”

“Is something wrong, Mr. Madden?”

His mouth twisted sideways. “No, but I just spotted my brother.”

“He’s here? Is he with anyone?” My heart thumped against my ribs. I tried to look around him, but I didn’t see West. “Should we ask him to eat with us?”

Race pivoted to face me, his cheeks white. “No, we need to get out of here before they see us. He’s got GeeBee with him.”

“That’s great, isn’t it? We can all eat together.”

“It’s not great. I don’t want to talk to her right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because last week, she informed me she was going to find a woman for me to marry. It was funny when she was doing that to West, but I want no part of it.”

“Wait... she’s trying to find wives for both of you?”

A hand appeared on his shoulder. “Too late to run, bro. GeeBee already saw you.” As West pulled Race away from the podium, I spied Grandma Bette sitting at a table, sporting a silky pink leopard-print top. A friendly smile lit her face and she waved at me. I returned the gesture and moved closer to listen to the brothers.

“This is what you get when you try to avoid her,” West said. “You should’ve answered your cell phone.”

West didn’t seem upset that his grandmother was there with matchmaking intents. But I didn’t really like the idea of West getting engaged. How stupid was that? It’s not like I was planning to date him.

“She flew from LA to Chicago? Just because I didn’t answer her calls?”

“You didn’t answer me, either, or you’d have known she was coming.” West used a growly tone. “Where’ve you been? I knocked on your hotel door and left messages for you to call me.”

“Maybe I wanted you to stay out of my business.”

West lifted his palms beside his face. “Don’t kill the messenger. But you might want to come up with an excuse when GeeBee asks you the same question.”

“Hey!” I flapped my hand between them. “If your grandmother has invited prospective women to dinner, this fake dating thing with Race and I won’t work.”

“No one else is coming.” West flinched. “At least, not that I know of. You can never be sure with Grandma Bette.”

Race whipped his face toward me. “Don’t mention anything to GeeBee about this being fake. My only chance to get out of this is to convince her the relationship is real.”

“Good luck with that,” said West as he glanced over his shoulder.

Grandma Bette gave another pleasant wave, seemingly unoffended by Race’s reluctance to join her. Or maybe she was a skilled actress, like my grandmother. For all I knew, she was furious. A shudder rippled down my spine. Some of that fury might end up aimed at me.

“If you don’t think we can fool GeeBee, maybe we should just leave while we can.” Race plastered an obviously false smile on his face and nodded toward his grandmother.

West pulled his brother close and whispered something in his ear. Race’s eyes darted to me and back. “I know.”

“You know what?” Anger and shame spiked together. Were they talking about my lack of acting ability? Or my clumsiness? Or what?

“It’ll be okay, Harmony. We’ll just have to play it by ear.” If this was West’s version of encouragement, he’d failed completely. Playing it by ear was not my forte. “Don’t volunteer any information,” he added.

“Eh-hem.” Melinda appeared, clearing her throat. “Mr. Madden, will you still be dining with us?”

“Yes,” West answered in unison with his brother’s “No.”

“Maybe we can all move to that garden table.” I was thinking it might be slightly less embarrassing if a fight occurred out of earshot of most of the other restaurant guests. I wondered how this sweet little old lady who’d brought baked goods to the band and crew now inspired such fear in this wealthy rock superstar. Whatever the reason, she now had me shaking in my proverbial boots as well.

Literally.

And actually.



**M**e and my stupid plan to outsmart GeeBee. Why had I thought I could get away with passing Harmony off to my brother? I should've known my plan would backfire. Everything was a complete mess. I didn't dare confess the truth... to GeeBee or Harmony. GeeBee was as determined as ever to find a bride for me. And Race had evidently graduated from the prayer group to matchmaking. Only moments before Race had arrived, she'd flipped through about a hundred thousand pictures of potential mates she'd somehow collected on her cell phone.

"For the last time, GeeBee, I'm not interested," I'd told her, urging her to put her phone away before Harmony and my brother arrived at the restaurant. Lucky for me, Race had let slip on Saturday that he'd made a reservation at Leopold's for seven o'clock. That had happened before GeeBee had decided to "grab a ticket and fly to Chicago." She seemed intent on spending every dime of the stock portfolio Grandpa had left her. But it was her money to spend. And no one in their right mind would presume to tell her what to do. Not even Grandpa, God-rest-his-soul. He'd always said Bette was the best natural disaster that had ever happened to him.

I'll admit, some of GeeBee's photos had me looking twice. By normal standards, the women were attractive. But over the last few weeks, Harmony had somehow wormed her way even further into my head.

Maybe it was because she'd won over even the crankiest of our crew. I often found her sitting cross-legged on the floor,

listening as one of the guys spilled his guts, displaying emotions he probably didn't know he had. I think most of the men were secretly in love with her. And all the women treated her like a sister.

You couldn't dislike Harmony, no matter what disaster she initiated. Even when a thousand-dollar microphone had slipped out of her hand and crashed to the stage floor during set up.

"That's okay," I'd said, as I retrieved the dented and non-functioning mic. "Don't worry about it. We have a spare."

I'd tried to ignore Meghan staring at me with her lower jaw in her hands. "Who are you and what have you done with West Garrison?" she'd whispered.

"You're not yelling at her either," I'd muttered back.

She'd cut her eyes toward Harmony, who'd begged for forgiveness, her stricken expression tugging at every heartstring in the room. I half expected someone to step forward and claim responsibility for the accident.

Meghan had taken the dented microphone, cradling it in her arms like a dying pet. "It's fine, Harmony. I'm not mad."

Then she'd turned her head, speaking where only I could hear. "She's a witch. She's replaced every one of us with a weirdly nice clone version."

Having no counterargument, I'd simply nodded agreement.

But now that GeeBee had revealed her revised matchmaking agenda, I wondered where Harmony fit into her big picture. "Trust me, Race isn't right for her," GeeBee had said, only minutes before they'd arrived at the restaurant.

I wasn't sure how she knew that, but I happened to agree with her. Still, there wasn't much I could do about it at this point. In fact, I was beginning to think GeeBee was my best hope of getting Harmony out of my brother's clutches before she fell for him. Which, let's face it, was inevitable. No woman could resist his charms.

And I'd experienced firsthand how it felt to be the rebound relationship of one of Race's discarded girlfriends. Like when you're leaning in to kiss her and she bursts into tears and sobs that she misses Race so much. After the two of you have been going out for *six months!*

When I thought about it, I didn't know why I held out any hope for Harmony and me. There was approximately zero chance I'd ever get to ask her out. And probably a negative chance that she'd be interested. Especially after being with Race. Even in a fake relationship. Which I really, really hoped wouldn't turn into a permanent thing. The last thing I wanted was for Harmony to be my sister-in-law.

Maybe she'd be better off. What did I have to offer a woman? I'd only been in love once, but evidently, I was self-centered. Caroline had told me as much the night she'd broken up with me. At the time, I'd blamed everything on Race. He'd simply winked at her, and she'd dropped me to be with him.

But her words that night had confirmed my deepest hidden fear...

I was exactly like my birthfather. And I knew firsthand how much his selfishness had hurt his family. Harmony didn't deserve that. No one did.

As usual, we got a few Race-gawkers as we made our way to the more secluded area of the restaurant to be seated at a round table in the corner.

"Isn't it weird having everyone stare at you everywhere you go?" Harmony eased into her chair beside Race, her stiff posture relaxing slightly in the more secluded setting.

I snagged the chair on her left, but she only had eyes for my brother. He opened his mouth to reply, some glib comment prepared, I'm certain. But GeeBee beat him to it.

"I'm getting used to it." From the basket in the center of the table, GeeBee snatched a piece of bread with about a hundred different seeds embedded in its surface and smeared it with butter. She gestured with the buttered bread before taking

a bite. “I don’t really mind talking to my fans. It’s good for business.”

Race and I exchanged a glance. Had the moment we’d been dreading for years finally come? Was GeeBee showing signs of dementia?

“I think Harmony was asking Race that question.” I leaned over and found GeeBee’s other hand in her lap to give it a gentle pat.

She jerked it away. “Don’t take that condescending tone with me, young man. I may be old as Methuselah, but my spaghetti is still in my bowl.”

“Your spaghetti?” Race missed the silent signal I gave him to let the matter drop.

“Yes, my spaghetti’s in my bowl. I haven’t lost my wits. Haven’t gone bananas. I’m not a few eggs short of a dozen.” She took a bite of her bread and chewed with angry vigor.

Harmony was grinning. Naturally, she thought Grandma Bette was funny. Because she didn’t realize how quickly that tornado could change paths and head straight toward her. Never a storm shelter in site when you needed it.

“You remind me of my Gramma.”

GeeBee cocked her head to one side, giving Harmony the sizing-up look. Poor girl had no idea she ought to be terrified. GeeBee might’ve decided Harmony shouldn’t be dating Race, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have plans for Harmony. I wondered if she also had millions of male photos saved somewhere on her phone. And where on earth had she found all those pictures anyway?

“I can see why I might remind you of her.”

“I don’t know, GeeBee. I doubt there’s another grandmother like you.”

“Hmm...” She cocked an incredulous eyebrow at me. At least I think it was her *incredulous* eyebrow. It might have been her *judgmental* eyebrow. Sometimes I get them confused. If both eyebrows went up, that could mean anything.

“That’s a compliment. You know you’re one of a kind.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled. I only saw it for a second, but I knew I’d amused her, as much as she might pretend otherwise.

“Harmony wasn’t questioning my uniqueness. She’s saying I remind her of her grandmother, Loretta.”

I flatlined right then and there. If GeeBee knew Harmony’s grandmother, that must’ve been where she’d gotten the resume. If she spilled the beans about how and why she’d sent me Harmony’s resume, I was sunk.

Harmony leaned forward. “You know her?”

GeeBee sat back and folded her arms. The wheels were turning inside that unpredictable head of hers. No telling what she was going to say. I held my breath. Fairly sure Race did, too. My eyesight was already getting fuzzy by the time she finally replied.

“Your grandmother and I go way back. All the way back to when we were on Broadway together. When she had the lead in *Coopersville*, I was her understudy. I had my first lead role in *Three’s a Crowd*, and she played my archenemy. But she was one of my best friends. We lost touch after we left New York, but I found her a few months ago on Facebook.”

If I’d worn dentures, they would’ve fallen out of my mouth. I checked my lap, just in case. Nope. Empty. But it still felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. GeeBee had been an actress in New York City?

“You were on Broadway?” Race beat me to the question.

“Of course.” She lifted her chin, as if our shock was offensive. “That’s how I met your grandfather. He started off directing plays before he moved to Hollywood and shifted to movies.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell us?” Sweat was already trickling down my back. I shrugged my suit coat off and hung it on the back of my chair. This was going to be the longest dinner of my life.



“You never asked.”

“Did you get to star in any movies?” Harmony asked. “The ones your husband made?”

“I had a few cameo roles, but nothing big. Then I got pregnant and that was the end of my acting career.”

“Did you ever regret giving it up? To be a wife and mother?” Harmony’s question surprised me. It hadn’t even occurred to me that GeeBee could’ve chosen a different path. If she had, we wouldn’t even exist.

“Not for a second.”

A relieved breath whooshed out of my lungs. How guilty would I feel if she’d lamented choosing a family over her career?

“That’s what Gramma says, too. She gave it all up to marry my grandfather and have a family.”

“Nowadays, a woman doesn’t have to make that choice.”

“Gramma says that, too.” Harmony’s jaw jutted forward. “But she’s not fooling me. I know she’s trying to manipulate me into pursuing a man instead of my music.”

“Loretta is one hundred percent right.” GeeBee’s eyes squinted in a way that meant you’d better pay attention and pointed her finger at Harmony. “You don’t have to choose between being a performer and getting married.”

“Yes, but it’s still hard. Relationships get in the way when you’re trying to establish a career.”

“If a relationship gets in the way of your career, it means you’re with the wrong man. My Walter never asked me to give up acting. He wanted me to be happy, whatever that meant. He would’ve supported me no matter what I’d chosen to do.”

Harmony’s face reddened, but she didn’t back down. “Men like that don’t exist anymore. Or if they do, they’re rare. That’s why I’m not going to date anyone seriously unless I’m ready to give up on making it as a singer.”

“Hmph,” GeeBee replied, which Race and I knew meant, *“Not only are you wrong, but I’m going to prove it to you.”*

Poor Harmony was about to become the newest target of my granny-matchmaker. Meanwhile, I’d lied myself into a corner.

It was completely hopeless... unless...

If GeeBee could only find a genuine match for Race, while I ran interference for Harmony, at the same time pretending I was considering the matches GeeBee proposed for me and making sure Harmony didn’t get a hint of what had happened in the first place, everything had a slim chance of working out fine.

Yep. It was hopeless.

“Wonder why Gramma never mentioned you.”

I could tell by the cute little furrow between her eyebrows she was starting to connect the dots. When she saw the complete picture, I was going to be in trouble.

“I believe she wanted it to be a secret.” GeeBee sat back in her chair. “But I guess the cat’s out of the bag.”

Sheer panic sent my heart stampeding against my ribs. “GeeBee, don’t—”

“Your grandma sent your resume to me, and I made sure it crossed West’s desk.” GeeBee peered over the top of the reading glasses perched on her nose.

Harmony’s nostrils flared, and she sent a fierce glower in my direction. “I didn’t know that.”

She was going to hate me. I had to explain. “But—”

GeeBee interrupted. “Loretta didn’t tell you because she didn’t want you to think you’d gotten the job because of our friendship. But West can attest, that’s not the case. He didn’t know your grandma and I were friends until this very moment. Your grandma told me how talented you were, and I made sure West listened to your audition sampler. So please don’t be mad at her. The way everything turned out, it was obviously meant to be. Sometimes God uses people to get His will done, right?”

“I guess...” Harmony buttered a roll and gave it a thoughtful nibble while the server arrived to announce the specials. Had Harmony bought GeeBee’s story? She had no reason to suspect matchmaking had been GeeBee’s primary motivation for the introduction.

The server’s voice quivered as she took our order. Dressed in black tuxedo pants, black cummerbund, and a somehow-spotless white tux shirt, she shifted from foot to foot and tried not to stare at any of us. I’d seen it a thousand times—she was star-struck. It was pretty common, anyplace I went with Race. Believe me, I wasn’t envious of that constant attention.

When she had our dinner selections, she bit her lips and looked down, fidgeting with the menus in her hands. “My friends’ll be so jealous I got to meet you. Would it be okay if I got a selfie with you?”

“No problem.”

Race was always patient with his fans. If it ever happened to me, I’d probably be a grouch. Well, not the first time, or even the first hundred times. But a constant bombardment, like Race experienced every time he went in public, would get old fast.

“Oh! I meant... I thought...” The server’s shoulders scrunched as her gaze fastened on GeeBee. “Aren’t you Granny B? The TikTok matchmaker?”

“That’s me. Granny B.” She jammed a thumb at her sternum. “Need a match? Come to me! Sure, we can do a selfie.”

The server squealed and went around the table, bending her face next to GeeBee and snapping a picture. “I filled out my surrogate form online two weeks ago. I don’t have a granny recommendation, so I know I’m at the bottom of the list. But my mom is pushing me to take this super dorky guy as my date to my cousin’s wedding. His breath always smells like peanuts.”

“What’s your name, honey?”

“It’s Julie.” She fluttered her hands in front of her face. “This is so exciting. I can’t believe I’m actually meeting you in person.”

“How far off is the wedding?”

“Three weeks. I’m getting desperate.”

“I happen to know a nice young man with a similar dilemma. You could probably trade off wedding dates while I’m sorting out who would be your perfect matches.”

“Will that cost extra? Never mind, I don’t care what it costs. I’m happy to pay. Thank you so much.”

“Tell you what...” GeeBee lifted her cell phone from the table. Was that the newest iPhone? “Let me get a picture of us together, and I’ll post it on TikTok later.”

“Really? Oh wow! This is unbelievable. I’m going to be famous!” With a nervous glance toward the main dining area, she smoothed her hair and licked her lips before bending down for another picture. The phone flashed, and she straightened, fishing something from a hidden pocket in her cummerbund. “Here’s my card. It’s got the email I used when I signed up.”

GeeBee glanced at the card before she tucked it away in her...

*No! Please tell me my grandmother didn’t just stow a business card inside her bra!*

Julie scurried out of the room, presumably to put in our order, while GeeBee calmly picked up her napkin, flicked the folds out and placed it in her lap. I couldn’t think of a single word to say. Evidently, neither could my companions.

“Why do you look so shocked?” She gave us her classic flabbergasted look. Race and I had underestimated her again, and she obviously disapproved.

“Maybe because of where you just stuck that business card.” Race took his life in his hands, garnering a pirate-squint from our grandmother. She’d have him walking the plank if he didn’t watch out.

“No other option. I don’t have a purse. Don’t own one that matches my shoes.” She twisted to lift a black and gold tiger-striped pump above the level of the table, also flashing the bright pink of her tights.

Race coughed a snicker into his hand. I shook my head, but he ignored me. “I also didn’t know my own grandmother had more fans than I do.”

“You knew one of my matchmaking posts had gone viral. I told you weeks ago, when you had lunch at the house.”

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t use the word *viral*, GeeBee.” Race kept baiting her. I tried miming for him to zip his lips, but he kept prattling on. “You didn’t even know *K* meant a thousand.”

Smirking, he lifted his water glass to his lips.

“My fans don’t seem to care that I’m not quite hip yet.” She peered down her nose at him. “Besides, K-likes are old news now that I have one point two *M* followers.”

Race choked, coughing into his hand.

“One point two million?” My voice came out as a squeak.

“I think it’s so exciting,” said Harmony.

She leaned forward to rest her chin on her hands. But her elbow landed on the side of her butter plate and sent her butter knife clacking to the table and her roll sailing through the air. It hit me square in the mouth, depositing a glob of butter on my chin before tumbling into my lap.

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry.” She jumped up, armed with her napkin, and reached over to wipe my chin. Her hand brushed my face, weird electric sensations emanating from her fingers. Startled, I sucked in a breath, then forced a smile, as if I hadn’t felt a thing.

“Nice shot.”

“Actually, I missed. I was aiming for your forehead.” She eased back into her seat, head titled up in a lame attempt at a haughty expression. I was fairly certain the woman hadn’t had

a single arrogant thought in her life, as the rosy glow in her cheeks demonstrated.

I retrieved the roll from the napkin in my lap and held it toward her. “I thought you might be buttering me up.”

“You wish.”

Our exchange was sending my mind toward the gutter, so I wisely let her have the last word.

“West...” GeeBee peered over the top of the reading glasses perched on her nose. “Before Race and Harmony arrived, I believe you were explaining that they’ve started dating.”

“Yes.” I took a drink from my water glass, stalling for the right words. Time to punt. “Race probably wants to tell you about it.”

“We’re going out as friends.” Harmony cut in before Race could respond.

Race’s chair screeched against the floor as he scooted closer to Harmony and slung an arm around the creamy bare shoulders I’d been struggling to ignore. “Close friends. Hopefully more. But we’re taking it slow.”

“Really slow.” Harmony’s hands trembled as she refolded her napkin and pressed it into her lap. “Like glacier speed.”

“That’s right.” Race smiled, as if he’d already won whatever game he was playing. His hand caressed the top of her arm, fingers trailing across the soft skin. At least, I assumed it was soft. It certainly looked soft, but I’d probably never find out. Most likely, this was one of Race’s trademark moves that enticed women to fall hard for him. I’m pretty sure I saw her shiver in response.

His voice went sultry. “Super slow. No need to rush. We have all the time in the world.”

I’d never been envious of a hand before. But what I wouldn’t give to be one of his fingertips. I couldn’t stop watching those fingers draw lazy circles on her skin.

And neither could GeeBee. If this little show was meant for her, it was a convincing performance. Where GeeBee had once been convinced these two wouldn't be a suitable match, she had to be changing her mind. My tiny bubble of hope sputtered out like an untied balloon.

With a purse-lipped glare, GeeBee zeroed in on his hand, staring until it dropped from Harmony's shoulder. Then her penciled-on eyebrows formed half-circles over her eyes.

"That's better. If you've really changed your ways, you shouldn't be pawing all over Harmony. Loretta would be furious if she found out I let that happen." GeeBee sucked air between her teeth. "And here I thought you were ready to graduate from the prayer-list group to the matchmakers."

The frustration on his face morphed to delight. "Sorry, GeeBee. I think I'll need to stay in your prayer-list group for quite a while. I've got a long way to go before I'm ready for matchmaking."

The look he sent across the table to me was full of silent laughter. He was worming his way out of GeeBee's matchmaking efforts and leaving me as her principal focus.

"No, he's really been walking the straight-and-narrow, GeeBee," I said. "You'd be really proud. Right, Harmony?"

Race's searing glower would've melted a lesser man, but my pleasant expression never wavered.

"He gets misrepresented in the press all the time, Grandma Bette." Harmony's sincere enthusiasm was hard to ignore. "Race is actually quite the gentleman. He hasn't even kissed me."

Why did that knowledge make my heart so happy?

"You can call me GeeBee, dear."

Startled, I sucked in a breath. GeeBee only offered the shortened version of her name to family members... until now. Did this mean she'd accepted the idea of Race and Harmony ending up together?

“We’ll talk about it when you boys come for my birthday.” GeeBee straightened the silverware beside her plate.

“Your birthday?” Race asked.

“It’s two weeks from this-coming Tuesday.”

“Right, GeeBee,” Race explained, “but we’ll be in Atlanta on Thursday—”

“I know that. I have your tour schedule written on my calendar.”

“Yes, but we weren’t sure you could read it. You have so much written on it you can barely see the numbers.” We’d discussed celebrating her birthday on one of our off-weeks or after the tour, but I thought better than to mention it.

“You need to fly back for my eighty-ninth birthday. Take me out for a nice filet mignon.” The woman loved to eat steak. She must’ve still had her own teeth, though I’d never asked her. “And bring my present. I’ve decided what I want.”

“Okay, I’ll bite.” I mentally calculated the cost of last-minute plane tickets. The charter was already reserved to fly straight to Atlanta. This was going to be an expensive present. “What do you want us to bring you for your birthday?”

“A pet.” The emphatic nod of her chin said the matter was settled. “I want company. But not one that makes a mess or requires too much work. And I don’t want to potty-train a puppy or deal with kitty litter.”

“Then what kind of pet do you want?” Race and I shared an uh-oh look. We’d been here before. GeeBee was impossible to predict. And if we chose the wrong pet for her, one of us would be stuck taking care of it for the rest of its life.

“I’m sure you’ll pick something I’ll like if you put some thought into it.”

Tonight, I’d be Googling what pet had the shortest lifespan.





**D**ear Diary,

*The last two weeks have been crazy. I'm kind of famous now, but only for being the girlfriend of a rock star. No one cares that I can sing.*

*I had a talk with Gramma and fussed at her for not telling me she was involved in getting my job for me. But after learning what GeeBee was up to, I count myself lucky my grandma is only trying to be my music agent.*

*Poor West and Race. I thought Gramma was a meddler until I met GeeBee. I'd hate having my grandmother interfering in my love life.*

I felt guilty I'd been ignoring my cute journal, but I was too busy to write a detailed description of everything that had happened. As I'd feared, the press had gotten a "secret tip" about where Race would be dining that night. So when we'd emerged from Leopold's into the sea of flashing cameras, Race had made his announcement. With his grandmother's eagle-eyes watching his every move, he hadn't even put his arm around me. Instead, he'd held up our linked hands and proclaimed us good friends.

He'd also bragged that I was a good influence on him and had already taught him a lot about what was important in a relationship. By the time he was done describing me, even I was in love with this mythological woman imbued with great dating wisdom.

West had even paid Race's publicist to take over my neglected social media accounts. Evidently, I was now posting several times a day, and I'd gotten a gazillion followers overnight.

Race and I hadn't spent much time together, considering we were supposed to be boyfriend and girlfriend. Which was fine with me. It might give me the time I needed to write the perfect song for Race's album. I'd started several, abandoning each as I deemed them not right for Race's voice. He'd be making the decision for the final song on his album before the tour ended, and I was already panicking.

On Sundays or Mondays, West and Race usually flew a charter back to LA, along with Gary, Drake, and Paul—"the Hatters"—unless we had a weekday concert scheduled somewhere. But this week, with a Thursday concert coming up, all the singers and crew were staying at the hotel in Atlanta until the concert.

All of them except West and Race, who were scheduled to fly home for Grandma Bette's birthday celebration tomorrow and back the next day. No surprise, she'd gotten exactly what she'd demanded.

But the perfect birthday pet was a point of contention between the two brothers. Race argued they should wait and buy something in LA, but West said GeeBee was less likely to believe they'd given it sufficient thought if they purchased a pet at the last minute on Tuesday. I agreed with West.

And that was my first mistake.

That got me an invitation to go with West to pick out GeeBee's pet.

My second mistake was saying yes when he asked. I got the distinct feeling the brothers would blame me if GeeBee didn't approve of the choice. I considered trying to back out.

When a knock sounded at my door, I opened it and found West, sporting a thin black t-shirt stretched to contain his bulging muscles. The man never wore t-shirts. I had no idea his muscles were that well-defined, since I'd only ever seen

them under dress shirts. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't very well turn him down and deprive my starved eyes. Especially not when I saw he'd donned a pair of blue jeans that showed off his equally gorgeous thigh muscles.

"Let me grab my purse." I tore my eyes away from the tempting visual feast. Obviously, my fake boyfriend had already approved of our outing, so I wasn't breaking any rules I could think of.

Our taxi dropped us off at a pet store.

"You'd better keep those sunglasses on, or someone might recognize you." Ever the gentleman, West stepped ahead to open the door for me. And I wasn't about to complain about another chance to stare at those yummy back muscles.

"Me? I doubt it. Not if you-know-who isn't with me."

"You can't believe how skilled our publicist is. Your face is everywhere right now."

"Whatever you say. I'll keep them on."

I blinked as I walked inside, trying to adjust my eyes to the loss of sunlight. I peeked over the top of my sunglasses.

"Why is it so dark in here?"

"This is our nocturnal store," said a young man at the counter. "Our diurnal store is next door, if you're looking for a puppy or a cat or something. We've got pets that are active at night, like mice. You can get snakes on either side."

"I veto snakes. But mice are worse." A shiver rippled down my spine. "I really hate mice. Completely phobic."

"Then you really don't want a snake, either." Another guy came out from between the aisles, sporting a red polo that matched the one the first guy had on. "You have to feed them mice."

"I think I just threw up in my mouth."

"Just don't do it on stage and mess up another mic." West winked at me to show he was teasing. Or at least I think he

did. I couldn't make out his expression very well with my dark sunglasses on.

Polo-shirt guy pointed to his name tag. "I'm Markus. You probably don't need your sunglasses in here."

"I... uh..."

"She has to keep them on." West came to my rescue. "She got her eyes dilated. Eye exam."

"Been there." Markus pushed his own black-rimmed glasses up on his nose. "How can I help you?"

"I need a nice pet for my grandmother. One that doesn't require a lot of care."

"Snakes are actually pretty easy to care for." Markus rubbed his chin.

"Nope. Snakes have been vetoed." West patted my arm in a casual way, but my heart sped up in response. I shouldn't enjoy the contact, should I? Could you cheat on a fake boyfriend?

"Your grandmother might like a guinea pig. They're active day and night, so we sell them in both stores. But right now, we only have two left, and they're in the diurnal store."

"Let's see what you have in this store, first." West walked over to a glass case and peered inside. "What's in here?"

He tapped on the glass and a million mice came billowing out of nowhere.

"Ew!" I took a step back, trying not to hyperventilate.

Markus laughed. "You got 'em excited. We always tap on the glass before we feed them."

"Awesome!" West bent and put his nose against the case, eye-to-eye with the disgusting rodents.

"I'm actually in a horror movie right now." I edged around them, away from the mouse case, my heart firing like a machine gun.

“Don’t you mean literally, since you’re exaggerating reality?”

“You’re right. It’s not a movie. It’s real-life horror.”

“You’re safe. They’re behind the glass.” West straightened up, his benign smile clearly demonstrating he didn’t grasp the seriousness of my phobia.

“They can see me.” I shuddered, shuffling further away. The bottom of the cage was alive, a squirming mass of tiny monsters that bore no resemblance to the cute creatures in Disney cartoons. “They probably smell my fear.”

“How about a rat?” Markus pointed somewhere to his left. “They’re a lot more affectionate than a mouse.”

“Nope. Rats look like big mice.” I backed down the aisle. “Nothing with a long bare tail.”

“That takes out the dwarf opossum, then.” Markus drummed his fingers on his arm. “Are gerbils okay?”

“I’ll look at anything else you’ve got. As long as it’s as far as possible from those mice.”

“How about a chinchilla?” Marcus came down the aisle and led us around the corner to a cage with a fluffy animal who had a bushy tail, nothing like a mouse. “Chinchillas are super soft. They like to have attention, but they’re not terribly demanding.”

West reached through a special flapped hole in the top of the glass cage to pet it. “It is soft. GeeBee might like this. What’s their average lifespan?”

“They can live up to twenty years if they’re well cared-for.”

West jerked his hand out so fast he almost pulled the top off the case. “That’s a no-go. I’m looking for something with a short life-expectancy. Do you have something that only lives for six months or so?”

“West, that would be awful! GeeBee would be so sad when it died.” I was feeling braver as we got farther away from the mice.

“Most goldfish don’t live long, but those are next door.” Markus pulled out his cell phone and typed on the screen. “I can check the inventory from here, if you want.”

“Fish aren’t affectionate at all. We need something a little cuddly.” I edged forward, checking each cage for the presence of mouse-like creatures before I got too close. “I don’t think she’d be too keen on any of these frogs, either.”

“Cuddly, but short-lived.” West crossed his arms. “Trust me, it’s for the best.”

“How about a hamster?” Marcus motioned us to follow him down around the corner and back up the next aisle to the front of the store. I followed at a distance, hesitant to go back in that direction. He stopped at a display case off to the right. “Chinese hamsters have a pretty short lifespan. Less than two years average.”

I stopped in my tracks, stomach in my throat as I stared at the creatures. “They have long tails, like mice! Hamsters are supposed to have short tails, like a tiny bunny.”

“You’re thinking of these Syrian hamsters. People call them teddy bear hamsters.” Marcus opened the lid on the display case next to the mouse-looking hamsters and removed a small fluffy creature and handed it to West. “These usually only live for two to three years, although some people have kept them alive for five.”

“You’re a cutie, aren’t you?” West held the cuddly golden hamster up to his face, a sharp contrast to his scruffy masculine beard. It was so sweet my heart melted. “I guess I could handle getting stuck with one of these for a couple of years if GeeBee doesn’t like it.”

“Can you bring it over here so I can see it?” I stood in the aisle’s opening, afraid to get any closer to the still-teeming mice ten feet off to my left.

“Excuse me for a minute. I need to help these customers.” Markus waved at a group of three attractive young women who’d entered the store. To my dismay, they moved directly toward the mouse display case.

West brought the teddy bear hamster over to me, but I couldn't take my eyes off the girls with the mice.

“Does it scare you to watch, even from a distance?”

“It scares me to be in the same state,” I hissed between my clenched teeth.

I cringed as Markus reached into the case and started pulling out mice. He handed one to each of the girls, whom I guessed to be in their late teens. They were probably crushing on Markus and only touched the mice to impress him. I'd never liked any guy that much.

“You're really that phobic of mice?” He gave me a look I'd seen before. The one that said I was being an idiot to be so terrified of a tiny thing that couldn't possibly hurt me.

“It's called musophobia. And I'll have you know it's very common. At least I'm not afraid of roaches and spiders. Or heights or small spaces.” It was my best argument to defend my slightly irrational fear. “Only mice. I'm not even afraid of snakes. I held a boa constrictor one time. I still don't think GeeBee would want a snake, because they aren't exactly affectionate.”

He grinned. I could see it really well, even with my sunglasses on in the dark store. I guess my eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

“Well, I suppose everyone should be allowed to have one phobia.” He stretched out his hands, displaying a cute golden ball of fluff. “Since hamsters aren't on the list, do you want to hold it?”

With one eye on the girls with the mice, I cradled the small hamster in my hands and rubbed the soft fur with my thumbs. West watched my actions, a sultry look in his eyes that grew in intensity until my knees went weak.

Had that been my imagination? Surely so. West wasn't interested in me like that, was he?

I ducked my face to hide the rush of blood—my complexion did weird things when I got flustered and weirder things when I was over-emotional.

“Uh...” I had to say something... anything to break the awkward silence. “What about you? What’s your phobia?”

The intense stare vanished as he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Being stuck in my current job for the rest of my life.” The moment the words were out of his mouth, he looked like he wished them back. “Don’t tell Race I said that. In fact, forget I said it.”

“I won’t tell him.” A surge of empathy tightened my chest. I knew what it felt like to be stuck in a job you hated. “What would you do if you could do anything you wanted?”

“Record my own songs.” The corners of his mouth pulled back in a grimace. “Not likely to happen, though.”

“You sing, too? Do you sound like Race?”

“My voice is completely different.” Dejection spread across his face. “And *that* is why I have *zilch* chance of having my own music career. All I’ll ever be is Race’s brother.”

He was right, and we both knew it. Race’s popularity would probably lead to constant comparison between the brothers if West ever recorded anything. I gnawed on my bottom lip, trying to think of something positive to say.

“I’ve never heard you sing, but I bet you’re good.”

He shrugged, his expression miserable as ever. “Maybe. It doesn’t matter.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re better looking.”

Why didn’t I keep my mouth shut? I had no control over what stupid thing might spill out when I opened it. I looked around for a convenient rug to crawl under.

“Do you mean that?”

His words were so quiet I had to look to make sure I’d heard him. When I did, our eyes locked. I battled against a crazy, magnetic force that drew me toward him. And I was losing the battle, edging closer, still trapped in his mesmerizing gaze. Was it my imagination, or was he leaning



closer, too? His eyes went half-lidded. My pulse picked up speed.

*He's going to kiss me!*

Was I going to let him? Stupid question. Of course I was. How could I worry about ruining the rest of my life by dating my boss at a moment like this? I had no more willpower than when I'd sworn off chocolate for almost twelve hours before consuming half a pan of brownies. (Stupid mistake—I'll never swear off chocolate again!) If West wanted to kiss me, I wouldn't stop him. I'd simply deal with consequences later. Somehow.

Seemed like a rather dumb resolution, anyway, never to date my boss. What if we were the only two people in the world? Would I still say it was bad to go out with a guy I worked for? (Something was a little off with my reasoning, but I didn't care.)

I pushed my lower lip out and blew a little breath toward my nose, glad a bit of freshness still remained from the mint I'd eaten in the car. My gaze still glued to his, I licked my lips to moisten them. It had been so long, I'd forgotten exactly how to kiss without bumping noses. Was I supposed to turn my head? If so, which way? Left or right? Pretty sure it was right, but I'd never been great at telling my left and right apart.

His eyebrows lifted. "May I?" he whispered.

"Yes." My soft answer was lost in the loud giggles from the girls a few feet away. But his smile told me he'd heard my response.

His head bent slightly to one side. Great—now I knew to move my nose in the other direction. But wouldn't that make our lips meet crooked? I couldn't remember. This was going to be the worst first kiss ever. He'd never want to kiss me again. But that could actually work out well. After all, my resolution wasn't against *kissing* my boss; it was against *dating* him. And one kiss didn't constitute a date, did it?

His hands came up and cupped my cheeks as his lips descended toward mine. My heart slammed hard against my

ribs, drowning out all the voices in the store.

A pet shop wasn't the most romantic place to have a first kiss, but I'd had worse. Like behind the school trash cans in eighth grade. Hopefully, I wouldn't accidentally squeeze too tightly and suffocate the little hamster I was holding.

His lips were a breath away from mine when a feminine squeal rent the air. "Oh! Look out!"

I jerked away from West, watching in horror as one girl writhed about, thrashing her arms. "It's on my back! Get it off me!" she screamed.

"They're both on the floor!" yelled Markus. "Quick, catch 'em before they get away!"

The next scream I heard was mine. I'm not sure what happened to the hamster in my hands, but in a flash, I was halfway up the closest set of shelves. All I knew was there were mice loose in the store and I had to get my feet off the ground.

I felt the shelf bending under my feet before I heard a loud crack. Seriously? Wouldn't you think a pet shop full of vicious mice would make the shelves strong enough to use to escape dangerous predators?

The shelf gave way and I went down. The floor hit the back of my head with a painful thunk, as an avalanche of healthy-dog-treat boxes and squeaky toys piled on top of me. I thrashed in a panic, already imagining tiny fury feet skittering across my prone body.

"Are you okay?" A box shifted, revealing West's concerned face, and I grappled for his outstretched hand. I scrambled to my feet, but I didn't stop there. I climbed right up onto his back and hooked my arms around his neck.

"Uh cuh bruh," he said.

"What?" In terror, I cinched my arms tighter. "Did you say something about a cobra?" But really, who cared about a cobra when there were mice rampaging around the store?

He pried a gap in my arms and gasped for breath. “I said, *I can’t breathe.*”

“Oh, is that all?” I tightened my legs. No matter what, I couldn’t touch the floor.

“*Is that all?* I’d say breathing is rather important. Without it, I’m going to pass out, and you’ll be at the mercy of the vicious mice.” He chuckled, tucking his arms around my legs to keep me steady.

“Hey!” One of the careless, mouse-dropping girls pointed at me. “Aren’t you Race Madden’s girlfriend?”

Mouth hanging open, my hand went to my face, confirming the missing sunglasses.

“Race Madden? Are you kidding me?” West threw his head back and howled with laughter. “This is my girlfriend. Do I look like Race Madden?”

Her eyes narrowed. “No, you don’t. But she looks an awful lot like that Harmony Rivers girl. Same eyes. Same nose. Same exact hair color.” The girl slowly withdrew her cell phone from her pocket.

West twisted until we were facing the opposite direction and muttered under his breath. “The last thing we need is someone posting a picture of Race Madden’s girlfriend on another guy’s back.”

“Please don’t put me down,” I squeaked. “Those mice could be anywhere.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get me out of here.”

“As you wish, fair maiden.” West let out a loud and awful whinny. “Your noble steed hears and obeys.”

Before the first snort of laughter escaped my mouth, he was galloping toward the door. Safely outside, he lowered me to the sidewalk and handed me his sunglasses, a designer pair that would probably be horrified to perch on my unworthy nose.

“I can’t wear these. I might lose them. Or scratch them.”

His eyes rolled up in his head. “Don’t worry. These are freebies that Race threw in the trash.”

“Gramma would have a fit if I did something like that. Every time I throw away a piece of aluminum foil instead of washing it and reusing it, I hear her voice in my head telling me I’m being wasteful.”

“I can see why our grandmothers were friends back in the day.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets, his eyes trained on the stained sidewalk.

I sucked in a sudden breath as I remembered what we’d been doing when the mice had gotten loose and I’d destroyed the store. He’d been about to kiss me! But I shouldn’t read anything into it. He’d probably only done it in an effort to calm me down. He wasn’t trying to start a relationship with me. After all, he’d been totally horrified at being caught with me on his back.

“Listen, about what happened in there... or what almost happened. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

He looked up, eyes wide. “What are you saying?”

“Just that I know you were only trying to stop me from panicking, and you don’t actually like me or anything.” I watched his reaction, vainly wishing he’d deny the truth.

My hopes died with the slow nod of his head, his brows drawing low across his eyes. “Right. And you don’t like me, either. You like Race.”

“Right.” The word stuck in my throat like a dry saltine. “It’d probably be best if we forget it happened. Not that anything happened.”

“Nothing happened.” His gaze was hard, all the humor that had glittered in his eyes the entire outing gone. “Already forgotten.”

Why did I feel like my heart had a big hole in it... like I’d lost something big?

*Get real, Harmony. You can't lose something you never had.*



I was smitten with Harmony.

Completely smitten. And that wasn't even a word in my normal vocabulary before I met her.

She had a way of making me feel valued and important. Simply for being me. Not for being related to my rockstar brother. And she did it without trying.

When she'd said she was more attracted to me than Race, I could barely control myself. In fact, I hadn't. I'd kissed her. Well, I'd almost kissed her. And I wouldn't have stopped if it hadn't been for those stupid mice. Then again, those tiny harmless creatures had given me the opportunity to play the hero and rescue her.

I'd thought everything had turned out rather well, and I'd been looking forward to another try at finishing the kiss we'd started. Until she'd dropped her little bomb. *"It'd probably be best if we forgot it ever happened. Not that anything happened."*

She'd regretted it. Why had I been surprised? All those things she'd done—the way she'd spoken and acted that had made me feel so special—all those things were just Harmony being nice. Like she was to everyone. Race was the one she liked; the one she wanted to be with.

That's what permeated my brain for the entire flight from Atlanta to LA. That's why Race had given up carrying on a conversation and proclaimed me a grump before putting his ear-buds in and ignoring me for the rest of the flight.

But now we were with GeeBee, and I needed to put Harmony out of my mind.

“I love her! Thank you! She’s perfect!” GeeBee beamed as Race unveiled the fluffy gold teddy bear hamster from behind his back. Somehow, I’d gotten stuck holding all the accoutrements—cage, wood shavings, and hamster food. She bestowed a kiss on the furry creature’s head, and then gave each of us one on the cheek. “I think I’ll name her Tinkerbell.”

“It’s a boy hamster.” I’d purposefully chosen a male so I wouldn’t get stuck with a hamster who had a sissy name. “How about Hamilton?”

“Tinkerbell’s a perfectly fine name.” Race elbowed me, as if I were somehow insulting our grandmother.

“No one will know it’s a boy, anyway. From now on, she’s a girl. Isn’t that right, Tinkerbell?” She held the hamster up to her cheek. Then her expression went sober. “I know it was selfish of me to demand you be here for my birthday, but... well... I didn’t want to say anything about it at the restaurant because we had company, but... I’m not well, and frankly, I don’t know how much time I have left.”

Race and I gasped at the same time, and something thick and heavy fell into my gut. I might’ve complained about GeeBee’s interference on a regular basis, but I loved her and couldn’t imagine life without her.

“What’s wrong, GeeBee?” I left the hamster cage on the table and led her to the couch. She sat down, cradling the hamster in her lap, with Race and I flanking her.

“I think my old heart’s just worn out. I’ve been having sharp chest pains, and sometimes it’s hard to breathe.”

“What did the doctor say?” Race asked, his voice as shaky as mine.

“Doctor?” She flopped a hand forward. “Poo! I haven’t been to a doctor since I went through the change. I figure, if it’s my time to go, it’s my time to go.”

“GeeBee! You need to go to a doctor!” It was the closest I’d ever come to yelling at GeeBee. What if she’d waited too

long? My hands were trembling.

“I’m too old to be treated for anything.”

“Don’t say that.” Race’s face had gone pale.

I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff and someone had their hand on my back, applying pressure. I’d known we would lose GeeBee someday, but I’d always assumed she’d live to be at least a hundred.

“Will you take care of Tinkerbelle when I’m gone?” She looked straight at me. No surprise. I knew I’d somehow end up responsible for whatever pet we chose.

“Nope. I’m not taking him.”

That response had her slapping a hand to her heart, like she was going to have an attack right at that moment. “What?”

“Maybe you should go to the emergency room tonight,” Race suggested.

“And I don’t want a boy hamster named Tinkerbelle,” I added, just to be clear.

“Don’t listen to him, Tinkerbelle. West will take good care of you.” She kissed the stupid hamster on the head. He looked at me with his beady little eyes and spoke into my mind. *“Ha ha! I’ll still be alive eight years from now.”*

“Why don’t you ask Race to take care of him?”

“Race is too busy with his music career. I want to know Tinkerbelle will be in good hands when I’m gone.”

“Stop talking like you’re going to die.” Race ignored the opportunity to step up and take responsibility for Tinkerbelle. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“My heart is right with the Lord. I miss your grandpa, and I’m ready to go. There’s really no reason to stay here.”

“What about all those people who signed up to be matched on your TikTok thing?” For the first time, I was glad she had something to occupy her time. Even if it happened to be the most bizarre and interfering endeavor imaginable. “Are you just going to abandon them?”



“Of course not. My partners will take care of them.”

“Your partners?” My hand went to my chest as a sharp pain stabbed my heart. GeeBee’s ailment must’ve been contagious.

“It started out as grannies getting together to match up their grandkids. But there were so many sad, single people out there who didn’t have living grandmothers that I felt sorry for them. So I let those people sign up for our surrogate-granny matching service.”

“And they pay for this service?” Race asked.

“They pay a lot. You boys are lucky you were getting it for free.” She arched an eyebrow, and this time I’m certain it was the judgmental brow.

“Thanks a lot, GeeBee.” I tried to look grateful.

“But it’s time consuming.” She stroked the fur on Tinkerbelle’s back. “I had to hire other grannies to help me out. I’m sure they can carry on when I’m gone. Once I teach them the ins and outs of all the social media sites and how to manage the website.”

“You have a website, now?” asked Race.

“Yes. And I have a brilliant designer if you’d like her name. The Madden and the Hatters website could use a little updating, if you ask me. Have you checked your SEO lately?”

“GeeBee.” I put a hand on her arm. “Your granny friends need you. They won’t be able to learn all this computer stuff. Most older people can barely work their phones.” Hadn’t she been one of those phone-challenged people a few months ago?

“They’ll catch on eventually. I probably have a month or two left before I kick the bucket.”

“You’re going to the doctor tomorrow.” I used my firm, business tone—the one I used when I had to manage troublesome people in my job.

It didn’t work on GeeBee.

“I’m eighty-nine years old, and I’ve been making my own decisions since I was seventeen. I’m not about to start taking orders from my pipsqueak grandson.”

“What about your grown grandson who loves you and is begging you to take care of yourself so you can be here when my first child is born?” It was outrageous, but I was running out of options.

Her eyes went misty. She blinked. One hand flattened on her chest again. “Do you mean that? You’re ready to settle down and start a family?”

“We both are,” my brother added, surely not realizing what he was committing to.

She sniffed hard and swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. Then she turned her head toward Race. “You’re going to stop all your wildness and settle down with Harmony?”

His jaw stiffened. “If that’s what would make you happy, GeeBee, I’ll do it.”

“Wow.” I couldn’t keep my jealous sarcasm inside. “You might want to practice sounding more enthusiastic before you propose to Harmony.”

What did it matter? If Race asked her, she’d say yes. He always got what he wanted. And I ought to be glad for Harmony. She obviously liked Race, and her career would be cemented as well. Wasn’t her happiness the most important thing?

“Hmm... I really thought her personality would be a better match for your brother. And I already convinced Loretta you were too wild for Harmony.” GeeBee pursed her lips on one side, then the other. “I suppose it’s possible I made a mistake. I guess I can try to un-convince Loretta.”

I wanted to say something to stop it from happening. Before it was too late.

But I couldn’t reveal my true feelings. What if Race and Harmony ended up together? How awkward would it be if Race knew I had a thing for his wife?

*I have to tell her whatever she wants to hear so she'll agree to see a doctor.*

“GeeBee, I’m ready to cooperate now. If you send me another match, I promise to make a real effort at a relationship.”

She scratched her head, jostling the tight-white curls from her recent permanent, which she’d scheduled every three months for as long as I could remember.

“I don’t know, West.” She made a tsk-tsk sound. “I really thought I’d found the perfect match for you when I sent you Harmony’s resume. Then you passed her off to your brother, as if I hadn’t spent hours of my time working on it.”

“You spent hours finding Harmony?” Frustrated, I scrubbed a hand through my hair. “You said she was your friend’s granddaughter.”

“Yes, but you didn’t know that. It *could’ve* taken me hours to find her.”

The woman knew how to push my buttons.

“But I never asked you to find a match for me. In fact, I’d asked you *not* to.”

“Then I guess you’ll be glad when I’m gone.” She gave me her pouty lip. “You won’t have me bothering you with beautiful women who’re perfectly suited for you. Ever again.”

I looked at Race, hoping for support, but he threw up his hands. “Oh no! I’m staying out of this. You dug your hole, you can claw your own way out.”

“I’m sorry, GeeBee...” Speaking slowly, I reminded myself the most important thing was to give her a reason to live. “I didn’t think I wanted you to interfere in my life at the time, but now I’ve changed my mind. I should’ve given Harmony a chance, and I didn’t.”

“Yes, Harmony would’ve been perfect for you. But that boat’s already sailed,” GeeBee said. “The train has left the station.”

“That’s right. That egg has already cracked.” Race sported an obnoxious smirk. He knew I couldn’t smack it off his face with GeeBee sitting there.

“It’s cracked open and fried in a pan.” GeeBee bobbed her head in agreement. “Because Race said he’s going to marry her and have a baby.”

Race looked like he’d swallowed a bird, and it was trying to flap its way out of his throat. His strangled voice sounded like it, too. “I never said that.”

“You said whatever would make me happy, and a great-grandbaby would do it.” Her lips spread in a smug smile that she aimed at me instead of Race for some strange reason.

Picturing Harmony and Race having a baby together made me want to barf. I wadded my hands into fists, taking a deep breath to control my emotions. “I don’t think Race and Harmony will want to give up their careers and start a family.”

“Seems like my best chance, though.” GeeBee blinked innocent eyes at me. “I don’t think I’ll be alive long enough to wait for you to meet a girl, fall in love, get hitched, and then have a baby. At least Race is already in love with Harmony and ready to get married.”

Race let out an unintelligible gurgle.

“So you’re just going to abandon me?” I said. “Surely you want to stay alive long enough to find a match for me, too.”

“I suppose I could try to find someone new for you while I’m waiting for Race and Harmony’s baby to come.” She turned to Race, who was evidently too stunned to speak. “Maybe you could do some kind of fertility-thingy and try for twins. Speaking of babies, I had lunch with Everly Moore’s grandmother, Wilma, last week. Everly’s little girl just turned three.”

I couldn’t help feeling sorry for my brother. GeeBee might be eighty-nine years old, but her mind was as sharp as ever. She knew exactly what she was doing. Everly had dumped Race for another man, and he’d been struggling to get over her ever since.

Race's face went crimson. "I wouldn't know. Everly hasn't spoken to me in years."

"I kind of thought you were still soft on Everly." Though GeeBee's eyes seemed to be trained on Tinkerbelle, I suspected she was watching Race's reactions. "But I guess you're over her for good. Seeing as how you and Harmony are so serious."

"Harmony has nothing to do with Everly and me."

"But you are in love with Harmony, right? You're not still in love with Everly?"

He stared across the room, his eyes focused somewhere in the distance. His voice cracked when he spoke. "Harmony's a great girl. She's been good for me. How could I not be in love with her?"

At that moment, I felt about as low as low could be. I hadn't realized how much pain my brother was in, but I could see it on his face. More than three years, and he was still hurting. If Harmony loved him and she could help him heal, how could I even think about stealing her for myself?

GeeBee lifted the wriggling hamster up to her face and stared into his black eyes. "Tinkerbelle, remind me to call for a doctor's appointment tomorrow."

I was so relieved she was going to the doctor I didn't dare ask exactly what had made her change her mind. "He's getting fidgety. We should probably put him in his cage before he—"

"Good idea." GeeBee popped to her feet, with energy belying her claim of being on the verge of death, and handed me the hamster. "Hold Tinkerbelle for me while I get her cage."

"Why don't you call him Hamlet?" I used my hands to corral the hamster on my lap. "Or even Whiskers? Those are good masculine names."

Tinkerbelle regarded me with his unblinking stare as something warm soaked into my pant leg. Too late, I jerked him into the air.

"Nooo!" I swallowed the curse that came to mind, not inclined to have my ear in GeeBee's twisting grasp.

Race spied the wet spot on my pants that gave me the distinctive look of incontinence. “Maybe we should call him Tinkle-bell.” He laughed so hard he fell out of his chair. (It’s possible I accidentally tipped it over with my knee.)



**D**ear Diary,

*No one lets me help with equipment pack-up or set-up since that little “incident” where I tripped and fell while carrying something. Even though I sacrificed my elbows to make sure that panel-thingy didn’t hit the stage. Everyone was really sweet about it when it happened. Even Meghan fussed over my bruises. (Although she checked to make sure the sound panel was okay, first.) But now, if I show up and offer to help, they always find a nice way to get rid of me.*

*On a brighter note, Race tried my suggestion of performing a solo piece right before intermission. It was just him alone on stage, playing acoustic guitar and singing his ballad. The audience went so wild for it he decided to do the same thing in all the future concerts. That earned me back a little respect.*

I slid my sweet little notebook into my purse and sat back on the park bench in the almost-deserted hotel atrium to sip my morning coffee. I hadn’t written anything about my feelings for Race or West in weeks. I was so confused I didn’t dare immortalize my thoughts in writing.

Race had been spending a lot more time with me. Pretty much every night he and the “Hatters” were staying at the hotel with the rest of us. I was really proud of him. He hadn’t gone to a single party since the tour started, and the Hatters hadn’t been pressuring him at all. The truth was, I hadn’t even

seen Gary, Drake, and Paul do anything wilder than playing cards in one of their suites with a bunch of the crew.

But even though Race had taken me out to dinner a lot, he'd always invited someone to go with us. Which meant we were almost never alone together, and that was fine with me. He was super sweet and constantly told me I looked great and gave me little gifts like candy or pieces of jewelry, all of which made me feel really guilty.

We never talked about anything of consequence, so I'd been shocked out of my gourd when he'd dropped a bombshell on me last night. We'd been riding in a taxi back to the hotel.

"Harmony, I've come to realize you're everything I could ever want or need in a woman. I think we should move on to the next step in our relationship."

It had sounded very stiff. Rehearsed, even. Like reciting the lines in a play.

"What do you mean by next step?" I should've cut him off, going back to my pledge not to date a man I was working for. But I'd been too flabbergasted to think straight.

"I think we should date seriously and see where it goes. I can see us maybe getting married someday."

"I can't believe you're talking about marriage when we haven't even kissed."

"Because it was forbidden. I'm only following your rules."

It wouldn't have been nice to point out that his relationship-proposal had sounded about as romantic as a doctor suggesting I should get an MRI.

"Race, are you sure you actually like me like that?"

"I'm sure. I've been thinking about it a lot." He'd been staring straight ahead, not gazing into my eyes like you'd expect if he was actually into me.

"I have to be honest. You don't really seem all that attracted to me."



“I am. I’ll try to do better.” He’d turned toward me and taken my hand. It had still felt very platonic, and I’d sensed he was hurting.

“It feels like I’m more of an assignment than a passion.” I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “What’s really going on here?”

His broad shoulders scrunched upward, and he heaved a heavy sigh. “There was this other woman that I’ve been kind of hung up on. But she moved on years ago, and I’ve decided it’s time for me to move on, too.”

I’d watched his profile, seen the way his nostrils flared when he mentioned her.

“Have you talked to this woman since you broke up? Because you can’t really move on if you haven’t gotten closure.” That had been the pot calling the kettle black. I’d never actually gotten closure with What’s-His-Name, either. Though I hadn’t thought of him in at least a month. Maybe I was finally over him. I hoped so.

“I messed it up, didn’t I?” Race had pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “I shouldn’t have mentioned my past. West told me I needed to practice what I was going to say to you, and I tried. But I’m not good at talking about this stuff.”

“You and West have been discussing me?”

“A lot. He’s the one who helped me see how perfect we are together. How I really felt about you.”

That had answered the one question that had been burning in my mind since the pet store disaster. *Did that almost-kiss from West mean he cared about me?* The answer was obviously no. And it also explained why West had been avoiding me for the last two weeks.

“Let’s not rock the boat now.” I’d said. “Let’s leave everything the same between us and talk about it after the tour is over. There’re only three weeks left.”

In retrospect, I must’ve been crazy. I’d essentially turned down rockstar Race Madden. Tons of women had clawed each other for the chance to stand in the front of the crowd, fifteen

feet away from him, but I'd just discouraged him from pursuing a relationship. You'd think I'd have jumped at the chance, especially after I'd learned West was the one pushing him to be with me.

I wrote my reaction off to stress. The tour ended in three weeks. That's how long I had left to get my song written, and I was still stuck.

I'd discarded everything I'd started so far. Not that the songs weren't good, but they'd all been too country. None of them had sounded like something Race would want to record on his next rock album. I had enjoyed singing on the tour. But rock and roll obviously wasn't my forte, at least not where song composition was concerned.

I set my coffee down and pulled my guitar out of the open case at my feet. I had a couple of hours before the bus left. Hopefully, I could get a good start on a new song—one with the right sound.

I strummed a G-chord, moving to an E-minor and humming a little melody that popped into my head. Soon I was adding some words and a new song was flowing. It still didn't sound like a rock song for Race to sing. It sounded more like a song for me to sing about Race. But it felt so good to get my thoughts out I kept going.

*“TONIGHT WE WERE TOGETHER*

*But you were never there*

*You had this distant look you can't disguise.*

*Your lips were speakin' to me,*

*But your eyes were lookin' through me.*

*And that's when I saw wishin' in your eyes.*

*IN YOUR EYES—*

*I see you think about her*

*In your eyes—  
You have no joy without her  
And then you turn to me  
And say a thousand lovely lies.  
And that's when I see wishin' in your eyes."*

"I LIKE IT."

I jumped, swallowing the last note.

"West! You scared me." I shifted the neck of my guitar as he moved around to sit beside me, smelling amazing—like clean soap and some kind of masculine cologne or aftershave. "Not only are you not wearing a suit, but you have shorts on. Does that mean hell's frozen over?"

I hoped my joke covered up the way I was staring at his bare legs.

*Nice. I bet he plays soccer. Those guys have the best legs.*

"To be honest, I lost a bet with Meghan."

"What kind of bet?"

"I'd teased her about her newest tattoo. She made a deal that if she had it removed, I had to dress down for thirty days. How was I supposed to know it was a henna tattoo?"

I chuckled. "But last night you had a suit on."

"I committed to thirty days, but I didn't promise they'd be all in a row. Meghan's keeping a close count. I'm on day three." He uncrossed his arms so I could read the writing on his t-shirt. "I'm about to go buy some clothes so I don't have to borrow from Race anymore. He swore this was his only clean t-shirt when he gave it to me."

The shirt read *WORLD'S LARGEST SOURCE OF NATURAL GAS.*

I bit my lips. "I'm sure no one will notice."

“Believe me, they noticed.” He rolled his eyes. “I think Meghan and Race are in cahoots.”

“Ah-ha!” Everything clicked. “That must be why I got that strange group text from Meghan suggesting today would be a great day to take your picture and put it on social media. I thought it might be your birthday.”

“I knew it!” West groaned. “I should probably be glad this was the shirt Race chose for me. He’s got plenty that are worse.”

“Right. Some of them are pretty crass.” I’d even made Race change a few times.

“Race can get away with almost anything and still be golden.” A note of bitterness permeated his voice.

“Except in the dating department. The press really has raked Race over the coals the past few years. Truth is, he’s not nearly as bad as I thought he was after everything I’d read.”

“It’s hard to feel sorry for him when he set me up to be humiliated today. Be glad you don’t have a brother.”

“It’s the same way with my sisters.”

“Surely they aren’t as crude.”

“Maybe not, but they’re very sneaky and very nosy.”

“I might be willing to trade.”

“You should meet them first. You might change your mind.”

“I’d love to meet your family.” I was surprised at the longing in his voice, as if he didn’t have a family of his own. Obviously, that wasn’t the case. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he and Race had different fathers.

“The whole crew is coming to see me at the Houston concert. Even my grandmother, the one who knows GeeBee.”

He hadn’t moved, but somehow his leg was pressed against mine. How had that happened? Ah-ha! He’d done the guy thing where they have to spread their legs apart when they sit down. I would’ve enjoyed the way his calf brushed against

mine, except I hadn't shaved that morning. And I had the kind of legs that felt like prickly pears two hours after shaving.

"What's the deal with guys, the way you sit? Why can't you put your legs closer together?"

That was a mistake. Now his eyes were focused on both our legs. I slid the guitar down to cover more of my thighs.

"I could put my legs closer together, but it's not as comfortable. Besides, we have to stake our territory. Claim your space or lose it."

"Like those people who take both arm rests on an airplane?"

"Guilty as charged." He grinned. "But I'm a big guy. I need my space."

This gave me an excuse to study his broad, muscular shoulders. Then my eyes drifted down to his crude t-shirt. "Oh! I just got an idea!"

"For your song?"

"No, for your shirt-predicament. You could turn it inside out."

"That's a great idea!"

I didn't expect him to rip the shirt over his head and turn it inside out, sitting right beside me. He gave me an accidental eyeful of bare chest that made me squirm in my seat. But my embarrassment didn't stop me from gawking at him.

As he pulled the shirt back on, my hand disconnected from my brain and reached out to help him smooth it down. Fortunately, the zing I got when my fingers made contact helped me regain control, and I jerked it away.

Why would I do a thing like that? It wasn't like me. Maybe I'd been confused about who was sitting next to me. Growing up, I'd often helped my three little sisters get dressed.

"What did you say about dressing your sisters?" West broke into my musing.

*Did I say that out loud? How much had he heard?*

Blood throbbed in my face. “Oh... uhm... you know, I used to help them get dressed. That’s why I... uhm... thought about turning the t-shirt inside out.”

*Did he buy it?*

“Lucky for me you thought of it. Doesn’t look half bad.” He patted his tight abdomen—no doubt, a six-pack. I hadn’t really been able to tell from my angle, though I’d almost wrenched my neck trying to see. “Thanks. I owe you.”

I busied myself lifting the guitar strap off my shoulder, hoping he couldn’t see how pink my face was. “No problem.”

“Hey, don’t put the guitar up. I want to hear you sing some more.” He motioned with his hand. “Keep going. Is that the song you’re writing for Race?”

“Yes. Well, no...” I slumped against the back of the bench. “I’ve been trying, but I’m about ready to give up.”

“Why? That song was beautiful. You just need to change the *hers* to *hims*, and you’re good to go.”

“You don’t think it sounded too country?”

“If you sing it that way, it does. But if you change the strum pattern, it’ll be an awesome ballad.”

“I don’t think Race likes ballads. He’s only ever had one on an album.”

“Yes, but it was the number two most popular song on that entire album. It would be good marketing to keep a wide variety. I think another ballad would be a terrific addition.”

“Well, I’m getting desperate, so I’m willing to try anything. What pattern should I use?” I put my hands back in place on the guitar and gave the strings an initial strum, ringing out a G-chord.

“Why don’t you just try picking for now? No pattern at all.”

I started picking and sang through the chorus. “You’re right. It sounds less country already, although I have a tendency to sing it with a twang.”

He chuckled. “Let me try.”

I played through the chorus again, and West started singing. Rich and beautiful, his voice floated me into another realm. His mellow low notes, deeper than Race’s, made my throat tighten. He even let emotion crack his voice, wrenching my heartstrings.

“I wish we could write a song and sing it together.” I blurted it out before my brain engaged. It probably sounded like I was flirting with him, and he’d been avoiding me for that very reason. “I don’t mean anything by that. Purely commenting on your voice. I wasn’t trying to get you to kiss me or anything.”

*Stupid! Stupid! What am I saying?*

His eyebrows flew to the top of his forehead.

I made a lame attempt to explain. “I’m trying to say I’m not the kind of woman who kisses one guy when she’s dating another. At least, not usually. I guess I’ve been known to do and say some weird things when being threatened by man-eating mice. But I’m saying you don’t have to worry that I’ll do that again. You can be around me, and I won’t read anything into it. You know what I mean?”

His gaze dropped, and he picked at the threads on his inside-out t-shirt seam. “I know. We don’t need to bring it up again. We almost made a little mistake at the pet store. But nothing happened. I love my brother, and I want him to be happy. I want both of you to be happy. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

“Good. That’s good.” Why did I feel more disappointment than relief? “Even though the relationship is still fake.”

“For now.”

“Not just for now. For-*ever*. Race and I had a deal, and nothing has changed.” And I didn’t want it to, did I? Had I been an idiot for discouraging Race?

“But... you told me you liked him.”

“I did?” When had I said that? Oh, after the disastrous almost-kiss at the pet store. “I mean, I do, I guess. But only as a friend.”

“Really? That’s great!” His answer wasn’t what I was expecting.

“It is?” My hopes shot up like a bottle rocket.

“Well... uh...” His head ducked between his shoulders as they lifted. “It’s not great for Race, of course. But it’s great that you’re being honest with him. And who knows? You might change your mind...”

My bottle rocket plummeted downward, a dud. “I guess it’s possible. But to be honest, I think he’s still in love with someone else.”

“He told you about her?” West smacked his forehead. “My brother is an idiot. That relationship was years ago. It’s time for him to let go.”

“If you really love someone, it’s hard to let go.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” His head tilted in question. The genuine sympathy in his tone warmed my belly.

“I was engaged to a guy from my hometown. My boss.” *Weird! Talking about him doesn’t hurt like it used to.* “After he dropped me, it took him about two minutes and thirty-seven seconds to find a girl he liked better and marry her.”

“He hurt you pretty badly, didn’t he?”

I liked West’s stormy expression and protective tone. I pretended it meant something—that he wasn’t simply acting like a manager or a brother-in-law-to-be.

“What’s-His-Name really messed up my head for a while.”

“You don’t remember his name?”

“That’s just my pet name for him. A name befitting how much he should mean to me, based on how much I meant to him. But I think I might finally be over him.” I was surprised to find I meant it. I’d managed to get over Matt even without proving he’d made a bad choice. I’d thought becoming a



country music star would make me feel vindicated, but I hadn't needed it after all. "I just needed to find out I could be attracted to someone else."

"You mean Race?"

West aimed his piercing gaze on me, his focus moving back and forth between my eyes, like he was reading my mind. My breath caught in my throat, and I couldn't look away.

"I never said that," I whispered.

"Who were you talking about?" His voice dropped as he moved closer. And closer.

My brain went foggy, seemingly the result of some weird climate occurrence that had sucked all the oxygen from the local atmosphere. Or maybe it was that heady scent he was wearing—it had to be some sort of opiate.

*Is he going to kiss me? Why would he do that? He regretted it the first time he almost kissed me. I should probably stop him. Ha! Fat chance that's going to happen. We can kiss and figure out the regretting-part afterwards. Maybe this time I'll find out how it actually feels to have his lips on mine.*

"Harmony?" His hoarse whisper tickled the skin on my face.

"Mmmm..." Just to make it a little easier, I leaned toward him. I didn't pucker because I've seen how I look in the mirror with puckered lips. Ew! What guy would want to kiss those weird wrinkly things?

"If Race is only a friend, how do you feel about me?"

"I... uhm..." If I answered, I was setting myself up for possible humiliation. If this impending kiss was any indication, West appeared to be attracted to me. But that could be a purely physical thing. "How do *you* feel?"

His lips brushed my cheek and teased a trail down my jawline to my mouth. "I've wanted to do this since the first day we met."

At long last our lips connected, and lights exploded under my eyelids. He hadn't said how he felt about me, but I no longer cared.

What's-His-Name had been a decent kisser, but West's kiss opened a completely different dimension. One where kisses made your knees buckle, even sitting down. One that turned your insides into a bowl of Jell-O.

One that made you deaf and blind, so you didn't notice someone walking up to your bench, crouching behind you, then lifting her head and speaking, only inches away from your ear.

"Hey, guys," said Meghan.

We both jumped, our front teeth colliding.

"Ow!" I ran my tongue across my tooth, relieved to find it wasn't chipped.

There's nothing like a purple-lipsticked smirk to let you know you've been had. "Race is looking for you."

"Meghan!" West reached over the back of the bench and grabbed her wrist as she turned to leave. "Don't say anything to Race, okay?"

"Race won't hear it from me." She easily tugged her hand free and perched it on her hip. "But I think he needs to hear it from you."

"But it isn't what you think," West said.

Her I-wasn't-born-yesterday expression spoke volumes. She didn't understand what he was saying, but I did. West was confirming my fear. The kiss had been a purely physical thing for him. He wasn't in love with me. He wasn't even in like with me. Good thing I hadn't let myself fall for him.

*Okay, maybe I've fallen a little bit, but hopefully I can claw my way back up.*



Friday morning found me with my hair tucked up in a baseball cap and an oversized pair of sunglasses hiding half my face. I climbed the stairs to my youngest sister's Houston apartment and knocked on the door. Before I could pull my hand back, the door flung open and Cyan pulled me inside.

"She's here!"

I was immediately engulfed in a three-part hug, as April and Joy added their arms, squeezing until I could barely breathe. But I didn't care. It felt so good to be with my sisters, who loved me unconditionally. I'd taken that for granted for too long.

The room was littered with purses, shoes, thermal cups, and snacks, but no one else seemed to be around. "Where's Dad and Gramma?"

"She made him take her shopping. And they're picking up lunch on their way back." April, her strawberry blonde hair pulled up in a ponytail, dragged me to the couch. "Come, tell us everything about dating Race Madden!"

"You'll get to meet him after the concert." I'd been avoiding all but the briefest of phone conversations with my sisters out of necessity. I hadn't dared to talk about Race for fear they would figure out we weren't really dating. I had four long hours before I left to get ready for the concert. Keeping them fooled was going to be a challenge.

"I'm dying to hear what he's like." Cyan, whose hair was the same color as mine, snagged the seat next to me.

“You’ve hardly told us anything.” Joy was the sweet sister—we all acknowledged it. She was also the only one of us without a trace of red in her hair. We’d accused her of being adopted more than once. She sat on the carpet at my feet, competing with Cyan’s Great Dane—Blue—for the spot. She rubbed behind his ears and he melted against her, sprawling on the floor with his head in her lap. “Most of the stuff I know about you and Race I learned on social media.”

“And now I wish you hadn’t taken a stage name.” Cyan leaned her head close to mine and snapped a selfie on her camera. “None of my friends believe you’re really my sister because your last name is Harmony Rivers instead of Harmony MacIlheron. Even though our hair’s the exact same color.”

“Sorry. MacIlheron just doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

“Forget that. Tell us about Race before Gramma gets back.” Joy hugged her bent leg and rested her chin on her knee. “She’s been badmouthing him because she thinks he’s wild. But I think he’s dreamy.”

“Yes, tell us everything,” said April. “Is he a good kisser?”

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything on the news about my singing, have you? Because as far as I can tell, no one is interested in my ability to do anything besides attract a famous boyfriend.” Since it was my own fault, I tried not to sound bitter. But I’m pretty sure I failed completely.

“Whoa! You’re not dating Race just to further your career, are you? That doesn’t sound like you.” Cyan was the only one brave enough to say it, but I could see accusation in all of their eyes. I should’ve known I wouldn’t be able to keep up the charade. I’d have to come clean or they’d never understand.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. “If I tell you something, do you promise never ever to mention a word of it to anyone outside this room?”

Joy was on her knees, leaning onto my lap. “We won’t tell a soul! What is it?”

“I’m serious.” I held up my little finger. “If you renege, you can’t eat chocolate the rest of your lives.”

Joy’s eyes got big, but she held out her little finger, hooked it around mine, and pumped her hand twice.

“I’m in.” April gave me a firm pinky shake.

Cyan crooked her finger with mine and added, “This must be serious. I don’t think we’ve ever done one with lifelong consequences.”

“It’s really serious. If this got out, it could ruin Race’s reputation and any chance I might have of making it in the music industry.”

“We’re listening.” Cyan said.

“Okay... here goes... Race and I are fake-dating.” I grimaced, hurrying on before I lost courage. “He needed to be with a nice girl to help clean up his wild reputation. Which, as it turns out, he doesn’t deserve. But that’s a whole other story.”

I braced myself for outrage and surprise, but none came.

“I knew it was too good to be true.” Cyan’s body wilted like a piece of two-week-old celery.

I was a little hurt by their reactions, but I did my best to keep an unperturbed expression. “I guess none of you believed a guy like Race Madden would like me for real.”

“That’s not it at all.” Joy leaned back on her elbows. “None of us could figure out why you agreed to date him in the first place. If you swore one time, you swore a thousand times that you’d never *ever* date your boss again.”

“Maybe a million times.” April’s ponytail bobbed as she emphasized her words.

“And I quote.” Cyan bent two fingers on each hand, changing her voice to a weird nasally tone that I hoped wasn’t a sincere imitation of my voice. “If I ever, ever, ever date my boss again, may I be thrown naked into a pit full of mice.”

“My voice doesn’t sound like that.” I tried to distract her from the part about the mice, which I’d totally forgotten about

saying. Why had I been so stupid to tempt fate with such a horrific scenario? Why not let myself be thrown into a swimming pool full of piranhas instead? Or stabbed to death by a million razor blades. Either one sounded like a more pleasant way to die.

Cyan rolled her eyes. “But you don’t deny you said it, right?”

“I figured this doesn’t break the rule because it’s fake-dating.” I didn’t mention Race appeared to have changed his mind about our relationship being fake. Since the day West and I had that all-too-short kiss in the atrium, Race had been more aggressive than ever. Now that I remembered my “pit of mice” declaration, keeping Race at bay had suddenly become a matter of life and death.

In contrast, West had made himself scarce, and I felt certain he’d been pushing his brother to date me seriously. It was pretty obvious West had no feelings toward me beyond a vague physical attraction. And even that must’ve been minimal.

“I can’t believe it’s not real.” Cyan had the same expression as when I told her there was no Santa Claus. “I told all my friends.”

“You’re famous in Dry Gulch,” said Joy.

“But good famous,” April said. “Not bad famous like Belinda Barry’s ex-boyfriend. I can’t believe she posted on Twitter that he kisses like an aggressive lizard. That guy is going to be single for the rest of his life. Who would take a chance on a lizard-kissing experience?”

I choked in the middle of my laugh as a horrible thought popped into my mind. What if that had been the problem with West? What if my kissing was so awful West had been disgusted?

My stomach felt like I’d swallowed a gallon of spoiled milk. It would explain a lot, even the botched relationship with What’s-His-Name. When we were together, Matt hadn’t kissed me all that much. I’d always assumed he just wasn’t into it.

But what if kissing me had simply been a turnoff, so he'd avoided it? It could've been the reason he broke off the engagement. And it could be the reason West now ran in the other direction every time he saw me.

*What am I going to do? I'm bad at kissing!*

I tried kissing the back of my hand, but I couldn't tell anything about how it felt.

Unaware of my anguish, my sisters babbled on about Race.

"I wish it were real." Cyan twisted her lips to the side. "It was bad enough that my friends didn't believe I was related to you. You'll probably have a fake breakup soon, so no one will be impressed when I show them a picture of us together."

She looked so sad I had to say something hopeful.

"You can legitimately brag to your friends, if you want to. We'll be fake-dating until the end of the tour. To be honest, Race has been asking me to date him for real."

"He has?" Cyan's eyes turned to saucers. "Then why deny dating him?"

"Because it's still officially fake." I didn't want to get her hopes up too much. "Besides, he's not my type."

"Race Madden is every woman's type." Joy rolled her eyes with such force I could almost hear them rattling around.

"Not mine," I said.

Which was a good thing, considering my death-by-mice declaration. If it came down to the wire, I could probably get rid of Race with a single dreadful kiss on the lips.

"Let's start planning the wedding." April bounced up and down, shaking the cheap couch like a minor earthquake. "You'll be too busy with your career. And besides, you hate stuff like that. I'll take care of all the details for you. And Race is rich, so I'll have an unlimited budget. I'm so excited! This is going to make my career!"

April had great aspirations of being a wedding planner, which was difficult to achieve living in a town of less than five

thousand. (The sign said the population was 5,893, but I was pretty sure they were including pets and strays in the official tally.)

“This is exactly why I haven’t told you anything before.” I pointed an accusing finger at April. “You weren’t listening.”

“I was, too.” April bounded to the kitchen counter, her arm disappearing into the bottom of what she called her purse, which was roughly the same dimensions of a small transport van. “I listened so well that I heard what you said *and* what you didn’t have the nerve to say. You guys are in love.”

“We aren’t in love. We’re barely even dating.” I thought about pinning her to the floor with my knee, the way I used to when we were kids.

“You are, but you don’t even realize it yet.” April’s hand emerged, waving a decorative leather notebook, much like the one I’d been neglecting on a regular basis. “Luckily, I have my event planner with me. And I’ve already got a rough outline for an entire wedding, with spaces to fill in the details. I finally get to use it.”

“What else do you have in that bag?” asked Cyan. “A groom or two?”

“Okay, let’s start with the basics.” Accustomed to being teased about the size of her purse, April ignored Cyan’s jibe. She sank to the floor beside Joy, cross-legged, and gnawed thoughtfully on the end of her pen. “Where do you want to get married? I’m not sure there’s any place in Dry Gulch big enough for this shindig. I know! We could use Rose Ranch in Silver Springs. That’ll look better on the invitations, anyway.”

“You aren’t just jumping to conclusions,” I said with a frustrated groan. “You’re leaping across the Grand Canyon. You’re vaulting your way to the moon.”

“We should stand tallest to shortest.” Joy jabbed a thumb at her own chest. “So I guess that makes me maid of honor.”

“That’s not fair,” said Cyan, definitely the shortest of the three. But she was also the youngest, so she was stuck being a bridesmaid, either way.



*What am I thinking? I'm not getting married!*

"I'm the oldest after Harmony," April said. "And I'm doing the majority of the planning work for the wedding. I'm the logical choice for maid of honor."

"Hel-lo?" I wiggled my fingers in front of April's face. "This is the make-believe bride reminding you that you're planning a make-believe wedding."

"You're in denial," said April.

"Did you forget Race is a rockstar and I sing country? We're not even compatible."

"Are you denying that he's sizzling hot?"

"No, but—"

"And doesn't he have a gorgeous singing voice?"

"I guess. But it isn't the best I've ever heard." That honor belonged to West. Just the memory of his voice made my insides quiver.

"If your standards get any higher, you're never getting married." April jotted something in her notebook. "Of course, we'll have The Hatter's sing at the reception."

"I wonder if West would want to sing," I mumbled.

*What am I saying? There is no wedding!*

"Who's West? Is he in the band?" April scribbled furiously on her pad while Joy and Cyan eyed me with suspicion. It was like the time I'd offered them one of my coveted dark-chocolate-covered almonds, but only because I'd found an old bag that'd gone stale.

*Okay. I admit I'm a little stingy with my chocolate.*

"He's the band manager," I said, trying to sound casual.

"So this West guy is your real boss." A smile lit Joy's face. "That means you're free to date Race without the curse of the mice."

"And free to marry him." Cyan pumped her fist in the air.

"No, no, no! Stop this. Race and I are not in love."

“You are, but you’re not admitting it.” April turned the page, her gnarled pen flying as she wrote.

“Look...” I reached forward and slammed April’s notebook closed. “I’m sorry, but there isn’t going to be a wedding. I’m not in love with Race. And I’m never going to be.”

Even if I were, he’d most likely drop me like a soggy tissue if he ever kissed me. Marriage to anyone was looking doubtful.

“I told you it was your imagination, April.” Joy regarded me with sad eyes, as if I’d told her I was dying of cancer instead of dashing her hopes of marrying me off to a rock superstar. “April swore, the last time you called us, there was something different about you. She claimed she could tell you were in love.”

I ducked my chin, hoping the heat in my face didn’t translate to a full-blown flush. “Maybe I just sounded happy for a change. After all, I’m finally getting to tour around the country and sing in front of huge crowds.”

“I don’t think you ever blushed like that when you were dating Matt,” said Cyan.

“You can’t fool me.” April flapped a finger as if she were scolding a naughty child. “Monday night on the phone, you told me you thought it would be fun to co-write a song and sing a duet. Harmony Rivers wishing she could share the spotlight? I knew then and there you were in love.”

“A fantastic voice doesn’t equal love.” My face felt about as hot as a Texas sidewalk in August. Good thing April didn’t know I’d been talking about West at the time.

“The lack of one sure does.” April lifted her chin, daring me to contradict her. “If you’re honest with yourself, Matt never stood a chance. Poor guy tried to live up to your standards. Drove to Austin every week to take those voice lessons you signed him up for. That’s when he accidentally met a woman who liked him as he was.”

“He didn’t...” I sputtered. “I didn’t... I mean...”

Was she right? Had I made Matt feel bad about himself because he couldn't sing? Between that and the awful kisses, no wonder he dumped me.

"Don't look so sad," said Cyan. "You did both of you a favor. You and Matt were never a good match, anyway."

"That's right," said Joy. "We were relieved when he finally broke up with you."

"But... but," I sputtered in shock. "If that's what you were thinking, why didn't any of you say something?"

"We tried," said Joy. "You wouldn't listen."

"And let's face it, you were never in love with him," said Cyan. "You didn't even cry when you broke up."

"Because I never cry."

"Hardly ever," Cyan corrected. "You're stoic in a lot of ways, but when you're overwhelmed, you can't keep it in. That's why you cry at movies."

"You know I only cry in dark places where no one can see me."

"Because you have way too much pride," said April. "Your face doesn't get any redder than mine. I don't know why you're so hung up about it."

April was right about the color, but she didn't get a red nose or swollen eyes, like I did.

"If you'd been heartbroken, you would've cried in front of us," said Cyan. "And you never did."

"Are you saying none of you believed I was in love with Matt?"

"Didn't you wonder why I never started planning your wedding, even though you'd been engaged for over a year?" April opened her book again. "A good wedding planner knows whether her clients are going to go through with it. She won't waste her time unless it's a sure thing. Like now."

"I'm not in love." My voice trembled. The pressure in my throat built until I thought it might explode. The next words

that came out of my mouth stunned me as much as my sisters. “Not with Race.”

All three of them gasped and stared with wide, unblinking owl-eyes. Joy was the first to recover. “There’s another guy?”

“You see? I was right.” April tapped a finger on the side of her forehead. “I knew she was in love, even though she hadn’t mentioned the other guy.”

“Who is it?” Cyan asked.

April opened her notebook and scratched out Race’s name. “It doesn’t matter. I might have to change the font on the invitations to suit the guy’s name. But other than that, I think my plans will work with any groom you choose.”

“I’m so happy for you!” Joy’s hands clasped together under her chin, her smile befitting her name.

“Wait. You said Race was pushing you to start dating for real.” Cyan’s eyes widened. “Does he know you’re in love with another guy?”

“Race doesn’t know.” I sagged against the back of the couch. “And neither does the guy.”

*Not that it matters, since my horrible kiss drove him away.*

Before any of them could ask another question, the front door flung open and Gramma marched inside, two immense shopping bags dangling from her hands. I wondered why she hadn’t made my dad carry them until he followed her inside, his arms laden with takeout food bags.

“Gramma!” I jumped up to give her a hug, relieved to escape the inquisition my sisters were undoubtedly planning in their heads. Too late, I realized I should’ve extended the pinky-promise of secrecy to include the entire conversation rather than simply the part about Race.

“That’s enough food to feed the entire MacIlheron clan,” said April.

“Because we have company coming for lunch.” Gramma cut our hug short and barked out orders. “Hurry! Pick this

place up. I don't want Bette to think my grandchildren are savages."

GeeBee was coming! I'd been avoiding Gramma's calls, afraid of her pointed questions. Now I worried GeeBee might've been talking to Gramma. No telling what she might've told my grandmother.

"I'll set the table." I searched the cabinets until I found real plates, as I couldn't imagine GeeBee eating off Styrofoam.

"You'll need nine plates." Gramma caught my gaze and held it.

I froze at the implication of her words, my heart racing. "Nine?"

Her glib response sealed my fate. "Bette's bringing her grandsons."



“Would you pass the mashed potatoes, West?” Race pointed to one of the quart-sized cartons near me. As I struggled to reach them without dragging my sleeve through my food, he laughed and flashed a wink at Harmony’s sisters. The three were perched on the sofa with their plates balanced on their laps. To their credit, they made some attempt to hide their amusement, but Harmony let out a guffaw and clapped her hand across her mouth to cover a snort. I tried to be mad at her for enjoying my discomfort, but it didn’t work. When those incredible green eyes looked at me, sparkling with humor, my brain refused to cooperate. It had done the same thing a week ago when I’d kissed Harmony in the hotel atrium.

Time to get the table’s attention on someone else. “GeeBee, did you finally go to your doctor’s appointment last week?”

“Doctor’s appointment? Nah!” She flipped her hand forward at the wrist. “I cancelled it.”

“But what about your heart?” The worry in Race’s tone matched my own.

“It was only heart-*burn*.” She pointed to her chest. “I took a few antacids and it went away.”

Race and I shared a look, remembering what we had promised when she’d convinced us of her imminent death. Score one for GeeBee. Make that score about a thousand. Don’t think we’d outmaneuvered that woman a single time.

“Come on, West.” Harmony startled me with a nudge of her elbow. Was it a friendly nudge or an angry one? “Enough being noble and sacrificing yourself. Switch seats with me. I can sit there on my knees, and I’ll be perfectly fine.”

When I’d discovered there were only five dining chairs at the small round table and someone would need to sit on a footstool, I had magnanimously volunteered. But with my shoulders barely above the level of my plate, I felt like a five-year-old eating at the grown-up’s table. To make it more humiliating, Harmony’s sisters kept staring at me and whispering.

Switching chairs would put me between Harmony and my brother, who was acting more interested in the three sisters than her. Maybe I could whisper a little well-needed advice in his ear when GeeBee and Harmony’s equally eagle-eyed grandmother, Loretta, weren’t looking. At the moment, the two were sitting across the table on bar stools, studying the three of us like queens looking down on their subjects.

“This chicken is great, isn’t it?” Harmony’s father, Tom, shot a smile at me, pointedly ignoring Race. He’d made it clear he disapproved of his daughter dating a rockstar. And Race wasn’t making the situation any better.

“Here, sweetheart...” Race wiped the corner of Harmony’s lips with his napkin. “You had a little gravy there.”

“I believe Harmony’s capable of wiping her own mouth.” GeeBee speared him with her trademark glare, the one that often preceded a painful ear-twisting.

Race ducked his face down to his plate, hiding a smirk with his hand. I suppose he thought his ears were safe from GeeBee with so many witnesses around, but it seemed foolhardy to me.

For my part, a bead of sweat trickled down my back. I could only hope GeeBee hadn’t or wouldn’t say anything to Gramma Loretta about the fact that she’d attempted to set me up with Harmony and I’d passed her off to my brother. I had a gut-feeling, Harmony would be extremely hurt by that information.

When I'd kissed Harmony in the atrium, it was like something shattered inside me. As if the wall I'd built to keep my emotions in check had crumbled to bits. Though I'd fought it with everything in my power, I had to admit I'd completely fallen for Harmony. And from the way she'd kissed me back, I was pretty sure she was attracted to me, too. I hoped it was more than a physical thing, but there was no way to know.

It was all too obvious Harmony's old fiancé had hurt her deeply. She didn't deserve to have that happen again, though that was a likely scenario with my brother involved. After Meghan had interrupted our mind-blowing kiss, I'd marched upstairs to confront Race. I'd planned to tell him I loved Harmony and force him to end their farce of a relationship.

But before I could say anything, Race had gone on about whether he could risk using one of Harmony's songs on his next album.

"I don't think I want to chance it." His face had twisted in a thoughtful scowl, then brightened. "This would be a good time to record that song of yours, bro. Didn't I promise you over a year ago? I'll just tell her I forgot."

He'd thrown it into my lap. Finally, the chance to drop the manager gig and become a performer. A way to escape my brother's enormous shadow.

It had been the opportunity I'd been waiting for, but I couldn't take it at Harmony's expense. How could I have pulled the plug on Harmony's dream of becoming a recorded composer? Instead, I had shamed Race into sticking to the deal with Harmony, citing the way she'd held up her terms of the dating agreement. I hadn't mentioned how I felt about her—I didn't dare.

So the two of them were still dating. And I'd been forced to avoid Harmony. First, because I couldn't stand to see them together. And second, to be certain Race didn't back out on recording her song. But once that song was recorded, all bets were off. I planned to tell her I cared about her and pray it wasn't too late.



Now, I was eating a lunch with Harmony, knowing she probably hated my guts after what I'd done—running out of the atrium after Meghan caught us kissing and then ignoring her for a week. I would be lucky if the worst she did was tease me about sitting on the footstool, rather than stabbing me with a plastic knife from the table.

I fought to keep my expression neutral under GeeBee's unrelenting gaze, despite the bolt of electricity that shot through my body from the mere contact of Harmony's elbow on my shoulder.

*And that happened through the material of my shirt. If our bare lips ever touch again, I'll probably be electrocuted!*

My eyes strayed to those lips—so sweet and lush. The memory of the moment I'd finally captured her mouth with mine and the passion she'd returned had dilated every blood vessel in my body.

She caught me looking. I gulped and averted my eyes. Was her hand going for her knife?

“Well?” Her brows furrowed. “Are you going to switch with me or not?”

Her offer was generous, but her tone was cool. I kept an eye on the plasticware, just in case.

“Sure. Thanks.” I maneuvered awkwardly off the stool and stood up in the limited space against the kitchen bar as she shuffled past, her back brushing my chest.

I used the front of my shirt to fan myself, hoping no one was looking. But GeeBee's intense stare seared into me. As I sat down, I lunged for my water glass and guzzled half of it.

“West...” Gramma Loretta waited until she had my attention, patted her mouth dry and sat back in her chair. “Bette tells me you're a singer, too. Is that right?”

“I used to sing.” I was shocked GeeBee had mentioned my “hobby” to her friend. She must've done that back when she was still trying to set me up with Harmony.

“West has a beautiful voice.” At Harmony’s statement, warmth spread in my chest. But before I could get my hopes up that her words had any hidden meaning, her cheeks turned as red as her hair, and she added, “Race does too. I mean, they both do.”

“Whose voice is better?” asked the strawberry-haired sister... the one who kept picking up a small notebook and jotting things down. I’d missed her name in the hasty introductions.

The dark-haired sister was named Joy, but she didn’t look too joyful at Notebook Sister’s question. Joy jammed an elbow in her side and spoke between gritted teeth. “Stop causing trouble.”

“Of course, Race has a better voice.” I spoke up to smooth my brother’s ego before he got mad at Harmony and decided not to record her song.

“West is always playing down his musical abilities,” said Race, “but his voice is actually better than mine. And as for guitar playing, he wipes the floor with me.”

It took both hands to pick my jaw up off the floor.

“Don’t look so shocked.” Race pointed at me with a half-eaten chicken leg. “You and I both know it’s true.”

“But you have a genuine job, don’t you, West?” Tom knitted his bushy eyebrows together. “Not a musician, like Race. You can’t make a dependable living by performing on a stage, right?”

“I... uhm...” Still stunned, I couldn’t think how to respond.

“That’s enough, Tom!” Loretta narrowed her eyes. “Race makes a decent living with his music. Besides, it’s none of your business.”

“It’s my business if he wants to date my daughter.” Tom muttered. “He didn’t even ask my permission.”

“Dad, I’m thirty-one years old.” Harmony rolled her eyes.

“Old enough to know better.” Tom jutted his jaw forward.

“West could be a rockstar if he wanted to.” Was that really my brother talking? He’d never said anything like that before. “Lucky for me, he prefers working behind the scenes instead of in the spotlight. Without West, the only woman I’d hear screaming my name would be GeeBee when I’m in trouble.”

Why was my brother being so nice? He must want something.

“Don’t worry, Race. Cyan and Joy would still be screaming for you,” said Notebook Sister as she got up from the couch with her plate and headed for the kitchen.

“Not you?” Race sent her a wink.

“I prefer Harmony’s songs.” She tossed a lock of hair over her shoulder. “They have more meaning.”

A shadow crossed his face. Notebook Sister had hit a nerve with Race. He worried constantly that he’d sold out, agreeing to record the songs his producer deemed the most commercially viable, except for one song of his own choosing per album.

“You haven’t given Race’s music a fair chance, April.” At last, Harmony had revealed Notebook Sister’s name. “A lot of his songs are deep. Like ‘Shattered Heart’ and ‘Ice in Your Veins.’”

“Thanks, Harmony.” Race beamed at her. She’d just named the two allotted songs from his last two albums and inadvertently earned herself some brownie points. I was glad I was sitting between them, so he couldn’t hold her hand.

“Which of Harmony’s songs are your favorites, Race?” Spoken in a gentle southern accent, Loretta’s question sounded mild and innocent, but I could smell a trap... one I suspected Race couldn’t escape without help.

Sure enough, his panicked gaze darted in my direction. I yelled at him inside my head. *Didn’t I say if you’re going to date Harmony, you ought to listen to her music?*

My lazy brother hadn’t bothered. Even though her songs were awesome.

“I’d like to hear the answer to that,” said April as she made her way back to the couch. “Your music is so different from hers I’d love to know which songs you liked.”

I glanced at Harmony, whose fair skin was flushed. She’d probably guessed that Race hadn’t heard any of her music. I, on the other hand, had secretly feasted on her lovely voice every chance I got, like some love-sick teenager pretending her romantic songs were sung to me.

“Race and I were arguing about this the other day,” I said, praying God would forgive my white lie. I also prayed GeeBee wouldn’t discover it. Lies were always punishable with a good ear-twisting. “His favorite is ‘Iron Will,’ but I think he mostly likes that wailing chorus melody. I still say ‘Covered My Heart’ is the best song she’s ever recorded. Probably one of the best songs ever written.”

“Oh, wow! Thank you.” Harmony’s fingers patted my hand where it rested on the table.

I should’ve gotten an Oscar for keeping a straight face when that unexpected electricity bolted through my arm. Did that mean she’d forgiven me?

“I like that one, too,” Race said. “In fact, I like it a lot.”

Abandoning my hand, Harmony’s fingers flew up to cover her gasp. “You really like it that much?”

As usual, Race beat me out, snatching the Oscar for Best Actor from the brother who pulled his fat out of the fire. I hadn’t wanted Harmony to be embarrassed. But I hadn’t meant to make Race into some kind of hero either. I kicked him under the table, gratified when he flinched.

“I do like it,” he said. “It’s amazing.”

I was so irritated I barely resisted the urge to ask him to sing part of it. Watching him crash and burn might’ve been worth exposing my part in the deception.

“If I came up with a rock version, could that be the one you record for your album?” Harmony’s eyes sparkled with hope. “It’s been harder than I thought to come up with

something new for you. Or maybe we could extend the deadline a few weeks?"

"My producer's getting antsy." Race stretched his arms over his head, his customary way of stalling while concocting a lie. He was setting her up to reject her song and blame it on his producer. "We'll have to stick to next weekend as a deadline. If you want to take a stab at it, you could try a rock version of 'Covered My Heart.' I'm sure I'll love it, but of course, he gets the final say."

"Oh. Okay."

Her tension, thick as pudding, filled the room, yet no one else seemed to notice. They all continued chatting and eating, as if her world wasn't falling apart. Each blink of her watery eyes tore at my heart.

I had to do something. "Why don't I help Harmony with the arrangement? I know exactly what the producer is looking for."

"You think it would work?" Her hope-filled eyes locked with mine and twisted my heart into an even tighter knot.

"I'm sure of it." My mind scrambled to work out the logistics. Race's producer owed me a couple of favors, so maybe I could cash in on one of them. If Race refused to use his allotted song for Harmony, I'd try the direct approach. I was confident it would be a hit. Race would know that, too, if he'd ever bothered to listen to her music.

"Thanks, West." Harmony smiled, and a goofy grin took over my face.

Then GeeBee's squinted glare focused on me, so I twisted my mouth into a grimace. "You're going to owe me, Race. The things I do to keep your girlfriend happy."

"Thanks a lot, bro." That's what Race said aloud. But his tone said, *"I'm going to kill you for messing up my plan to get out of this obligation."*

GeeBee pursed her lips. I wasn't sure what that expression meant, but Loretta wore an identical one. Hairs raised on the back of my neck. *I may be in trouble.* After GeeBee's birthday

dinner, she'd appeared to have accepted the idea that Harmony and Race were a permanent item. She'd completely switched gears, sending me new potential matches once or twice a week, all of them as awful as the women she'd pushed on me before she'd chosen Harmony. To use one of GeeBee's terms, she'd be *fit to be tied* if she found out I'd changed my mind and intended to work against her current plans.

Only one thing was certain—I couldn't let Harmony marry Race. He didn't put her first in his life, the way she deserved. At the very least, I had to persuade her not to settle for less than that, even if the guy she eventually chose wasn't me.

Still sitting with her feet tucked under her on the ottoman, Harmony bounced on her knees. "I'm so excited you like my song, Race. It's going to be great! I just know it!"

"I'm sure it will be, sweetheart," said my-brother-the-jerk, as if it had been his idea. I had to swallow my pride, knowing this was best for Harmony.

As she reached for the coleslaw, the footstool tipped. With a gasp, she teetered, and I grabbed her waist to steady her before she landed on the table. But she jerked out of my grasp, as if she'd been burned, her elbow tipping my drink. Cold drenched my lap. I shot to my feet, mopping my wet pants with my napkin.

So much for hoping she was still attracted to me. Repulsed was more like it. She'd twisted away from my touch. She probably thought I was the jerk, instead of my brother.

"Sorry." Eyes wide, her hand covered her mouth.

Everyone stared at the gigantic wet spot spreading on the crotch of my pants.

Chuckles rippled around the room, but Harmony looked distraught.

Race glanced at Harmony, then turned to me. "Did you forget to wear your depends, old man?"

This time he wasn't being a jerk. I knew he was deflecting the attention away from Harmony. Maybe he cared more than I thought he did.

“I was completely out.” Resigned to wet pants and underwear, I sat back down, shifting gingerly. “Tried to borrow one from your stash, Race, but they were too small for me.”

“Ha! Wishful thinking,” he replied. “But this reminds me... How’s Tinkerbell, GeeBee?”

“She’s doing well. She spends a lot of time in that little wheel.”

As GeeBee launched into a story about her emasculated hamster, Harmony quietly cleared her throat, catching my attention.

“I’m sorry I knocked your drink off.” Chin tucked down, Harmony looked up through a fringe of thick lashes, and a band tightened around my chest. What was a little sticky Coke in the grand scheme of things? I would’ve forgiven her even if she’d dumped burning coals in my lap.

“That’s what I get for startling you.”

“I appreciate your offer to help me arrange the song,” she said in a low tone. “But I won’t hold you to it, if you change your mind.”

I couldn’t blame her for not trusting me.

“I’m not changing my mind—”

“West, are you good with that?” GeeBee’s voice cut into my consciousness.

“Uhm... sure. That’s fine.” What had I just agreed to? Hopefully not going out on a blind date with one of her newest matches.

“Good. I’ll only be staying with Loretta in Texas for a month or so. And Tinkerbell already loves you, so she won’t be upset. I have her at the hotel, so we can—”

“Wait! I’m not keeping your hamster for a month.” I scrubbed a hand through my hair, belatedly realizing it was sticky with coke. “And Tinkerbell is a boy.”

“You could bring Tinkerbell if you want to, Bette,” said Loretta. “She’d be safe from the cat inside her cage.”

“West already volunteered to keep her,” said GeeBee.

“I didn’t volunteer.” I had a sick feeling GeeBee would never take Tinkerbell back. “Why don’t you ask Race to keep him?”

“Race has a crazy musician’s life. He doesn’t have time for a pet,” said GeeBee. “You’re a manager—you have nothing to do.”

“You see, Harmony,” said Tom. “There’s another reason you shouldn’t be a performer. You won’t ever have time for a pet.”

“Thomas Evan MacIlheron!” Gramma Loretta used a universally recognized you’re-in-trouble-young-man tone on her son, who appeared to be in his fifties or sixties. “Just because your band didn’t make it back in the day, doesn’t mean your daughter can’t give it a shot.”

“Mother! I told you never to mention—”

“Dad was in a band?” Joy shouted.

“I didn’t even know he could sing.” April jumped to her feet, followed by her sisters.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” asked Harmony. “We could’ve sung a duet.”

His face as red as his hair, Tom looked like he’d taken a bath in red Kool-Aid. “It was a long time ago, and it was a mistake. A complete waste of time.”

“Not a complete waste of time, since that’s how you met Ginger.” Loretta gave a sharp nod. “It’s about time you fessed up to your past.”

“I was a different person, then.” Tom pushed his plate away and folded his arms. “Young and stupid. I won’t let my children make the same mistakes I made.”

“Mom was in the band, too?” Harmony was up on her knees, leaning forward on the table. Her sisters circled behind



him.

“Come on, Dad.” April grabbed his arm. “Tell us everything.”

“Yeah! I can’t believe you kept it from us all this time,” said Cyan.

“I can’t believe you broke your promise.” Tom glared at Harmony’s grandmother.

She lifted a defiant chin. “I should never have kept your secret from the girls all these years. They deserve to know the truth.”

“We’ve never even heard you sing, Dad.” Harmony pressed a hand to her heart.

“My voice isn’t that great.” He stared at his hands in his lap. “But your mom... her voice was beautiful.”

“Your mother was the lead singer. And your dad...” Gramma Loretta pointed a finger at him. “He played guitar. When he was a teenager, he hardly did anything else. I could barely get him to do his homework.”

“Really?” Cyan gasped, disbelief clearly written on her face. “Were you any good, Dad?”

As Tom twisted toward Cyan, one corner of his mouth crooked up. “I wasn’t just good. I was awesome.”

“Why did you stop playing?” asked Joy.

His shoulders rose and fell. “Life happened. The band broke up, and I lost heart. I had all these dreams. Stupid dreams.”

“Did you quit because of me?” Harmony’s question was almost a whisper. “Because Mom was pregnant, and you had to get a proper job?”

“Oh, honey. No.” He shook his head, sadness etched in the lines on his face. “I promise it had nothing to do with you. We got tired of living in a crappy place with second-hand furniture. Your mom and I decided it was time to be grownups. We knew we had to be practical, but it tore us up. I wanted to

spare you the pain of getting your hopes up, the way we did. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"I get it, Dad," said Harmony. "I see why you don't want me to go through that disappointment. But what if you hadn't even tried? Wouldn't you always wonder what might've happened? Aren't you the one who told me whatever I do, I should give a hundred percent?"

"Yes, but... I wasn't talking about music." The muscles along his jawline flexed.

"You had your chance. I should get mine." Harmony returned the challenge in his glare.

"So you and Mom were in a country band, huh?" April said, breaking the tension. "What were you called?"

"We were called *Tom and the Cool Cats*." Tom cleared his throat, his face turning red again. "But we didn't play country—we played rock."

After that, Harmony and her sisters got even more excited, all talking at once. Race's eyes rounded, and he leaned close to me. "This is too much female hysteria for me. Let's get out of here."

Cyan's Great Dane, aptly named Blueberry Danish, got in on the action, barking loud enough to be heard above the din. I found the family dynamic heartwarming, despite the chaos. "Go ahead. I'll hang out a while longer with GeeBee."

"Don't you need to get back to Central Arena and oversee the set-up crew?"

"Not me. Didn't you hear? I'm only the manager. I have nothing to do."



**D**ear Diary,

*For once, I have a lot to say. The last twenty-four hours have been a bit insane. I certainly didn't think I'd end up in the E.R. last night. But I can't complain about getting up close and personal with West's bare chest.*

*Let me go back and start with lunch at Cyan's. Stressful? Uh, yeah! How about sitting between West and Race, with Gramma watching my every move? My nerves were shot. Then Dad unloaded a bomb! Told us he and Mom had been in a rock band when they first got married. Talk about crazy and emotional—I was a hot mess!*

*After that, I was more determined than ever to prove to Dad how successful I'd become with my music. The concert had to be perfect. I absolutely, positively could not stumble on the stage. Not even a little. I wore flat shoes, walked cautiously to my position at a snail's pace, and didn't move for the rest of the show.*

*Okay, I didn't stand perfectly still while I was singing, but I did that thing where I didn't move my feet. So, yeah, I probably gyrated around like I was being shocked with a cattle prod. At least I didn't trip or fall. That is, not until after the concert.*

*But that wasn't my fault!*

*I mean, when you're walking around in the backstage area, who expects to ram their face into a hamster cage? I'll admit I'd just spotted my family with the security guard and was waving to them when I slammed into Tinkerbell's perilous*

*habitat, lost my footing, and tumbled to the floor. But it wasn't my fault that tiny gash on my forehead bled enough to supply the Red Cross for an entire year.*

*I tried to tell West I was fine, but from the look on his face, I must've resembled the victim in a slasher movie. I felt terrible that he sacrificed his new blue polo shirt—the one that matched the color of his eyes. (Sigh!) It wasn't like I'd claimed I'd lost so much blood I couldn't walk. West didn't even ask. He just scooped me up before I could protest, holding me against the hard planes of his chest in those ridiculously muscular arms.*

*And that tingle I always feel when he touches me turned into a lightning bolt of electricity when he pressed me against his bare skin. My brain short-circuited, and I couldn't make my lips move. Otherwise, I could've told him that my head didn't hurt and I was perfectly capable of walking.*

*The cute thing was the way he almost passed out when the doctor got my face numb for the stitches. That's right... West has needle phobia! And now I don't feel so bad about my much more reasonable musophobia.*

*So that made it even sweeter that he hauled me to the E.R. and sat in the room with me while they stitched up my forehead. I would've thought it was romantic if he hadn't told me about a thousand times that he was doing it because he was obligated to take care of his brother's girlfriend. No mistaking West's intentions this time. Strictly platonic.*

“SORRY, I’M LATE.”

West's voice! I slammed my journal shut and slid it under my guitar case. “No problem.”

With another show scheduled at the same Houston venue tonight, we had a rather leisurely day. No packing. No traveling. For me, that meant no excuse for not working on the song for Race's album. I only had a week to get it done. But now that the plan had changed from writing a new song to

revamping an old one, I was much more relaxed. Except for the part about being with West.

“How’s your head?” He sat down beside me, smelling all wonderful—clean, with a splash of masculine scent that made me want to bury my face in his neck. It wasn’t after shave, because his beard was scruffy—my favorite look. As if I needed another reason to be attracted to him.

I reminded myself that only a week ago he’d denied the significance of kissing me within seconds of doing it. I suppose it had been a kissing try-out of sorts, and I’d failed because of the terrible-kisser thing. I’d probably never get a second chance at it, but if it ever happened, I was ready. A little online research this morning had turned up a very informative article, “29 Ways to Up Your Kissing Game.” I’d only made it to number seventeen, but everything after that was way beyond anything I would call kissing.

“It’s fine. Nothing really hurts but my pride.” I ought to be mad at him for avoiding me all of last week after our intimate moment. I mean, even if my kisses are completely repulsive, we could’ve carried on a normal conversation. It’s not like I was going to tackle him to the ground and lock lips again. But how could I be mad when he’d taken such good care of me?

“It wasn’t your fault. It was way too congested in the back for me to be holding that gargantuan cage.”

“Yeah. What was with that crowd milling around backstage? Some of them asked for my autograph, but a couple gave me nasty looks.”

“Those are fan club members. We had a lottery for twenty backstage passes. It’s a new thing, but I guess we’re doing it the rest of the tour.”

“Why? Seems like a security nightmare.”

“Race’s publicity guy came up with the idea. Can’t say I’m crazy about it. But I can hardly complain about the fans backstage when my own grandmother came in with a hamster cage.”

“I can’t believe security let her back there with it.”

“You mean you think they could’ve stopped her?”

“Right. I forgot it’s GeeBee we’re talking about.”

“Your Gramma Loretta seems to be cut from the same cloth.”

“I know! Just when I think I have her figured out, she surprises me. Like, who knew she’d contacted GeeBee about getting me this singing gig with Race? I didn’t even know they were long-time friends until GeeBee mentioned it.”

I was a little worried that GeeBee was planning to stay with Gramma for such a long time. What if she got her involved in her TikTok matchmaking? The last thing I needed was to have my grandmother trying to set me up with strange men from all across the country.

“She seems very supportive of your music career.” West opened the case at his feet and pulled out his guitar, so I did the same. “Funny your father used to be in a rock band and now he’s so adamant you shouldn’t have a career in music.”

West and I had commandeered a reading nook on the second floor of the hotel, deserted except for the occasional guest strolling by en route to the elevator. There was plenty of space between the two of us on the couch, but I was acutely aware of the heat emanating from his body.

*He’s staring at me, waiting for an answer. What were we talking about? Oh, yeah... my father’s secret past life as a rock musician.*

“That’s probably what’s been wrong with Dad all these years. I always assumed he was sad and grumpy because he missed my mom. But now I think missing music could be a lot of his problem. I can’t even imagine my life without music. It would be...”

“Depressing,” West supplied, caressing the guitar in his lap with a loving hand. “I ought to know. I haven’t had time to play in five or six months.”

“No wonder you were so cranky the day we met.” *I shouldn’t have said that.* “Just kidding. You weren’t that bad.”

“I was. I admit it.”

Humor sparkled in his eyes, but I felt guilty for criticizing him.

“I’d have been cranky too if some water-logged stranger had shown up at my office and dripped all over my nice wood floors.”

“You were cute, even sopping wet.”

Little warm tendrils worked their way up from my neck into my face. I cleared my throat. “Eh-hem... shall we get to work?”

“Let’s do this.” He lit into the arpeggiated introduction to *I Never Told You*, playing it perfectly. Then he hit a C minor and played through the chords, adding in a new dynamic riff. “What do you think of this?”

“I love it! That definitely doesn’t sound country.”

“I thought we could use this rhythm all the way through. Kind of drive it along.” He played through the first verse with the new rhythm and repeated the riff before going into the chorus.

“You’ve already got it arranged. We’ll have this whipped out in a few hours.” I tried to hide my disappointment. Even though it was stressful, I’d been looking forward to spending time with West.

“It might take a lot longer.” He tucked his shoulders up protectively around his face. “I’m hoping you’re willing to write a bridge.”

“Sure.” I could whip out a bridge in a couple of hours. But with a little finesse, I ought to be able to stretch it out for days.

“And I had another idea, though I don’t want to get your hopes up.”

“What?”

“Race has never done anything quite like this, but I was thinking... maybe you could give him an alternate version. A

duet. Where you echo the first line and harmonize on the second. Then you might get to sing the recorded version.”

“Seriously?” My heart stamped inside my chest. “That would be amazing! You think he might go for it?”

West cocked his head to the side. “Like I said, don’t get your hopes up. But I think it’s worth a try.”

He sang the first verse, echoing in falsetto to demonstrate my part. After a few seconds, I joined in and sang the harmony. Our voices blended like cream in coffee. Why was West wasting all this talent?

“What about you? Why don’t you ever sing with Race?” I wondered aloud. “Like, why are you the manager, instead of singing in the band? Or recording your own music?”

“It just kind of happened.” His Adam’s apple worked in his throat. “None of us realized what was coming. Race needed me, and I stepped in to help. Then suddenly, he was famous, and I was swamped with work. I didn’t have time to do my own music anymore.”

“Couldn’t Race have helped promote your music?”

“He meant to.” West leaned back on the couch. “But he got big so fast. And things went south in his personal life. I think he just forgot.”

“And you didn’t want to bug him about it, did you?” Naturally, he hadn’t pushed his brother to help him with his career. One thing I’d learned about West—he was selfless to a fault.

*That’s how I know he would never tell me I’m an awful kisser.*

“It’s not Race’s fault, though.” As West’s fingers softly picked through my song’s chord sequence, his gaze went unfocused. “I could’ve done something. Could’ve found a replacement band manager. Or used my connections to make headway on my own.”

“Why didn’t you?”



“Seemed like it wasn’t worth the effort. In everything we’ve ever done, he was always better. He was quarterback. He won the talent show. He got the girl.” He frowned harder when he mentioned the last one, and I wondered if there was a story there. “So why try? Maybe it was easier to blame it on my brother than take a chance and find out I’m not good enough.”

“But you are good enough. More than good. I’d say you’re amazing.”

“I used to believe that, but no one else has ever said that to me. No one but you.” He leaned toward me, eyes dilating. I swear, he looked like he wanted to kiss me. And I wasn’t about to stop him, no matter what I’d told myself before this session started.

Then he stiffened and looked away.

*What happened? I must’ve done that weird pucker thing with my lips. Or maybe he suddenly remembered how bad it was the last time.*

“Enough moping about what could’ve been,” he said, without making eye contact. “All that matters right now is getting your song ready for Race.”

The kissing moment was gone. Or maybe I’d imagined it.

“I really appreciate all you’re doing to help me.”

“It’s nothing.” He started strumming through the song again. “Who knows? Maybe someday, when you’ve got your first gold record, you can return the favor. You might even record something I wrote on one of your albums.”

“I’d love to hear a song you’ve written. Why don’t you sing one for me?”

“There’s one I’ve been working on lately, but it’s not finished.” He looked around, as if someone might be eavesdropping. “It’s about this woman I used to know.”

“Someone you dated?”

“I wanted to. But I never got the nerve to tell her.” He strummed a chord. “I just have this chorus.”

He started singing, his deep velvety voice drawing me in. I closed my eyes and immersed myself in the song.

*“You’re the one I want  
Everything I need  
Open up my eyes  
You are all I see  
You’re my everything  
Ba-by... you’re my everything  
When I’m dry and thirsty  
You’re the drink I crave  
Without you I am dying  
I am yours to save  
You’re my everything  
Ba-by... you’re my everything”*

It was so beautiful. Emotion swelled in my heart. I couldn’t help wishing he’d written it for me.

“I made you cry? Was it that bad?”

His finger brushed my cheek, and my eyes popped open.

“No.” Blinking my eyes dry, I reached up to take his hand and squeeze it. “Sometimes music is so beautiful it makes me cry. It’s almost the only time I do it.”

“The only time you cry?”

“I probably seem pretty emotional to you, but what you’ve seen is me with my guard up. I’m an even hotter mess on the inside. If I don’t box things up, I get super-duper emotional. Ughh!”

“Are you sure that’s healthy?” His brows bent down. “They’re always warning men not to bottle up their emotions. Doesn’t that apply to women, too?”

“Oh, but I only lock them up for a short period. I let them out every time I sing. Gshh! Like a fire hydrant. Otherwise,

yeah... I'd be totally insane. Believe me." I pointed to my head. "There's a lot of mixed up feelings in here. Gotta keep a tight plug."

"What would happen if you ever lost control?"

*Evidently, it makes me into a wretched kisser.*

"If all this stuff came rushing out at one time, instead of a couple of tears, I might start sobbing. And it wouldn't be pretty." A shiver of dread rippled up my backbone. "You know those Hollywood actresses that can cry a bucket and look beautiful doing it, even with their faces magnified a thousand times on the big screen? Well, that isn't me. I've got the red cheeks, red nose, weird wrinkles around my mouth... the whole works. It's U-G-L-Y ugly. Let's hope you never have to see it."

He threw his head back and laughed. Obviously, he wasn't taking my warning seriously. "If it starts to happen, let me know and I'll close my eyes."

"Good idea. Like Medusa. You don't want to look."

"Or I'll turn to stone?"

"You'll dissolve on the floor in a mass of hysterical horror. At that point, anyone could steal your wallet or your iPhone. Very dangerous."

He laughed until he had to wipe his watery eyes. "Seriously, Harmony, I don't believe anything could make you look ugly. Even when you were a drowned rat, you were breathtaking."

"Did you just call me breathtaking?" I gulped. "No one's ever called me that before. Now, a bag of hot air—I get that almost every day."

"Of course, you're breathtaking. How can you not know? Your eyes are like green glass with blue stars, and..." His words trailed off, and he shifted his gaze to his fingers, picking the strings as he alternated between G and C chords. "Lots of people think you're beautiful, Harmony, even if they haven't used that word. Why else would a rockstar like Race want to date you?"

“Because I’m squeaky clean and good for his reputation?”

“Yes, but now he likes you more than that.” Our gazes connected. “Because you’re beautiful, inside and out.”

Talk about breathtaking... he literally did it. He took my breath away. I couldn’t even make my lungs work. I just stared into his eyes, completely mesmerized. And yes, I’ll admit, I was hoping I’d get a chance to try some of the seventeen kissing tips I’d been studying.

“Did Race actually say that about me?” It was hard to believe. “He’s never said anything remotely romantic, even when he suggested we date for real.”

“Race is... He’s... He doesn’t always know what to say. He’s only adept at casual flirting. Beyond that he’s totally awkward.”

“You really think Race cares about me? Something real, beyond our fake relationship?”

I held his gaze, waiting for the answer. A yes would be the same as saying Race cared and West didn’t. I knew how it worked. I grew up with three sisters in a town with very few eligible guys. If you claimed one, he was off limits to the others.

He broke eye contact and stared at the carpeted floor. “I think it’s very, very important that you give Race a chance. The tour is over in two weeks. You need to stay with him until then.”

“And after that?”

“You can see how you feel when there’s nothing on the line. No job to lose. No song to be approved. You’ll be free to date whomever you please.”

There were two ways to interpret West’s cryptic words. Either he cared about me, but I was officially off limits until the end of the tour when Race didn’t need a fake girlfriend anymore, or this was his gentle way of rejecting me by pushing me toward his brother.

I had to pin him down. “West, just tell me straight out. Do you like me or not? Specifically, do you like me as more than a friend?”

His mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. My pulse pounded in my ears as I waited. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away.

“I’m not the kind of guy who would steal his brother’s girlfriend.”

“Then I’ll break up with him.”

“No! You can’t do that!” West looked like I’d told him I was about to strike a match in a room filled with gas.

“Why not? The fake girlfriend trick has done its thing. His reputation is golden. He doesn’t need me anymore.”

“Please don’t break up with him. He... You... His ego is too fragile. Now that he’s gone out on a limb and asked you to date him for real, he’d be devastated if you turned him down. You said it yourself... he hasn’t gotten over being dumped by his old girlfriend.”

My heart was beating so fast I thought I might pass out.

“This is stupid. We’re all adults. Why can’t we be honest with each other?”

“Just trust me. For the next two weeks you have to stay with Race, and you and I are just friends.”

Even now, West was pushing me to be with Race. And he’d never come out and said whether or not he actually liked me.

“I’m going to need to sing. Right now. A lot.” I drew an invisible circle around my face. “Or this thing is going to get ugly fast.”

I started singing the first song that came to mind.

*“Home, home on the range....”*



After that near catastrophic conversation, I tried to restrict our discussion strictly to music. But even that was hard. I never should've sung the chorus I'd written with her in mind. Now, she wanted to work on it together, and it made me wish she was writing her parts to me.

"How about something like this in the verse?" She sang, in that entralling voice, making up a compelling melody as she went.

*"My heart's been torn and beaten*

*Tossed around*

*Crushed and trampled*

*On the ground"*

"Yes, that's beautiful." I loved how she got my creative juices flowing. "And we can keep drawing that picture. Something like..."

*Thrown out in the*

*Freezing cold*

*Left for dead*

*On the side of the road"*

"Yes. I like it. Maybe change the last line and bring the melody line up." She sang it again, altering the melody.

*"Left for dead*

*Beside the road"*

“Yes, yes, yes,” I said, “and then maybe...

*I'd given up on ever*

*Finding love again*

*Then you came along*

*And... blah, blah, blah, blah rhymes with again”*

“I’ve got it!” Her eyes brightened. “You could say...

*I'd given up on ever*

*Finding love, and then*

*You came and brought my dying*

*Heart to life again”*

“Perfect.” I had to work hard to find saliva to moisten my parched throat. “Absolutely beautiful.”

Roses bloomed on her cheeks as she smiled up through her lashes. My insides swirled like a shaken snow globe.

“I love it,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I do, too.”

If only I could tell her I meant every word we were singing.

I considered leveling with her—saying flat-out that I’d fallen for her. She’d given me plenty of indications that she was attracted to me.

But my gut told me Race wouldn’t react well if Harmony broke up with him to date me. Either he wouldn’t use her song on his album. Or he would use his charm to steal her away from me, as he had in the past.

My best chance of having a relationship with Harmony was to encourage her to stay with Race until she had a contract to record the song. And to be safe, I wanted my brother to be so distracted with some other woman that he had no interest in taking Harmony away from me, simply to prove he could. Yet I didn’t want him to take up with his usual fare of wild, attention-seeking women. We’d worked too hard to clean up

his reputation to simply throw it all away. I needed to find him another decent woman to date.

Where could I possibly find a woman who would fit the bill? As much as I hated to admit it, my best bet was GeeBee.

And how was I going to talk GeeBee into finding another woman for Race without admitting that I wanted Harmony for myself? I certainly couldn't risk her finding out the truth. Especially when she was staying with Harmony's grandmother in Dry Gulch for a month. Knowing GeeBee, she would feel compelled to meddle again, and Harmony's Gramma might get in on the act. Harmony had a lot of pride. If she felt pressured to be with me, she might reject me on principle.

I must've made an awful face while all this was going through my mind, because Harmony's expression went from elated to depressed in a matter of seconds. She heaved a weighty sigh and knelt beside her case to put her guitar away.

"West, if I ask you a question, will you tell me the truth?"

I knew a trap when I heard one, and this was definitely a trap.

"Most likely, I would. Unless there were extenuating circumstances."

Her brow furrowed. "Like what?"

"Like suppose telling you the truth would result in a kidnapper killing someone I loved—I would lie my head off to save their life."

"Okay, but if there's no life on the line, then you'll answer honestly?" She sat back down on the couch beside me. Her intense expression made me anxious about what she might ask.

"As long as an honest answer wouldn't hurt anyone," *including myself*, "I'd tell the truth."

She worried her lower lip with her teeth, and I couldn't tear my eyes away. So plump and tempting.

"Never mind. I'm just going to ask."



Her eyes closed and her mouth pulled back in a pained grimace, as if she thought I might hit her. She took a deep breath, but I quickly put a finger to her lips before she could speak. Her eyes popped open in surprise.

“Harmony, if your question is that bad, maybe you shouldn’t ask at all.”

“I have to do it now, before I lose my courage. It’s about the other day when we kissed. Before Meghan showed up. I need to know...” Her eyes squeezed shut and she scrunched her face. “Was it awful?”

I was still struggling with guilt over that melt-my-socks-off moment with the woman who was technically dating my brother, but I certainly didn’t want her to be remorseful. “You shouldn’t feel bad about that. It was totally my fault.”

“Come on, West. Tell the truth. I can handle it.”

She was making no sense.

“I’m not lying. Why would I lie about that?”

“To keep from hurting my feelings, obviously.”

“Listen, you shouldn’t give that kiss another thought. I was aggressive. I pushed you into it, and I won’t do it again.”

“Awesome.” Her sarcastic tone said it was anything but awesome. “Guess I studied that stupid article for nothing.”

“What article?”

*Why are women so impossible to understand? It’s like you have to know a special code language.*

She stood up and reached for her guitar case. “Forget it.”

I knew that one. It was code for you screwed up big time, but I had no idea what I’d said wrong.

“I’m sorry, Harmony.” I grabbed her arm and tugged her gently back to the couch. She sat down but snatched her arm away. “Let me try again and see if I can make myself clear.”

“Oh, you’ve made yourself clear as a bell.” She wouldn’t look at me. “You don’t want to kiss me again. I get why you

wouldn't want to repeat a disaster like that."

"I wouldn't call it a disaster." I leaned down and flipped open my case, buying time to think as I put my guitar away. Sitting back against the couch cushions, I searched for words. "Getting caught by Meghan was probably a good thing. It stopped us just in time."

"Just in time?" She turned her head, locking eyes with me.

"Maybe I'm justifying it in my head, but we really didn't kiss all that long. In my mind, it doesn't count as cheating on Race."

Her eyelids tightened to narrow slits. "Are you claiming the whole reason you've been so standoffish since then is because of my fake relationship with your brother?"

Wasn't that what I'd been saying all along? This had to be a trick question.

"I'm saying that I'm trying to do the right thing and wait until the tour is over, along with your relationship with my brother." *And after your song is on the album.*

"And it had nothing to do with the... with the quality of the kiss?"

"The quality?" I blinked at her.

"I can't believe you're making me spell it out." She let out a huff. "Did you enjoy kissing me or not?"

"Did I enjoy kissing you?"

"There must be an echo in here." She sent her gaze to the ceiling. "Stop avoiding the question."

"I'm not. I just... Is that what you think? That I didn't enjoy kissing you?"

"It's a logical conclusion."

Her jaw clenched. Something told me criticizing her logic was a bad idea.

"I'm not sure exactly what I said or did to give you that impression, but it's not true. In fact, it's killing me that we

can't do it again."

"You want to kiss me again?" A spark shone in her green eyes.

"Of course I do."

"Prove it."

"Prove it?"

"If you really want to kiss me, do it now."

"We can't." I tugged on the collar of my polo shirt, even though it wasn't tight.

"I knew it! I'm a horrible kisser, aren't I? You're just too nice to admit it."

I almost laughed out loud. Surely she was joking, right? Then I saw the genuine dejection in her eyes. I died a little, knowing I'd put it there.

"Some things are more important than the bro code." I glanced to the side, ensuring we had no witnesses.

Lifting a hand to cup her cheek, I bent to press my mouth to those luscious lips I'd been dreaming of since our last fateful encounter. My intent was to kiss her with enough passion to let her know I meant it, but holding back so I could remain in complete control.

But when her lips wandered away from mine, trailing across my cheek and dipping under my jawline, lights exploded behind my eyes. My chest quaked. If I'd been standing up, my knees would've buckled beneath me.

I gripped her upper arms and pushed her away. Trying to slow my breathing, I looked her in the eye. "Do you believe me now?"

"I do." A flush spread up her face.

"Good." I gulped, swallowing air. "Because we can't do that again."

"Why not?"

Her lips formed a pout, which made them even more tempting. I closed my eyes so I couldn't see them.

"I do a lousy job of staying in control when you kiss me like that."

"Yeah." A shy smile bloomed on her face. "And that was only number four on the list."

I could've asked her what she was talking about, but a little voice in my head told me ignorance was bliss.



THE NEXT MORNING, GeeBee answered her phone on the first ring. "Is something wrong with Tinkerbell?"

"Tinker is fine." I'd decided merely dropping the "bell" would preserve a bit of the poor hamster's dignity. "But I need to talk to you about Race and Harmony. I don't think their relationship is going to pan out after all."

"Why?"

Was she surprised? Upset? Irritated? GeeBee was impossible to read over the phone.

"I don't think Race is Harmony's type."

"Hmmm..."

What did that mean? Did she even believe me?

"And she must not be his type either, because Race isn't really trying."

"You think I should talk to him? Get him to try harder?"

"No! Don't do that!" I took a slow, calming breath. "I mean, I think it's a waste of time trying to keep them together. And I figured you might know someone who'd be a better match for him. Like one of those nice women on your TikTok Granny Matchmakers thing."

"I can think of at least one prospect." I could almost imagine her pursing her lips in thought.

Good. This was going exactly the way I'd hoped. GeeBee would get all wrapped up in finding a new woman for Race, which would pave the way for Harmony and me to be together after the tour.

To be honest, after the way Harmony had kissed me back at the hotel, I was done worrying about the ethics of pursuing a relationship with my brother's fake girlfriend. I would've told her straight out if I weren't afraid she would break up with Race. But once he'd signed a contract obligating him to record Harmony's song, I was going to make her mine. Officially.

"And I have several men in mind for Harmony as well."

Something the size of a meteor plummeted to the bottom of my abdomen. "You don't need to find anyone else for Harmony. She told me she's not looking for a relationship right now."

"Obviously, she isn't," said GeeBee. "That's why Loretta called me to begin with. But we'll find the right man for her. The two of us, working together—we're double-granny-power matchmakers. When we put our heads together, we're pretty much unstoppable."

"Great," I croaked.

"And don't worry." She lowered her voice. "I haven't forgotten about finding a match for you."



I CAME up with the brilliant idea of renting a car and driving with Harmony from Houston to Las Vegas, the site of our last on-the-road concert before returning for a final performance in LA. Ostensibly, the purpose was to work on Harmony's song. But in reality, it was an excuse to spend more time with her.

I coerced my brother into taking Tinker on the plane to LA and dropping him off with our office manager, Patti. She had agreed to be the temporary caretaker, and it had only cost me five hundred bucks. Money well spent, in my opinion.

Meanwhile, I was rewarded with three days alone in a car with Harmony. I drove while she played the guitar. During the first day's drive, we refined "Covered My Heart" for Race's album, and we churned out two verses for my song the second day. The resulting recordings on our phones sounded better than expected when played back through the car's audio system.

Our time together only confirmed my feelings for Harmony, even though we didn't talk about our relationship. On the third day, after experimenting with some new harmonies on her song, she coaxed me into talking about my childhood. Sharing with her felt more intimate than a make-out session.

"You've never told me about your parents," she said.

Unpleasant memories flooded my head, but I pushed them back, grasping for the good ones. "GeeBee did most of our parenting."

"She obviously loves both of you. You're lucky to have her."

"We know how lucky we are, but GeeBee is... GeeBee's hard to say no to."

"You mean she's pushy?"

"Pushy is an understatement. Resistance is futile." I chuckled. "She always gets her way."

"You're scared of her?"

"Sort of. I mean, she does a mean ear-twisting, but that's not the real reason we always give in. It's that neither of us can bear to disappoint her."

"Sounds a lot like my Gramma." She looked thoughtful. "So you and Race shared one parent, right?"

"My family history is..." I grimaced. "It's complicated. Mom was a teenager when I was born, and barely twenty when she had Race. I never knew my birth father. I grew up thinking Race's father was mine. I called him Dad, until one day, when I was five, he set the record straight and told me I

wasn't his kid. Made sense later on when I thought about it. He'd always spoiled Race and treated me like dirt. I guess it was a blessing he told me the truth. By the time he left us, about a year later, it was a lot harder on Race than me."

"That's so sad!" Next thing I knew, Harmony was looking out the window and singing "Home on the Range."

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to make you so emotional."

"I'll be fine in a few seconds." She fanned her face with her hands. "Singing almost always does the trick."

"But that was way more information than you asked for."

"No. I'm glad you told me. Honored, even." Her soft hand came to rest on my arm. "Sounds like your childhood was rougher than mine. Mom died when I was eight, but I always knew she loved me... all of us. And after that, Gramma moved in with us. She was the one who raised us, really."

I nodded. "Race and I spent a lot of time with GeeBee. Mom went back to school and picked up her college degree. She has her stuff together, now. A job, a husband, two daughters. They live in San Diego. She does her own thing and leaves Race and I alone."

"You aren't close to her anymore?"

"I think we remind her too much of her mistakes. She mostly pretends we don't exist." A bitter laugh escaped before I could stop it. "Well, she suddenly remembered she had at least one son when Race got famous. It hurt him more than if she'd just kept ignoring him."

"I don't understand how she could be like that with her own sons." Harmony's eyes puddled. Obviously, she couldn't fathom that kind of behavior. She would die before she would intentionally hurt a stranger, much less her own family.

"As the older brother, I always had to be strong for Race." I gripped the steering wheel. "That's why I'm so protective of him."

"Even though you're stuck being his manager while he gets all the glory?"

I kept my eyes on the road, but I could feel her gaze on my face. “It’s not like he did that on purpose. It just happened.”

“I’ll bet, if it had happened in reverse, you would’ve included him on the first album you recorded.”

“I can’t hold that against him.” I shrugged, pretending it didn’t bother me. “It didn’t occur to him to promote me. But when I asked him, he said he’d record one of my songs.”

“Really? Which album are you on? The last one?”

“He had a lot of stuff going on, and he kind of forgot. And I never got around to reminding him, so that’s on me.”

She groaned as if I’d told a bad dad joke. “You make a lot of excuses for your brother.”

“Race is kind of like a big, lovable, golden retriever, who knocks things down wagging his tail. It was never intentional. Even when he stole my girlfriends.”

“He stole your girlfriends? Isn’t that against the rules for brothers?”

“He didn’t actually steal them, because they were never mine to begin with.” It was humiliating to admit the truth, but I felt safe telling Harmony. “From the time we were in middle school, girls would flirt with both of us. Every time, it was Race they really wanted, and I was too stupid to realize it. Even Caroline wanted—”

I stopped, wishing I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Caroline?”

“Never mind. I don’t really want to talk about her.”

“Seriously? You can’t hold back now. I confessed a long time ago that my fiancé dumped me for another woman. Your story can’t be any worse.”

“It’s not that interesting.” I resolved to give a succinct version. “She was just a woman I liked who chose Race over me.”

“Ouch! I might’ve killed my sister if she’d gone out with a guy I liked.”



Now I had to defend him. “Maybe he didn’t know.”

“And you didn’t tell him?”

“What can I say? I’ll do anything to avoid conflict.” I cleared my throat, ready to shift the focus from me to Harmony. “Here’s a deep question for you. What do you think has held you back in your career? Is it just that you’ve never had your lucky break?”

“You want the truth?”

I glanced her way. She was studying her fingernails in her lap.

“Yes, absolutely.”

“I could’ve made it already, if it weren’t for my pride.”

Another glance caught her chewing her lip. “What happened?”

“I won this sing-off sponsored by Morris Records. First prize was to have them produce and record one song in their studio. I just knew that was going to be my big break. But they did my demo recording and I never heard from them again.”

“That’s tough. Probably means they didn’t even listen to it.”

“Even if they didn’t, it hurt my pride. I swore I’d never work with Morris Records, no matter what. And sure enough, a year later, they made an offer. Not a big one, but it would’ve been a foot-in-the-door.” She blew air through her lips. “I told them to take a flying leap.”

“Yikes!”

“I still don’t regret it.” She lifted her chin. “That’s my rule. If you reject me one time, I reject you forever.”

“Isn’t that kind of harsh?” I asked, thinking about my attempt to push Harmony off on my brother. More than ever, my relationship with Harmony seemed about as stable as a house of cards. Yet I’d made that ill-fated decision before I’d met Harmony in person. Surely that had to count for

something. “What if the initial rejection was made in ignorance? Don’t you believe in second chances?”

“I figure, if that person rejected me without a second chance, why should I give them one simply because they changed their mind? That’s a wishy-washy person, right there.” She slapped her palms across each other three times like she was brushing dust from her hands. “I say good riddance. You can’t really trust them.”

With a sinking feeling, I realized if Harmony ever discovered the truth, I had no hope.



After I dropped Harmony off in Las Vegas on Thursday, I'd driven on to LA with the express purpose of having a long conversation with my brother on the flight back. Race, however, had stayed awake thirty-six hours straight playing video games and had used the flying time to catch up on his sleep.

I shook him out of a deep sleep shortly before we landed in Las Vegas on Friday afternoon. His hands came up to rub his eyes.

"Why did you wake me up?" he yelled. "I was rockin' some sweet dreams."

"And snoring loud enough to rock this plane out of the sky," I said.

"That's why you always keep your earbuds in, man," he said, his voice still strident. He gestured to his ears, then pointed to the back of the plane, where a cacophony of snorts and gargles from the rest of the band was competing with the roar of the jet engine. "Music will drown out all the snoring."

"Forget those guys." I jerked his earbuds out. "We need to talk about Harmony's song. She and I worked on it together the past few days, and it turned out fantastic."

"Yeah. About that..." He made a face and my stomach churned. I wasn't going to like his answer. "I'm really leaning toward using my slot for one of my own songs. Something more artistic, you know?"

“But Harmony’s counting on this. You promised.”

“I only promised to listen. I didn’t say I would use it for sure.” He yawned, stretching his arms and legs. “Listen, I tried to follow your advice. I asked her if she wanted to date for real and she didn’t seem interested. To be honest, if she’s not willing to move beyond a fake relationship, I don’t feel like going out on a limb for her song, either.”

I crossed my arms. “Have you told GeeBee?”

His face went pale. “It’s none of her business.”

“So true...” I gave his arm a conciliatory pat. “As if that mattered.”

“She won’t be that surprised.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! GeeBee’s probably already planning you’re the wedding and naming your children. If you reject Harmony’s song—which is amazing, by the way—you’re also ending the relationship that GeeBee believes is genuine. How are you going to explain that? Especially after last weekend, when you lied about Harmony’s song and got her all excited about it?”

“You were just as complicit as me.” Race jutted his chin forward. “You’re the one who claimed one of those songs was my favorite.”

“Only to protect Harmony’s feelings. Otherwise, I would’ve let you suffer the consequences.” I speared him with a glare. “You didn’t bother to listen to a single one of her songs. You could’ve had them playing in your earbuds every time you flew.”

“You’re right.” He sagged in his seat. “I just don’t like country music. Especially after my dad... you know...”

My anger softened. I needed to remember he hadn’t had an easy childhood.

“You can’t spend the rest of your life avoiding everything that reminds you of your father.”

“I don’t want to talk about him.” A scowl etched itself into his forehead. “For once in my life, I want to make my own

decisions. I don't want him or you or GeeBee or the producers or anyone else telling me what to do."

"I'm not telling you. I'm begging you."

"Begging?" His brows shot up. "What's it worth to you?"

"Anything you want."

"Anything I want?" He straightened in his seat. "Let me get this straight. You'll give me anything I ask for if I include Harmony's song on my next album?"

I tried to swallow, but a lump in my throat the size of Georgia prevented that from happening. "Yes, whatever you want. But you have to keep this between us."

"Very interesting." Wearing a conniving grin, Race steepled his fingers together under his chin. "And why would you be willing to do this? Do you have feelings for Harmony? Is that what's going on here?"

Anxiety curled in the pit of my stomach. If Race found out I liked Harmony, I knew what would happen. He would turn on that magical charm of his and take her away from me without even trying. Exactly like he had with Caroline. Granted, that was five years ago. But my brother hadn't gotten any less charming or any more trustworthy.

"I don't have a crush on Harmony." That was the truth. It was way more than a crush. "Haven't I been pushing her off on you all along?"

"Yeah, you have." His smile fell. "So if you don't like her, why are you so set on getting her song on the album?"

At that moment, a brilliant thought came into my head. "Because, if neither one of us is going to end up with Harmony, GeeBee's going to be mad as a hornet. I can only see one way out of deep GeeBee trouble..." I wagged a finger in front of Race's nose. "If Harmony's song gets recorded, Harmony will be over-the-moon happy, which will make Harmony's grandmother happy, which will—"

"Which will make GeeBee happy." Race rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Okay, okay. I'll do it."

“Don’t look so depressed. You’ve helped write every other song on that album.”

“Yeah, but I wanted to try for something special.”

“This song of Harmony’s is good. And you know, if it crosses over and gets played on both the country and the rock stations, that would be amazing.”

“Whatever you say. But the best part will be you serving me breakfast in bed every morning for the rest of the tour.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“You made a deal.”

I really wanted to slap that smirk off his face. But the last time I’d done that we were seven and six years old, and I’m pretty sure one of my ears is still crooked because of GeeBee’s punishment. I settled for returning a haughty sneer.

“That’s ridiculous. You have a cook when you’re at home and when you’re on the road, you have room service.”

“Your pancakes are better than Frederick’s. And at the hotel, I have to get out of bed to get my tray.” He used a whiny voice like when he was ten.

“Not happening. Pick something else. Like walking barefoot on live coals.”

“Okay. Let me think.” He gazed up at the ceiling, then flashed me a toothy smile. “How about a weekly pedicure and foot massage?”

He lifted a bare foot in the aisle and wiggled his gnarly toes.

A groan erupted from my chest. “Did you want regular or blueberry syrup on those pancakes?”



I was surprisingly calm as I stood with my hand poised to knock on the door. Really. My fingers weren't even shaking. It had all started when West had pulled me aside last night after the concert.

“Don't sweat it, Harmony. Race already agreed to use your song.”

“Are you sure? He hasn't even heard it yet.”

“He has. Yesterday on the plane, I played the recording you and I made together,” West had said. “He's completely on board.”

“Thank you, West. You've done so much for me. I don't know how I can ever repay you.”

“It's nothing,” he'd said. “He hasn't heard the duet version yet, so it's your job to sell him on the idea.”

“I'll do my best.”

But the more I'd thought about it, the more I'd realized I didn't want Race to use my song on his album. It was West who had earned the opportunity to break into the music field. The song he'd written was incredible and moving, but would probably never get recorded. West would never be selfish enough to push for what he deserved. Someone would have to do that for him.

And that someone was me.

Why? Because, for the first time in my life, I was actually (and literally) in love.

It was a deep longing. A powerful ache. Impossible to deny, it compelled me to seek his happiness, rather than mine. It wasn't even a sacrifice. I knew it would bring me more joy to see him happy.

What's more, this love wasn't dependent on him returning the feeling. I wanted him to. With all my heart, I wanted him to. But I suspected his attraction was purely physical.

I wasn't the least bit nervous about my decision. I'd made it up to Race's suite without tripping a single time. Poised and confident, I was ready to make my case for choosing West's song for the album. Fortunately, I had a decent recording of it on my phone.

Before my knuckles contacted the door, it jerked open and West's face appeared.

"Oh. Sorry." His dark hair was tousled, as if he hadn't bothered to comb it yet. I barely stopped my hand from brushing away an unruly lock that fell across his forehead. "I was just putting this tray out in the hall."

Confused, my eyes went to the number on the door. "I thought this was Race's room. Am I at the wrong suite?"

"No, this is it. I'm just here delivering his pancakes." He opened the door and swept his arm wide in a gesture of welcome. "Come on in. He should be out in a minute."

Though my belly got all warm and fuzzy seeing West again, I knew I had to talk to Race alone to make my plan work.

"You brought your brother breakfast? That's so nice. I could count the number of times I've done that for my sisters on one hand." I thought back. "Uhm... maybe one finger."

"I'm not being benevolent." The left corner of his mouth kicked up in a rueful grin. "I sort of lost a bet."

"If I were you, I'd stop making bets. I notice you're still paying off the last one you lost." I tugged on the hem of his



polo shirt as I walked past him. Really, it was just an excuse to touch him, but he'd never know that.

“Hey, Harmony.” Race ambled in through another doorway and plopped down in an overstuffed chair, propping his bare feet on the footstool. “You did a great job on the song. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks. But really West did most of the work.”

“You wrote the song.” West waved his hand in protest. “I only helped with the arrangement. You’ll get the credit as the composer.”

“You mean, when I win a Grammy?” I joked, leaning my elbows on the back of a red wingback chair.

“It could happen,” West replied in a serious tone. The man was insane, but my heart did a happy dance, anyway. He was distracting me from my purpose, though. It was time to get rid of him.

“Well, I think we have some details to work through,” I said. “Right Race?”

I looked at West, expecting he would volunteer to leave us alone. Instead, he settled onto the couch and crossed a leg over his knee.

At that moment, I wanted to murder Meghan. The sight of his muscular legs was torturing me, and it was totally her fault.

“You don’t have to stay, West.” I tried a more direct approach. “I’m sure you have a lot to do.”

“Not really.” West stiffened, his gaze darting to his brother and back. “I’ll just stay until you work out the contract details.”

Okay, he was trying to be stubborn. But that man didn’t know the meaning of the word. I’d resolved to get his song on the album instead of mine, and nothing was going to stop me. Least of all a man who was too nice for his own good.

*How am I going to get rid of him?*

An idea sprang into my head. Over and over West had warned me that Race wouldn't put my song on the album if I broke up with him. It was time to test his theory.

"Before we talk about the song, Race, I was thinking we should discuss ending our fake relationship."

The blood seemed to drain from West's face. Race looked a little pasty, too.

"I was hoping we could pretend for a bit longer." Race cleared his throat like it was full of phlegm. "In fact, I'll pay for an apartment in LA if you'll stay awhile."

West's head snapped toward his brother. "I don't see any reason to extend it beyond the tour."

"But what'll I tell GeeBee? You warned me—"

"Shut up, Race," West growled.

"What about GeeBee?" I asked.

"Never mind." West bounded to his feet and hooked his arm around my waist, tugging me toward the door. "Race has already heard your song. He and I can work out the details on the contract."

I twisted from his grasp. In my mind, I twirled like a graceful ninja. In reality, I spun around, lost my balance, tripped over my own feet, and tumbled to the floor, grasping at West's arm and hauling him down to land on me and knock the wind out of my lungs.

"Sorry," he said, our faces inches apart. His breath smelled like mint toothpaste. For a minute, my good sense abandoned me, and I thought about trying number seven from the kissing article.

Then he rolled off, still mumbling apologies. I scrambled to a stand, ignoring the pain in my hip and ribs. I slammed my fists onto my hips and reminded myself I was angry with both of them. "Tell me, right now. What does GeeBee have to do with when we break off this fake relationship?"

Race cringed, covering his ears. "Don't get mad at me. West was the one who started it."

“I didn’t start anything,” said West.

“You’re the one GeeBee tried to match to Harmony to begin with,” Race said. “And you came to me, begging me to take Harmony off your hands. It was your idea to have a fake relationship to help my reputation. Then you helped persuade GeeBee the relationship was real so she wouldn’t pressure you to marry Harmony and produce grandkids anymore.”

The room tilted, and I lurched, grabbing for the chair-back to steady myself. Mouth powder-dry, I rasped out my words. “West? What’s he talking about? Tell me he’s making this up.”

“Harmony...” His eyes shifted, and I knew... it was true. All of it.

The entire time, West had simply been trying to get rid of me. His way of avoiding conflict had been to hide the truth about his actual feelings. Every word, every action had been pure manipulation.

How could I have been so stupid? It all made sense now. The way he’d attempted to oust me the day of the audition. How he’d urged Race and me to keep dating. The deep-seated guilt that had compelled him to pitch my song to Race for the album.

And the kisses? Those must’ve been guilt-related, too. He felt sorry for me because I’d been dumped by my fiancé. He probably told himself he was being nice to me by pretending he actually cared.

“Wow. I think you missed your calling, West.” I was proud my voice didn’t tremble. “You have amazing acting skills. You should win an Academy Award.”

Eyes stinging, I felt tears coming. This wouldn’t be pretty. I turned my back to both of them and marched to the door, my head held high. I didn’t dare look back, so I raised my voice as I flung the door open. “Forget the recording. I don’t want my song on the album anymore.”

“Harmony, wait.” West’s voice drew closer. “I can explain.”

If he caught up to me, he would get hit with full on ugly-face. Exposure would leave him traumatized, at best. I did the only thing I could to protect the man I loved and salvage the tiny bit of pride I had remaining...

I ran.



*I 'm pretty sure a semi-truck just rammed into my chest. At least, that's what it feels like.*

“Oh man!” Race stared at the door Harmony had slammed behind her. “She seems really mad. You should go after her and calm her down before she says something to GeeBee.”

“She wouldn't have anything to say to GeeBee if you hadn't shot off your big fat mouth. Telling her you were going to set her up in an apartment in LA? Seriously? Where did that come from?”

“I panicked. And it's your fault.”

“My fault?”

“You said GeeBee would get upset if we broke up, and I wanted to delay that as long as possible. Honestly, I was kind of hoping you would get a girlfriend so GeeBee would lay off me for a while. Hasn't she sent you a ton of pictures of potential women from that TikTok thing she does?”

“I don't want any of those women.” My patience gone, I twisted to glare at him. “I want Harmony.”

Race blinked. He blinked again. “Say what?”

“I'm in love with Harmony, okay?” I flung my hands in the air.

“Wait, you're in love with Harmony?” He scratched the back of his head. “But you told me I had to keep dating her.”

“Just until the tour is over, and only because I wanted you to record her song on your album.”

“But what about all that stuff you said about how we should date seriously?”

“Back then, I thought she was into you, and I didn’t want you to dump her and hurt her feelings. But I found out she’s into me, instead.” I collapsed on the couch. “At least she used to be. Thanks to you, she probably hates me.”

“Hold on! You can’t blame all this on me.”

I wanted to, but I knew I couldn’t.

“You’re right. It’s not your fault.” Something like a hay bale lodged in my throat. “I screwed everything up.”

“Yep. You sure did.”

“Gee, thanks. I feel so much better.” I laced my words with sarcasm.

“I still don’t get it, West. Once you started falling for her, why didn’t you tell me?”

I’d avoided this conversation for years.

“To be frank, I was afraid it would be another Caroline-thing.”

“Caroline?”

I looked up, not surprised at his confusion. He’d been with so many women. How could I expect him to remember one woman from five years ago?

“Caroline Kemp. Six-foot tall. Brunette. Played keyboards. She and I dated for almost six months, but she dropped me for a chance to be with you.”

“I remember her now.” He went red from the neck up. “She didn’t tell me you two had been going out... and neither did you.”

“I didn’t bother to tell you. It’s not like I wanted to be with her once I saw her flirting with my brother.”

“I’m really sorry, bro. Believe me, I know how it feels.” His expression took on a slightly haunted look, and I knew he was thinking about Everly. “I’d never do that to you on purpose.”

“I guess I should’ve told you. But you have no idea what it was like to grow up with you as my little brother.” I chuckled to lighten my words, though my stomach felt acidic. “You’ve always been a magnet, everywhere you went. You had all the friends and all the girls. Women used me to get to you all the time. I was almost invisible. And—”

“West, I think you’re delirious. You were—”

“Let me finish. I might as well get all the humiliation over at once.”

“Fine.” He sat back and entwined his arms across his chest. “Then it’s my turn.”

“As I was saying, with Caroline, I thought I’d finally found the one. She and I were happy together. I thought I was in love. But the minute you showed her a tiny bit of attention, I was like last week’s news.” I swallowed hard. “With Harmony, I tried my best not to fall for her. I assumed she’d be exactly like Caroline and every other girl, so I wouldn’t stand a chance with you around. I didn’t dare admit my feelings to myself, much less to you. Later, when there was a possibility she was actually attracted to me, I didn’t want to rock the boat by saying anything to you about it.”

“You mean you didn’t trust me.” His dark expression made it clear he was upset. “You thought I’d try to take her away from you.”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d react.” I backpedaled, trying to come up with an explanation that wouldn’t sound insulting. “Like you said, I’d been pushing you to try for a serious relationship with her.”

“And all of that is another way of saying you didn’t trust me.” Hurt emanated from him like heat from an oven. “Just like you believed I was doing drugs and sleeping with every woman I went out with.”

“You built that reputation with the media and never said or did anything to refute their accusations. What was I supposed to think?”

“You were supposed to believe in me because you knew me better than anyone.” His eyes shot daggers at me. “Contrary to your description, my life hasn’t been all glowing and wonderful. I was so jealous of you I did everything I could to get attention. I was the screw-up living in the shadow of my perfect older brother. The brother who had more musical talent. The one who made straight A’s. The one who never did anything wrong. The one all the mothers wanted their daughters to marry.”

“Great. All the mothers loved me. That would’ve been so awesome if I’d wanted to date older women.” I shook my head, glancing at the ceiling. “I guess Mrs. Cunningham was kind of hot.”

Race bit his lips, nostrils flaring. The corner of his mouth twitched. Then we both burst out in laughter, going on and on until we were blinking back tears.

I wiped my eyes, taking a deep breath. “Are you telling me the truth, Race? Were you really jealous of me?”

“Every day of my life.” He sobered, shaking his head. “I’m still trying to figure out how you could’ve been jealous of me. We both know you carried me through everything I’ve ever done.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. Maybe if I’d told you everything, I wouldn’t be in this mess. But what’s done is done.” I leaned forward and dropped my face into my hands. “I’ve never been this miserable in my life.”

“I’ve never seen you this upset over a woman, but I know how you feel.” The cushions shifted, and Race’s hand gripped my shoulder. “If you’re in love with her, you can’t give up. We’ll think of something. At least one of us has a chance at being happy.”

I looked up at my brother who, for once, wasn’t goofing off and joking around.



“Are you this miserable about Everly? Even after all this time?”

“Only when I let myself think. Being busy keeps me numb.” His throat convulsed as he swallowed. “But you still have a chance to make it right with Harmony. You can explain everything to her like you explained it to me. If she’s really into you, she’ll forgive you.”

“She won’t communicate with me. Not ever.” I rubbed my throbbing temples. “It’s a pride issue. She has a zero-tolerance policy for rejection, and I rejected her. She knows I tried to get rid of her by getting you to date her. So I’m out. End of story.”

“West, you’re my big brother and a brilliant manager. And I have a lot of respect for you.”

“Thanks, but that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“On the other hand,” Race waited until he caught my gaze. “Sometimes you’re an idiot.”

“Uhm, you really suck at making me feel better.”

“I’m trying to get you to do something instead of feeling sorry for yourself.”

“If you have some bright idea how to fix all this damage, I’m ready to hear it.”

Race propped his elbows on his knees and frowned, staring at the door. “The real issue here is that you’ve hurt her pride, right?”

“That’s right. No way to undo it.”

“If you want Harmony back, you’re going to have to grovel.” He straightened. “I’m talking crawling on your knees and begging for forgiveness.”

“That won’t work.” I let out a weighty sigh. “I’m willing to humiliate myself. But she’ll never listen to me. She made it clear. If you snub her once, you get no second chances. She’s so stubborn about it she was willing to forgo a record deal.”

His pursed lips produced a long, low whistle. “Okay, that’s taking pride to a whole new level.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Are you sure you want a woman with that kind of standard for hurting her pride? Sounds like high maintenance.”

“Maybe she’s a stickler about it, but I can’t judge her. Honestly, her pride is no worse than mine. That’s how I got in this position to begin with.”

“There must be some way around it...” He brightened, holding up a finger. “Ah-ha! You’re forgetting our secret weapon.”

“What secret weapon?” I asked, my tone telling him I thought the war was lost, even if he pulled a nuclear bomb out of his pocket.

Race flashed a sly grin. “GeeBee.”

“You actually think GeeBee would be willing to help me when she finds out I’ve been lying to her?”

“I think she might, if only because she’ll like having you admit she was right all along.” Race arched an eyebrow. “Though you might have to get your ear sewn back on after she’s done with you.”

“You’re right.” I winced. “But I don’t think it would make any difference. Harmony won’t listen to GeeBee or her grandmother. She hates being manipulated.”

“Then you can get her sympathy. Tell her how GeeBee manipulated you.”

“I can’t tell her anything if she’s blocked me. I guarantee she’s already written me off.”

“How do you know unless you try? Call her. If she doesn’t answer, leave a voicemail. Apologize. Throw yourself on her mercy.”

“Okay, I’ll try.” With wooden fingers, I pulled my cell out of my pocket. I didn’t have a shred of hope when I punched in the numbers. “But I bet she’s already blocked me.”



Tears streaming down my face, I took the stairs up to my room. Five flights. I stumbled three times, resulting in a slight stubbed toe and slight sprain on my left foot. By the time I reached my floor, I was so winded, I might as well have run a marathon. But I hadn't dared to get on an elevator with my ugly-face. My pride had taken enough of a hit, learning that West had been rejecting me all along, from day one.

I grabbed my bag and started stuffing my belongings inside, not bothering with my usual clothing-rolls to prevent wrinkles. I wasn't sure where I was going to go, but I knew I had to get away. I couldn't handle facing West again, even if it happened on accident. At the moment, I didn't want to talk to him at all.

"Better block him," I mumbled to myself as I dug into the bottom of my purse for my phone.

The tears made my screen blurry. I needed an emotional release, and I needed it fast.

I started singing, then realized I was singing West's song and cried even harder. A glance in the mirror revealed a puffy red face, like something from a comic strip. Or maybe a horror movie.

I launched into another song, but tears kept coming. I tried another. And then another. But none of them gave the usual emotional release.

*Don't I know any songs that aren't about love?*

I even tried “Home on the Range,” but that one failed too.

I couldn’t get West out of my mind. If there was such a thing as too nice, that was him. He was too sweet to tell me the truth of how he really felt about me.

Or was he too spineless? I remembered him mentioning he would go to any lengths to avoid conflict.

But why had he kissed me? Twice? And done such a thorough job of it?

None of it made any sense. I knew one person who would have the answers and was currently staying in Dry Gulch, Texas, with my grandmother. I had to get far away from West Garrison, anyway. Now, I knew where I was going.



“HARMONY!” Gramma turned when I walked in the back door, soapy water dripping from her hands. “What are you doing here?”

“Is that any way to greet your granddaughter when she’s been out on tour all summer?”

“It’s only been ten days since I saw you in Houston.” She dried her hands on a dish towel before swallowing me in a bear hug. “I thought you had one more concert in LA on Saturday. That’s what I wrote on my calendar.”

Gramma moved to inspect her paper calendar, hanging on its usual nail in the kitchen wall. Each square had so many things scribbled on it you could barely see the number.

“I needed a break.” I dropped my duffle bag on the floor and sat down at the well-worn oak table. “Caught a plane. Sorry I didn’t call.”

In truth, I’d surprised them on purpose, afraid that GeeBee would’ve called her grandsons if she’d gotten wind I was coming.

“I thought I heard voices in here.” GeeBee clomped into the kitchen sporting cowboy boots, a pair of stiff blue jeans,

and a plaid snap-front shirt. She settled herself opposite me at the table. “How do you like my new duds?”

“They’re very... uhm... western.”

“Thank you. I have a Stetson, too, but Loretta won’t let me wear it in the house.”

“It’s not polite,” said Gramma.

GeeBee’s intense eyes focused on me, and I held her gaze for an uncomfortable fifteen seconds before I blinked and looked away.

“Where’s Dad?” The clock on the wall read eight-thirty. He should’ve been in the den with the television blaring, but the house was quiet.

“He’s on a date with Camille Cartwright.” Gramma looked entirely too pleased with herself for me to believe she hadn’t had a hand in the matter.

“It’s about time,” I said. A widow herself, Camille had been sweet on my father for at least eight years. Everyone in town had known; everyone but Dad.

“The band’s music tour is almost over.” Gramma eased into the chair beside me, casting a wary look at GeeBee. “Why take a break before the last performance?”

My pulse sped up. I didn’t particularly like confrontation, but this one had to happen. I focused my gaze on GeeBee. “I want to know exactly why you gave my information to West.”

“Your grandmother gave me your resume and demo tape. I sent them to West because I thought you’d be perfect for the band.” GeeBee calmly folded her hands on the table. “And I was right.”

“Are you saying you never suggested that West and I should date?”

“Back then, I hadn’t even started my granny matchmakers on TikTok.” She squinted and pushed a pair of wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Hate these stupid glasses, but I ran out of contacts.”

“Sorry to break the news, GeeBee, but I know what you’re doing.” Despite my irritation and anxiety, GeeBee brought a smile to my face. “That was an admirable job of sidestepping a direct answer to my question and then trying to distract me.”

GeeBee slapped her blue-jeaned leg as she cackled with laughter, not appearing the least bit contrite. “You got me! You’re as sharp as Loretta said you were.”

“The matchmaking was all Bette’s idea,” said Gramma. “I was only trying to boost your music career.”

“Don’t go throwing me under the bus, Loretta.” GeeBee stabbed a finger at her. “Did you or did you not say Harmony would be a good match for West?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know you were going to pressure him.” Gramma gave my arm a squeeze. “I promise, Harmony, I didn’t know what she was going to do. I thought she was just going to arrange for you to meet each other and let the rest happen naturally.”

“That’s basically what I did. No pressure at all.” GeeBee propped her elbows on the table. “Although I might’ve mentioned that the promise of great-grandchildren would give me a reason to live, what with my chest pains and all.”

“Oh, GeeBee!” My problems with West were temporarily forgotten. “Is it something serious? Is it your heart?”

“Not to worry, dear. It’s only indigestion.” She reached across the table to pat my hand. “But don’t tell the boys.”

“GeeBee! You can’t let them worry about your health.”

“It’s for their own good.” GeeBee bobbed her chin toward her chest. “They’d make terrible husbands if I didn’t force them to think about someone besides themselves. Men have a tendency to get caught up in their work and forget about what’s really important in life.”

I started to feel a little sympathy for West. “Gramma, you’d better never pull a stunt like that... pretending you’re sick.”

“If I did that, you girls would have me in the hospital so fast my head would spin.” Gramma gave a little shudder. “You know how much I hate hospitals. I swear, I’m not going in one of those torture chambers. At least, not as a patient. When the time comes, I’m going to die in my home.”

“I thought I might get my pilot’s license,” said GeeBee. “Then you and I could go out together, flying upside down through a barn, like in that movie. What’s it called? I forget the name.”

“Something about *Sleeping Lions*, I think. Yeah, I loved that movie.” Gramma smiled, wistfully. “But, you’re a terrible driver, Bette. Maybe I should get the pilot’s license.”

“If you flew as slowly as you drive, we’d never get off the ground.”

“Have you had supper, Harmony?” Gramma stood up and went to the refrigerator. “We have some leftover taco salad.”

“Hold on,” I said. “You’re both doing it, now. Trying to distract me.”

“Or I could whip you up some scrambled eggs.” Gramma held up a cardboard egg carton. “I’ve got blue eggs from Winnie Hazard’s new fancy chickens.”

“I’m not hungry.” I turned my full attention back to GeeBee. “I believe you were about to explain what happened when you tried to make West date me.”

A loud ring like an old phone came from GeeBee’s lap. She picked up her cell phone and squinted at it. “Speak of the devil—that’s West calling now.”

I put a hand on my chest as my heart flung itself against my ribcage a few times. I must’ve looked terrified, because GeeBee raised an eyebrow at me and silenced the ring, turning her cell phone off. “West can wait. I think I’d like to finish this conversation before I talk to him.”

“Did you talk to him earlier today?” I slid my hands into my lap so she couldn’t see them shaking. “Or Race? Either one?”

“No. What happened? Did one of them do something stupid?”

“It was nothing. No big deal.” If GeeBee realized how upset I was, she’d never tell me the truth.

Gramma returned to her chair at the table, having given up on distracting me. “Whatever happened, it’s got you in a tizzy, that much is for sure. Your face is so splotchy right now it looks like it’s been tie-dyed red.”

“Thanks a lot, Gramma.”

“Which one was it?” asked GeeBee. “Race or West? Did Race make a pass at you?”

“Make a what?”

“Never mind. Whatever they did, I’ll give ’em a good ear-twisting.”

She still thought Race and I were dating, and I didn’t want her to find out otherwise.

“They didn’t do anything wrong. Race just mentioned you’d originally matched me with West and he’d rejected the idea. I kind of wondered if it were true.” I kept my tone casual, like the whole idea didn’t bother me in the least.

“That makes it sound like I coerced them into hiring you. I promise you got in on pure talent.”

“I know you, Harmony,” said Gramma. “You’re too confident in your abilities to be worried about how you got the singing job. I’m betting you’re ticked off by the mere fact that West saw fit to reject the idea of dating you, even though you would’ve turned him down if he’d asked.”

“I might find that a bit irritating.”

“Harmony...” Gramma interlocked her fingers and twirled her thumbs around each other, the way she often did when she was deliberating how to say something I wouldn’t want to hear. “I think you’re beautiful, smart, and talented, but have you ever considered that you could have too much pride?”



“That’s a big *no-way*,” I said. “If anything, I’m proud of my pride. I’ll never be a doormat.”

“Ah, but pride can be a double-edged sword.” A little Mona-Lisa smile snuck onto GeeBee’s face. “It could’ve kept me away from my Walter. You see, I thought I was too good for him. In fact, I flat-out turned him down the first dozen times he asked me out.”

“Why?” Curiosity overcame my resistance to having two grandmas attempting to teach me a lesson I didn’t want to learn.

“Because he was shorter than I was and had a bald spot. Even though he was brilliant and sweet and funny, I thought I could do better.”

“What happened?”

“I’d gone out on a date with my hunky leading man, who’d basically treated me like a piece of trash. Walter found me in tears and had me laughing within minutes. Then he told me, ‘Bette, none of those guys will ever show you the respect and love you’ll get from me. Because none of them will ever treasure you like I do. Give me a chance, and I’ll show you how it feels to be cherished.’”

“That’s so sweet.” I fanned at my watery eyes, knowing my face was getting redder. What did it matter? GeeBee had already seen my ugly-face.

“There you go,” said Gramma. “Bette and Walter are a perfect example of not letting pride get in the way of a relationship.”

“None of this applies to me,” I said, with an indignant sniff. “I hate to be the one to break this to you guys, but my relationship with Race is fake. We’ve been pretend-dating to help his reputation.”

“I figured as much. You and Race never really clicked, did you?” GeeBee cocked her head to the side. “I wasn’t born yesterday, you know.”

I gaped at her. “But... I thought you—”

“Sometimes you have to set your pride aside and be honest, like my Walter did,” said GeeBee. Her next words ambushed me. “If you like West, you should tell him.”

“I... uhm.... I never said anything about liking West.”

“No, you didn’t.” GeeBee’s fingers drummed silently on the table. “And if you don’t like him, you should let him down easy.”

“Let him down easy? I think you may be delusional. West doesn’t like me. He’s the one who rejected me!”

“I know my grandson pretty well. Practically raised him from a pup. I’m pretty sure he’s taken with you.” She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand. “Though, I guess I could be wrong. There’s a first time for everything.”

Butterflies filled my tummy. Was it possible West liked me, after all? But even if he’d changed his mind, I knew he’d spurned me after our first meeting. Admittedly, I hadn’t been at my best the day of the audition. But if he’d rejected me after seeing me wet and muddy, he’d certainly run screaming if he ever saw my ugly-face. Deep in my heart, I knew I couldn’t be with a guy unless he accepted me always—normal or scary-red-splotchy-swollen.

“Even if I did like him—and I’m not saying I do—I’d never be able to forget that he rejected me and lied to me all this time.”

“Well, when you go back for the LA concert, you should swallow your pride long enough to have a conversation with him.” Gramma pursed her lips. “Whether you like him or not.”

I pushed away from the table and stood up. “You mean *if* I decide to go back for the final show. I might skip it. Because, let’s face it, The Hatters don’t really need my voice. No one will miss me if I’m not there.”

“But Loretta and I are flying to LA to see the final concert.”

“We are?” Gramma stared at GeeBee for a few seconds with a confused look.

“Yes,” said GeeBee. “Remember? I bought those non-refundable tickets so you and I could see Harmony sing at the last show of the tour.”

“Oh, right. My memory’s getting bad these days.” Gramma tapped a finger on the side of her head. “Guess you’d better go to that concert after all, Harmony. What with us going all that way to be there.”

“Unless you’re saying you’re a quitter.” GeeBee’s bright red lips made a straight line. “If that’s the case, I made an obvious mistake when I matched you with West to begin with.”

GeeBee had drawn an irritating line in the sand. Now, if I didn’t go to the concert, West would have a legitimate reason for rejecting me. She’d taken away my high moral ground, and she knew it.

“Fine. I’ll go to the concert, but don’t expect me to talk to your grandsons.” I glared at GeeBee and circled my hand around my face. “I’m so emotional right now I feel permanently splotchy. I don’t let anyone but family see me like this. So you’d better not interfere again... I mean it!”

“Who me?” GeeBee blinked her twinkling eyes. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”



“You look terrible, bro.” Race clapped me on the back and chuckled. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“Feels like a month ago.” A lightning bolt ripped through my left jaw joint, and I pressed my fingers against it. I’d been clenching nonstop for five days now, the reason my TMJ pain had flared up.

So far, Harmony had refused to communicate with me. I knew from a terse conversation with GeeBee that Harmony had flown to her hometown in Texas, but didn’t know what had transpired between them. GeeBee had taken the opportunity to chew me out, though her condemnation was no worse than the berating I’d given myself. Too bad I didn’t have a magic time machine to go back to day one and have a do-over.

I couldn’t fault Harmony for acting on her injured pride when my own pride had been my downfall. I could see it all so clearly now. If only I’d been honest about my attraction to Harmony from the beginning. But history had shown the majority of the female population, if forced to choose, would pick my brother in a heartbeat. So I’d pretended I didn’t like her.

Yet I couldn’t continue to use Race as an excuse, either. In my heart, I’d always known my brother would’ve backed off if I’d asked him to. But it had been less risky to blame Race than to reveal my true feelings for Harmony and face the possibility of humiliating rejection.

Instead, I'd stubbornly stuck to my plan to procure a contract for Harmony's song on Race's album, convinced the feat would somehow secure my place in her heart.

The result of my decision? Harmony had experienced humiliation, rather than me.

And I hated myself for it.

"Actually, I dropped by to give you some good news." Race glanced over his shoulder where Gary and Drake were laughing at videos on their phones. He lowered his voice. "Harmony's here."

My insides scrambled themselves. I'd been praying she'd show up for the concert, but now that she was here, I was petrified. "Did you talk to her?"

"I haven't seen her. I heard it from Meghan. Said she showed up for the early soundcheck as if everything were normal."

"I called her this morning and it went straight to voicemail, so I assume she still has me blocked." Acid churned in my empty stomach, but I wasn't the least bit hungry. "I don't think our plan is going to work."

"There's no way she won't forgive you. How could she resist a public avowal of your love?"

"I still can't believe you're going to let me do this." I tried to swallow, but my mouth felt as if it were stuffed with saltines.

"It's the least I can do. I owe you a lot," said Race. "And I assume you'll be extending the breakfasts-in-bed through the end of the year."

"Very funny." Any other time, I would've had a snarky comeback. But in my present state, it was the best I could do.

"And if she turns you down, you won't mind if I try to date her for real, will you?"

The next thing I knew, I had Race pinned against the opposite wall, the front of his shirt balled in my fist. His hands lifted in surrender.

“Don’t you know I’m teasing? I’m the one helping you get her back, right?”

“Sorry. I guess I’m losing it.” I let go of his shirt and twisted away, pressing my hands to the sides of my head.

“That’s okay.” Race smoothed the front of his now-wrinkled shirt. “I’d rather see you mad than walking around like a zombie the way you’ve been all week.”

To his credit, Race had stuck to my side like glue, refusing to let me wallow in my gloom. After coaxing me to sing my song for him, it had been his idea to include it in the show, along with a public apology, to win Harmony over. He and I were going to perform it during the acoustic break before the intermission.

“Evidently, being awake and miserable at night inspires me. I’ve written two new songs since Sunday.”

“Sounds like the start of a great premiere album,” said Race. “Looks like I’ll be needing a new manager.”

“You know, for the past three years that’s exactly what I thought I needed to be happy. But now...”

“Now you know how I felt all this time.” Race flipped a chair around backwards and sat down, his arms folded across the back. “Success is no substitute for love.”

I knew he was referring to Everly.

“Is there anything I can do to help you in that department?” I asked. “Other than to stop telling you it’s time to move on?”

His eyes focused beyond the wall. “No, you’re right about that. I should’ve moved on a long time ago. Maybe I should consider one of the women GeeBee’s been suggesting. She’s probably sent me thirty pictures this last week. Said she’s been saving them for when I quit pretending I was in love with Harmony.”

“When did she figure it out?”

He barked a harsh laugh. “I’m not sure we ever had her fooled.”

“I’m not sure we’ve fooled her even once in our entire lives.”

“And now, you’re going to owe her.” He grimaced. “Harmony might not be here if GeeBee hadn’t tricked her into it.”

“Yeah. There’s no telling what it’s going to cost me. Especially since I also had to admit she was right about Harmony in the first place.”

“I’ll bet you ten bucks I know what she wants from you.”

“I already know.” I groaned. “She’s decided having a pet slows down her jet-setting style.”

“Look at it this way...” Race chuckled. “If Harmony won’t take you back, you’ll always have Tinkerbell.”



“Where are your lucky marbles?” April sat beside me at the dressing room mirror, directing my efforts to cover my dark circles with concealer. “You’re going to need them with you tonight.”

“I keep them backstage now.” I pointed to my tote bag. “Trying to keep disasters to a minimum.”

I didn’t mention that a picture of West holding the marbles had replaced the actual marbles as my good luck charm.

“Grab them right now and let’s get it over with. Let’s hunt West down so you can talk to him before the show.”

“Shhh!” I darted my eyes to the right, indicating Meghan and Cassie in the corner, snacking on the goodies GeeBee had dropped off. How she’d found time to bake was a mystery, since she and Gramma had only flown in the day before. In a low voice, I murmured to April. “Keep your voice down.”

“Why? Do you think they don’t know? Hey!” She waved at the two, who were unsuccessfully pretending not to listen.

“Do either of you know why Harmony is so grouchy and looks like death warmed over?”

“Ignore my sister,” I said. “She has a condition—we don’t usually let her out of the house.”

“A rare condition in our family,” April said, “called common sense. Would either of you care to guess what’s wrong with Harmony? I mean, besides the stuff that’s always wrong with her...”

I leaned close to April, blocking her view of the other women, and growled a warning in her ear. “If I ever do get married, which isn’t looking likely, I’m hiring Francis Smith to plan my wedding.”

“I have a guess!” said Meghan.

I twisted to find her waving her hand in the air like an enthusiastic school girl.

“There will be no guessing.” I clamped my teeth together.

My threatening tone must’ve fallen flat, considering the way Meghan’s lips—turquoise to match the streak in her hair, split into a wide grin. “I’m betting Harmony and West had a fight, because West looks even worse than Harmony.”

“He does?” Something squeezed my ribcage, making it hard to breathe. If West was miserable, it could mean he actually liked me and hadn’t been faking it. It could also mean he’d been suffering all week, through no fault of his own.

Whose fault was it? Mine and only mine. During the last five days, with nothing to do but think, I had come to a sobering conclusion—I was a fraud.

Discovering West’s initial rejection had given me an excuse to dump him with righteous indignation. I’d claimed my injured pride as the reason. But a week of introspection had forced me to admit my motivation wasn’t pride, but fear.

Ever since the fateful day the mailman had delivered that rejection letter from Morris Records, I’d been secretly petrified of another failure. I’d learned that talent in no way ensured success. Part of me had wanted to give up on my



musical career altogether, as my father had urged. To settle for a safe life, living in my hometown and married to an accountant. But when What's-His-Name had broken up with me, I'd thrown myself into my music, not daring to admit I was petrified of failing again.

I'd faked it. Faked my bravado. Faked the confidence I exuded and the haughty attitude that went with it. I'd repeated my cover story about spurning Morris Records so many times I'd almost fooled myself into believing it. But deep in my heart, I knew I was nothing but a big, fat chicken. And a failure.

The truth was, I'd kept West's number blocked all week, not because of anything he'd done, but because I dreaded coming clean and confessing the truth. Chances were his attraction to me—if it had ever been genuine—would vanish like a puff of smoke. No less than I deserved.

But it was time. Time for West to stop feeling guilty for something that wasn't his responsibility. Time to reveal the true Harmony Rivers—warts and all—and live with the consequences.

“You see?” April climbed to her feet, tugging on my arm. “Everyone knows already, so why delay? Let's go talk to him.”

“How about after the show?” I mumbled.

“You shouldn't wait.” April put on her lecture face. “What if there's an earthquake and we all die without you getting a chance to straighten things out with West?”

“If we die, it won't matter. And I'll have been spared the humiliation of having to face him.”

“If you die without making up, you'll never get to kiss him again.” Meghan's dancing eyebrows let me know she was enjoying my discomfort. “You seemed to be really into that kiss when I caught you.”

“You saw them kissing and never told me?” Cassie slammed her hands on her hips, her expression outraged. “I thought we were besties!”

A kiss from West sounded quite enticing, though I estimated the chances of it happening at about thirty percent.

“If he doesn’t hate me already, he probably will when I confess the truth.”

“Or he’ll be like me,” said April. “Relieved you were lying to cover up a humiliating brush-off, instead of being a complete idiot who threw away a perfectly-good record deal.”

I should never have told her the truth about Morris Records.

“Wow, April. Judgmental, much?”

“Got my robe and gavel with me.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to him. Let’s go before I lose my nerve.” Might as well. I stopped resisting and let April pull me to my feet.

“Oh, I forgot!” Meghan hit her forehead with the palm of her hand. “Now’s not a good time to leave the dressing room. Security suggested we stay out of sight, since we’ve got fans wandering backstage.”

“Why does that matter?” I asked. “They’ve been around the past few shows.”

“You haven’t heard?” Meghan scrunched her nose. “A few hours ago, Race announced that the two of you broke up. Every time that happens, some of the fans go a little berserk. I don’t know why he didn’t wait until after the concert.”

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t mention anything about West, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Meghan winked. “He just said the two of you had decided to be friends. But those big sad eyes of his looked all devastated, as if you’d cast him aside.”

“Great,” I said. “Now all the fans hate me.”

“In Race’s defense,” said Meghan, “he specified that the decision was mutual. But there are always a group of fans who take these things personally, like they’re trying to defend a close friend. Maybe some of them are secretly in love with

him. Who knows? Whatever the reason, when those crazies get all stirred up, they always turn on his exes.”

“And those fanatics are exactly the kind of people willing to pay the big bucks to be in that lottery for the backstage passes,” said Cassie.

I slumped down onto my stiff chair. Now that I’d raked up enough courage to face West, waiting was pure torture.

“You might want to turn down my voice in the mix tonight,” I told Meghan before taking a long drink from my water bottle. “My throat is so dry, I might sound croaky.”

“No worries,” Meghan said. “If your singing is off, I’ll dial you down.”

“Who does the lights?” asked April.

“That’d be me,” said Cassie. “I’ve got a team, but I’m in charge. Why?”

“You need to be ready to douse Harmony’s spotlight.” April gave my shoulder a conciliatory pat. “You probably don’t realize this about my sister, but when she gets extra emotional, her face turns the color of a lobster who’s been dropped in boiling water.”

“It won’t be a problem, Cassie.” I said, planning multiple ways to pay April back for embarrassing me. “As my sister knows, I don’t have that problem when I’m singing.”

Round-eyed, Cassie gaped at me, then wrinkled her nose. “If singing helps your problem, now might be a good time to belt out a song or two.”



I STOOD in the backstage shadows watching Harmony sing. With the benefit of the in-ear monitor Meghan had fitted me

with, I could hear her clearly in my left ear. She'd started the show a bit hoarse, as if teetering on the edge of emotional breakdown, but a few songs in, she'd hit her stride. Now her voice was as sweet and smooth as chocolate mousse. It testified to the truth in her explanation that singing was an emotional release for her. I could only pray it helped her heal from the hurt I'd caused.

They were singing the last song before Race's customary acoustic solo performance. When Harmony came off stage, I would have about sixty seconds to apologize and explain that the song we were about to sing had been written with her in mind all along. I prayed that, along with a public declaration in front of the entire audience, would convince her of my true feelings.

Incredibly, I was more nervous about her approval than about singing live on stage for the first time. I shifted from foot to foot, wriggling my fingers around the neck of the guitar strapped across my shoulder. I practiced the lyrics in my head for the millionth time.

"That's her, isn't it? Harmony Rivers?" The male voice behind me and to the right was filled with bitterness.

"Sure is," answered another man. "I can't believe Race is still letting her sing. Maybe he doesn't know she was cheating on him."

My blood boiled at the lie. I could only hope Harmony never got wind of such a nasty rumor. I whipped around and eyed the men, noting the yellow backstage passes hanging from lanyards.

"She's about to come off stage." The taller man raised his voice to be heard over the music blaring from the speakers. Massive, he and his friend could've been pro-wrestlers, complete with bulging muscles and tattoos covering every square inch of their exposed arms and necks.

Since when was this the kind of fan Race attracted? Most of his diehard fans were adoring women. Their yellow passes shouldn't allow them to be backstage during the show, and I didn't like the way they were talking about Harmony. I waved,

trying to catch the attention of a security guard twenty feet away, but he was busy directing a group of four yellow-tagged women toward the exit.

“You grab her and I’ll distract the others,” said the shorter of the two wrestlers.

*They’re after Harmony!*

“Security!” I yelled, waving both hands. But no one appeared to notice except the two would-be kidnappers. Adrenaline shot through my body as they lumbered closer, blocking my view of the guard.

“You need to pipe down.” Even the shorter one loomed over me.

“You two need to leave. You’re not allowed to be here.” I put all the authority I could muster into my tone, gripping the guitar so they wouldn’t see my hands shake.

“We’ll leave when we’re good and ready.” The giant, who was sporting a green mohawk, regarded me with all the respect one would give to a baby dung beetle.

I tried a different tactic. “You’re wrong about Harmony. She’s been completely faithful to Race.”

“He says that about all of them,” said Shorty. “He covers for those lying, cheating gold-diggers every time. But this one’s not getting away with it.”

“You may be right about some of the other women Race dated, but not Harmony.” I gestured toward the stage. “If you’ll just listen to Race, he’s about to explain.”

“I know you.” Green Giant stepped closer, squinting at me. “You’re the guy in the picture. You’re the one who was kissing her!”

With an evil snarl, he slammed one cannon-ball fist into the palm of his other hand, as if to terrify me before breaking me into pieces.

It worked.

I rotated my guitar to hang from my back, using my body to protect it. (In retrospect, I probably should've done the opposite.) But my greatest fear was for Harmony. If I didn't get help, she would walk into an ambush.

I let out a yell that would rival Tarzan while aiming an upper-cut at Green Giant's jaw. Pain exploded in my knuckles when it connected.

*That's going to mess up my guitar playing.*

He barely flinched from the force of the blow. His eyes went wide at first, then narrowed with rage. I was still trying to shake the pain out of my throbbing hand, when I heard Race in my left ear, announcing our song.

His first swing hit squarely on my ribs and I felt a stabbing crunch. The second belted into my stomach, taking my breath away. Then a boulder slammed into the side of my head, and the world tilted.

*I'm falling. I hope it doesn't break my guitar.*

Blackness.



As Race began his introduction of the acoustic portion, I slid my hand into my pocket and pulled out my lucky picture of West. As distracted as I'd been, I needed all the help I could get to exit the stage without an accident.

I was halfway to the curtain when I realized Race wasn't giving his usual spiel. He was saying something about how important it was to have friends who would always be there for you... always forgive... always give you a second chance when you screwed up.

I couldn't help thinking of West and hoping I hadn't waited too long to make things right with him. Even if I found out he didn't want to date me, I hoped we wouldn't lose our friendship. And I hoped it wasn't too late to tell Race about the incredible song West had written so he would use it on his album.

How many times during that past week had I sung his song, pretending I was singing with West? Wishing it could be true for the two of us? I could hear the guitar introduction in my head.

*Wait! It's playing in my ears!*

I'd almost made it to safety. I was only ten feet from the side curtain when Race sang the first notes of West's song, and I whipped around to see what was happening. The picture slipped from my grasp, my feet got tangled, and I tumbled to the floor. Ignoring the sharp pain in my ankle, I rolled to my knees and grabbed the picture, hoping I was relatively

unnoticeable on the darkened side with Race in the center spotlight.

As I slowly rose to a crouch, Race started singing the chorus of West's song. His guitar stopped and he sang acapella. It was hauntingly gorgeous. Mesmerized, I glanced toward him. He was staring in my direction, motioning with his hand.

*He wants me to come?*

Race's hand went back to the guitar as he continued the instrumental break, and he spoke into the microphone. "Friends, hang onto your seats. This voice is going to blow you away."

West must've told his brother I knew the song. The man was incredible. Still trying to help my career, even after I'd run out on him and blocked him for an entire week.

Race was still playing, extending the guitar interlude. He was waiting for me. I couldn't imagine the effort West had gone to in order to set this up. I couldn't disappoint him now.

I straightened and limped my way back to center stage. Race's eyebrows lifted when I stepped into the spotlight. He hesitated for a second, then gestured to his microphone on the stand, edging to the side to make room for me. With West's picture gripped in one hand, I tilted the microphone down and belted out the second verse, pouring my heart into it. I could only hope West was listening and would know I was singing it to him. That I meant every word.

When I hit the last note of the verse, I popped up an octave and held it out while the crowd cheered. Race slid over to harmonize on the chorus. I nodded for him to sing the third verse, and I harmonized above him. Then we sang the break in unison and repeated the chorus. On the last chorus repeat, the audience stood up and waved their cell phones in time.

My pulse was pounding by the time we finished to applause and cheers. I was so happy for West. His song was going to be a hit.



As the last notes of Race's guitar faded, so did his smile. He set his guitar down on the stand and waved to the crowd, then took my elbow and ushered me toward the side of the stage. I kept up with him, trying not to limp. I didn't want to answer any questions about my injury, on the off chance no one had noticed me taking a tumble.

"Where's West?" Race yelled over the noise, his frown indicating his irritation. Had he not approved of my performance on the song?

"I don't know," I yelled back, and tugged my monitors out of my ears to hear him better. "But surely he was listening, right?"

"Why did he send you out instead of coming himself? He was supposed to—." Race froze, one hand over the monitor in his ear while the other tightened painfully on my elbow. All the blood seemed to drain from his face, and he gaped at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Something happened. A fight. West is hurt."

"Hurt?" I gulped air, my hand on my throat. "How bad is he?"

"I don't know." Race started running and I hobbled after him. "They've called an ambulance."

Off stage we found an excited mass of people. I attempted to shove my way through, with no success. But GeeBee appeared and took my hand, splitting the knot of bystanders like a hot knife on butter. She led me to the center, where several uniformed men and women crowded around a prone body, two kneeling beside him, only his customary dress pants and shoes visible.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but you'll need to stay out back," said one guard, who'd obviously never met GeeBee.

"That's my grandson." She wilted him with a glare. "He's lying on that floor, gravely injured, because someone didn't do his job. Was it you?"

"Uh... no ma'am. I... uh..."

“Right now, his girlfriend needs to be with him, and you’re standing in the way.”

He moved aside, his face bright red.

She thrust me past him and West came into view. My lungs refused to draw in air. I dropped to my knees and bent to brush my lips on his cheek, purple and swollen.

“I’m so sorry.” My tears wet his face as I whispered in his ear. “Please, be okay.”

Shouts rifled through the air. “Get back. Out of the way.”

They lifted his body onto a stretcher and wheeled toward the exit. I followed, hoping to ride in the ambulance. Outside, lights flashed, and reporters fired questions. I found a microphone thrust under my chin, a video camera aimed at me.

“Can you tell us what happened, Ms. Rivers?”

“Was there a riot?”

“Who’s on the stretcher?”

“Who got arrested?”

“Was there a shooting?”

“Is anyone else injured?”

My face was hot as Hades, my eyes full of tears. I had no doubt what I looked like. But it was time to dump my pride.

“The man on that stretcher was West Garrison... the man I love.” I lifted my chin, giving the cameras a full view of my hideous face. “And I hope whoever did this to him sees this Medusa and turns into stone for eternity!”

After that, the questions came so fast I could barely decipher them.

“How long have you and West Garrison been together?”

“Were you cheating on Race Madden?”

“Is West Garrison the man you were kissing in the picture?”

I felt an arm wrap around my shoulder. Race pulled me against his chest, patting my back as I took shuddery breaths. He waved an arm until the crowd silenced.

“For the record, Harmony never cheated on me because Harmony and I never actually dated.”

The crowd erupted with exclamations and questions until Race held up a hand and silenced them again. “But I love Harmony...”

My chest felt like an elephant was sitting on it. Filled with remorse, I pulled back. An apology was all I could offer. “I’m so sorry, Race. I never meant to hurt—”

His finger pressed to my lips. “I love Harmony like a *sister*. Which is what she’ll be when she marries my brother, who they just loaded into the ambulance. So now, if you’ll let Harmony through, she can ride with her *fiancé* to the hospital.”

A hand gripped my arm and propelled me to the ambulance. As I climbed in, I turned to see GeeBee shaking a finger at the paramedic. “Okay, you can go now. And you’d better take good care of my grandson.”



I peeled my eyelids open, wincing at the bright lights. Everything throbbed with pain, especially my face and head. A groan erupted through my parched throat.

“Are you really awake this time?”

Race’s voice. I squinted at him, trying to turn two Races into one. “Where am I?”

His face moved closer, coming into focus. “You answer me first. What’s your name?”

“You know my name.” I probed my throbbing face with ginger fingers, discovering a plethora of bandages on one side. “I hurt too much to play games.”

“I know your name, but do you?”

I answered him, just to shut him up. “West Garrison. Okay? Are you happy? Now, you tell me, where am I and what happened?”

“What day is it?” Race frowned and I wondered if I’d gotten my name wrong.

“Saturday. The last concert is tonight and...” My words lodged in my throat as my memory flooded in. Two thugs with backstage passes, waiting to ambush Harmony. My heart racing, I struggled, trying to sit up despite the tubes and wires connecting me to machines. “Harmony! Is she okay?”

“Keep your voice down.” Race pressed me back to the bed, his hand on my chest. He cocked his head to my left, the

side where a bulky bandage blocked my vision. “She’s right there next to you, finally asleep. Hasn’t left that chair since you got here.”

I cranked my head to the left, ignoring the sear of pain from the mere pressure of the pillow on that side of my face. Slumped in a chair, still wearing her black outfit from the concert, Harmony’s head dipped at an awkward angle, her glossy hair tousled, mascara smeared under her eyes, rosy lips parted in sleep. No woman had ever looked more beautiful.

“She’s okay...” I let out the breath I’d been holding as a tightness I hadn’t recognized relaxed in my chest. Blinking to clear my watery eyes, I swallowed hard. “I thought those two goons were going to... I tried to get the guard’s attention, but he didn’t hear me. And there wasn’t any time... I thought—”

“Hey, bro. It’s okay. I mean, you ended the show at intermission, so we have a bunch of furious ticket-holders.” He pretended to punch me in the arm, though he never made contact. “But that’s okay. We’ll refund the money and take it out of your paycheck.”

I laughed, jarring however many ribs were broken... probably all of them. “Ow! Please don’t make any more jokes.”

“Who’s joking?” he deadpanned. “I mean, I figure you’ll have to work free for a couple of years to pay it off, but I’m patient.”

Despite my efforts, another chuckle escaped. The resulting stabbing pain sobered me. “How long have I been in the hospital, anyway?”

“Twenty-two hours. It’s Sunday night, now.”

“Twenty-two hours? Was I unconscious all that time?”

“No, you’ve been in and out of it, with a severe concussion. Every time you woke up, you were spewing nonsense. You couldn’t remember who anyone was, including yourself.” He lifted his hand to his mouth and yawned. For the first time, I noticed the dark circles under his eyes. “You just

kept asking ‘Where am I?’ over and over and over again. They did a CT scan to look for bleeding in your brain.”

“How did it turn out? Am I going to be okay?”

“Let’s see, how did the doc word it?” Race pursed his lips and rubbed the scruff on his chin. “‘West must have the hardest head in recorded history.’ Of course, I could’ve told him that.”

“You’re giving me grief when I could be dying?” I knew he was teasing, but I flashed the go-jump-in-a-lake crossed fingers at him, for good measure.

“The doc said there was no sign of bleeding in your brain. Other than that, you’ve got a few broken ribs and a lot of bruising. So, it looks like we’re stuck with you for the foreseeable future.” Though he tried to be nonchalant, I heard the slight catch in his voice.

“Thank God for that.”

“That’s for sure,” said Race. “GeeBee had her entire granny prayer team on it.”

Though painful, another round of laughter lifted my spirits, and for a moment, it felt as if everything was going to turn out fine. Then I remembered I’d missed my one opportunity to explain everything to Harmony and sing my song to her. The realization smothered me, a blanket of depression. But now wasn’t the time to be selfish.

“I’m glad Harmony’s okay. That’s all that matters.” I tried to clear the gravel from my throat. “But I guess I screwed up my chance to fix things with her.”

“Yeah, about that...” Race’s gaze flitted to Harmony’s sleeping form and back to me. “I kind of did something a little unusual pertaining to your possible future relationship with Harmony.”

“What are you talking about?”

Race studied the ceiling—it wasn’t a good sign. He always looked down when he had something to confess. When he looked up, it meant whatever he was going to confess was so

bad that he needed to choose his words carefully to soften the blow.

I braced myself for the worst. Had he tried to repeat the explanation I'd rehearsed in front of him, and Harmony had decided the two of us could never be more than friends? It would make sense, in light of the fact that she'd parked herself beside my hospital bed.

"I'm not quite sure how to say this, but..." He hesitated and acid swirled in my empty stomach.

"Just tell me, already."

"Okay." He took a step back, as if I might be able to take a swing at him. "You and Harmony are kind of..."

"Kind of what?"

He grimaced. "Engaged!"



Images of white lace and red roses swirled before my eyes. I was about to step through the double doors in the back of the church in Dry Gulch and lay eyes on my groom-to-be. As I turned the corner, I saw him.

*No! Please, no!*

Waiting for me at the end of the aisle, his expression dispassionate, stood none other than Matt Meyer, a.k.a. What's-His-Name! The wedding march music in the background morphed into a soft-pop version of "You Get What You Deserve." My sisters stood in a row to the left of our ancient pastor, all of them weeping openly.

I froze in the doorway. My father was waiting with his elbow extended.

"We can't do this, Matt," I yelled down the aisle. "You're married to someone else."

No one in attendance reacted to this news, remaining wooden in their pews.

“Hurry up, Harmony, before your face turns all puffy and red.” Matt’s bored voice carried from the front of the tiny church.

“But we’re not in love with each other!”

At this, the audience gasped in unison.

“You can’t have everything, Harmony. Sometimes, you have to settle for what you can get.”

“No! I can’t! I won’t!”

Of their own accord, my feet started moving, carrying me down the aisle against my will. On the end of the front pew, Gramma peered at me with red-rimmed eyes and pointed her finger at me. “Your neck...”

“My neck?”

“Your neck.” She nodded solemnly. “It’s crooked.”

“Oh no! It’s bent!” I tried to straighten the angle, but pain ripped through it as if it were broken. I grabbed the side with my hand. “Ow!”

My eyes popped open to find Gramma’s face only inches away from mine, bright white walls behind her. “Harmony, you’re going to get a crick in your neck sleeping like that.”

Antiseptic smells assaulted my nose, but relief flooded my veins that the horrifying scene hadn’t been reality. I scooted up in my chair, straightening my spine, but wasn’t so lucky with my neck. It appeared to be permanently crooked over to the right side.

“Too late.” April’s grinning face replaced Gramma’s. “I think it’s already cricked.”

GeeBee tsk-tsk-tsked with her tongue, matching the movement of her head. “You boys shouldn’t have let her sleep like that.”

“Hey! I tried my best to make her take a break and go sleep in a normal bed.” Race’s offended voice came from my



left, but I couldn't turn my head to look at him. "She's more stubborn than West."

I was about to defend West when I heard him speak on my right.

"It's not my fault—I was unconscious."

*West is awake! And he sounds normal!*

Without thinking, I swiveled my neck to see him. Or rather, I tried to. Razor-sharp blades jabbed my neck muscle, bringing tears to my eyes. "Aaaahhhh!!!"

"Harmony! Are you okay?" West's concerned tone heaped guilt on me. I wasn't about to complain about a sore neck when he had a concussion and broken bones.

"I'm fine. Really." I slowly turned my entire body to face him, my head still slanted to the side. "It's just a silly crick. It'll go away."

I smiled—which only hurt a little—and licked my lips. His face was a little swollen on the left side, but his smile still made me all warm and melty inside. And evidently he'd been disconnected from the wires and tubes while I'd been sleeping.

"Are you feeling better?"

"I am *now*."

I wondered what he'd meant by that extra emphasis on now but didn't want to ask in front of an audience.

"Harmony..." April's tone was like an overripe apricot. Something heavy fell into my lap. "Here are your marbles. Don't you have something you need to tell West?"

My traitor of a sister stood far enough to the side that I couldn't see her without twisting my entire body around, just out of range of the daggers my eyes were trying to fire at her.

"Out! Out! Everybody out!" Hands clapped together, and a female nurse appeared wearing pink-flowered scrubs. "Everyone needs to go. Except the fiancée. She can stay."

My face prickled with heat. I worried the combination of a red emotional face with a bent neck might truly be worthy of a

horror movie. Maybe, since West was lying down viewing everything sideways, he wouldn't notice the difference.

West hadn't reacted when the nurse called me his fiancée. Race must've already told him about the big miscommunication to the press. I'd been planning to set the record straight once we got to the hospital. But being West's fiancée gave me the advantage of being able to stay in his room. So I'd reluctantly kept up the pretense, and everyone else had contributed as supporting actors.

"I'm his grandmother," GeeBee lifted her chin. "There's no need for me to leave."

"Well, okay. But we're about to do his sponge bath." The nurse's smile was full of sparkle. Guess you had to have a sense of humor to do that job.

"I'm outta here!" Race and April announced in perfect unison, then burst into laughter and sprinted for the door.

"We'll be outside when you're done." Gramma took GeeBee's arm and they exited together.

"Wait for me!" I attempted to stand up, every movement spiking pain in my neck. If I were in the room when West got a sponge bath, even if my eyes were closed, I'd probably faint in my chair.

A giggle exploded from the nurse and she touched my shoulder. "Don't worry, dear. I was only teasing about the sponge bath."

"Oh, thank goodness." West's face glowed the color of strawberries.

"I just need to look at how you're healing."

She pulled the sheet down to his waist, and I couldn't look away. To be honest, I didn't try very hard. He was fit, with ripped muscles, but I gasped in horror at the bruises.

"Sorry to make you do this," said the nurse, "but I need you to lie on your left side."

Wincing, he rolled toward me, obviously trying to mask his pain. The nurse lifted a bandage on his back.

“Okay, these stitches look good so far. The splinters caused some tearing, so some of it will have to grow together.” She opened a packet and placed a new strip of gauze. “But don’t worry, I bet your fiancée won’t mind your scars a bit.”

“What happened to your back?” I asked, chewing my lip.

“When I fell, I landed on my guitar. It broke and a piece jammed into my back.” His mouth pressed in a firm, straight line.

“Oh no! Your Martin?” Instinctively, I knew he was more upset about his guitar than his back. He’d been through so much pain already, and now he’d lost his beloved guitar, too. All because he’d been trying to protect me.

“It’s alright. Just a guitar.” He held his right hand out, knuckles swollen and purple. “I can’t play right now, anyway.”

I felt his sorrow and mourned with him. “They arrested the guys who did this to you.”

It wasn’t much comfort, but it was all I could offer.

“I know.” He grimaced as the nurse pressed on his back. “Race said they were high on something. The police had to take them down with tasers. Turns out those two had worked at the arena and knew a back way in. They led about twenty fans inside to keep the guards distracted and snatched a couple of their backstage passes.”

“I don’t even know how to thank you for what you did.” My eyes stung, and I squeezed them shut. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Eh-hem.”

I jumped when the nurse cleared her throat. I’d almost forgotten she was there.

“We’re all done for now, and it looks like the doctor’s going to release you soon.” She helped West get repositioned on his back. “But I’m going to keep the rest of your family out for a bit.”

“Good luck with that,” said West. “You don’t know my grandmother. She’s not easily deterred.”

“I wouldn’t worry about her.” The nurse smiled. “That earlier bit was all an act, you know. She’s the one who told me you two needed some privacy.”

Both our mouths were still hanging open when she packed up her stuff and closed the door behind her.



“Harmony, I need to tell you something...” My mouth seemed to be filled with glue. “I had a really great speech—I’d rehearsed it about a zillion times—but I can’t remember a word of it. So—”

“I need to go first, anyway.” Her ribs expanded with a mammoth breath. “I lied.”

She scrunched her face like she was waiting for a balloon to explode. Or maybe her neck was just hurting.

Thud—a hunk of concrete clunked into the bottom of my stomach.

*She lied.*

I was afraid to ask what about. Most likely she’d lied about being attracted to me in the first place. After all, she was one of those people who would bend over backwards to avoid hurting someone’s feelings.

“I’m sure you had a good reason.”

“I can’t move my head, but if I could, I’d shake it to say no.” She chewed on her lip, looking adorable, despite her confession. “I lied to everyone, including you. I even lied to myself.”

“Listen, no one’s perfect. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“But you need to know the truth.” She blew a piece of hair off her face, her head still tilted at a strange angle. “Morris

Records rejected me.”

“You told me about that. You told me—”

“I told you the second time they offered me a deal, but I lied.” She was talking fast, like she was trying to do it all in one breath. “They rejected me twice and I was too ashamed to tell anyone.”

I considered what she was telling me, but it didn’t seem to warrant this amount of drama. I thought better of mentioning that she might be slightly overdramatic.

“I’ve lied before. Got my ears twisted for it. We all make mistakes, Harmony.”

“Don’t you get it? The Harmony you liked, if you ever actually liked me, wasn’t the real me. I’m not confident and self-assured. I’m not fearless and determined. It was all an act.”

Gritting through the pain, I rolled onto my left side to face her again. She leaned forward in her chair. With her head tilted, we were almost looking eye to eye.

“First, let’s make one thing clear...” I barely stopped myself from telling her I loved her. That could’ve scared her off. “I like you. I actually like you a lot.”

“But it’s not me you like.” Her chin trembled and she tucked her lower lip between her teeth.

I groaned at the temptation to kiss those luscious lips, to claim them as mine. But for the fact I wasn’t mobile, I would’ve done it.

“It *is* you I like.” I reached my swollen fingers out to caress her cheek, flushed a rosy pink. “The Harmony I like is the one who’s terribly clumsy every time she gets nervous. The one who jumps at the chance to help a guy clean up his reputation, risking her own to do it. The Harmony who believed in my brother when no one else did. When I should’ve been the one to believe in him. The woman who destroyed an entire pet store to escape two tiny mice. The Harmony who’s always ready to take the blame for something

that's not her fault because her heart is about three times bigger than any normal person's."

"No, no, no." She shook her head and then flinched, her hand rising to grasp the side of her neck. "You can't put me up on a pedestal, West. I'll tumble right off. Just talk to my sisters, my grandma, my dad. They'll set the record straight. I'm not special. I'm just plain old Harmony. The girl who was ready to give up and marry a man she didn't love so she'd never risk failure again. The girl who ran away a week ago and pretended to reject you, just so you wouldn't get a chance to reject me."

"But I wouldn't have rejected you."

Her clear green eyes glistened with unshed tears, and I ached with the need to hold her.

"You would've rejected me. Eventually."

My heart raced.

*I'm losing her! She's so convinced she isn't worthy of love that she won't believe me.*

I had to tell her the truth.

"Harmony, I haven't been completely honest. You see, I lied to you, too... even just now."

"About what?" She looked up through wet lashes, her face flushed.

"I don't *like* you, Harmony... I—"

"It's okay. You don't have to explain."

"But I'm trying to tell you—"

"I'm not surprised. Not really. But I need to say something. Right now. It's like a total pride cleansing." Her words gushed out like an open fire hydrant. "I love you, West. I fell for you a long time ago. I didn't want to admit it, because it's one more thing I've failed at. But after all you've done, you deserve to know."

*Harmony loves me! I just need to tell her I love her back.*

“Harmony—”

“Yes, I’ve failed. Failed at everything I’ve ever tried. But at least I’m being honest. And listen West, you’re going to make some woman really happy someday, because you’re an amazing guy.”

“Harmony—” I tried waving my hand, but she didn’t slow down even a smidgeon.

“I realize you were just being nice to me, with the kissing and all. I’m not accusing you of leading me on or anything. Whew! It feels good to get all this out in the open—”

“Stop!” I groaned as I forced my body into a sitting position and swung my legs to hang off the side of the bed.

“West, what are you doing?”

Harmony sprang up, still stiff-necked, and put a hand on my arm, presumably to steady me. But the moment her soft fingers touched my skin, a bolt of electricity zoomed up my arm. Pain momentarily forgotten, I nestled a hand on either side of her face and tilted my head to match hers. Her crystal green eyes went wide.

“You want to know what I’m doing?” Our lips mere inches apart, I whispered an answer. “I’m making you be quiet long enough for me to finish a sentence, so I can tell you this...”

I tracked my fingers down below her jawline to the madly pulsing blood vessel in her neck. “I love you, Harmony Grace MacIlheron Rivers. From the moment you walked into my office—muddy, messy, and dripping adorableness—I wanted you for my own. I couldn’t get you out of my mind, even when I tried. I love all of you, exactly the way you are—from the top of your red head to the tip of your cute toes.”

“You mean it?” She moistened her lips, driving me mad with the desire to taste them again.

“I do.” My hungry eyes were glued to her sweet mouth. “And you know what I’ve been dying to do, ever since we both woke up?”

“What?” Her voice was a whisper.



“This.” I pressed my lips to hers. At first tender. Then urgent. Seeking. My hands tangled in her silky red hair as I deepened the kiss, worshiping her soft lips with every fiber of my being. The warmth that spread through my body obliterated all the aches and pains. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and pulled her close, savoring her sweet smell and the perfect way she fit against my chest.

When she drew away, my arms felt strangely empty.

“I think my crick is better.” Her eyes went wide with wonder as her fingers probed her neck. “Guess that kiss healed it.”

“If that’s so, there are a lot of places I’d like you to kiss right now.”

As a blush crept up her neck, I realized my accidental insinuation. I laughed, and my ribs reminded me they were broken.

“Ow!” I clamped my arm against my side. “I didn’t mean it that way. But it does bring up a point.”

“What point?”

“That I’d like to be able to kiss you all over... soon, and for the rest of our lives.”

“Are you saying you want to get married?” Her blush grew more intense, almost matching the color of her hair.

“It seems we’re engaged already.” Catching her gaze and holding it, I found her hand and lifted it to my mouth, pressing a kiss to her fingertips. Her blood pulsed visibly in her neck, and my heart matched its pace. “If you’re willing, I’d like to make it official as soon as possible.”

I squeezed her hand, anxiously waiting for her answer.

“You think so now, but you might change your mind if you see my face when my emotions run wild.” She ripped her hand away and turned her back to me, humming “Home on the Range” at a frantic pace.

I chuckled, then paid for it with another sharp pain in the ribs. “Turn around and come close. I want to see this scary

face of yours.”

Her shoulders slumped and the humming stopped. “I might as well. This isn’t working, anyway.” She slowly rotated. As her face came into view, I saw it was indeed a bit splotchy and red, her nose rather bright, her upper and lower eyelids a bit swollen.

“Harmony.” I took both her hands in mine. “Nothing I see makes you one bit less beautiful in my eyes. In fact, being able to see the effect I can have on your emotions is pretty awesome in my book.”

“You mean that?” Her eyes glistened, bright and hopeful.

“I mean it with all my heart.” I tugged her to me and claimed her lips with a tender kiss I hoped would show how much I loved her.

As our lips parted, a shy smile flitted onto her face. “I think I finally believe you.”

“You should, because I understand it now—the reason you rocked my boat from the moment you stepped through my door.” I gazed into her eyes, marveling that this amazing woman cared for me. “My whole life I’ve been trying to keep everyone around me happy. And I’ve kept a thousand plates spinning to do it. But for the first time, I’ve found someone who does that for me. And you do it, without even trying. It’s just knowing you love me.”

“If that’s all it takes to make you happy, you should be ecstatic because I love you like crazy.” Her fingers trailed down my arms until they reached mine and interlaced. “Like my life has just been a bunch of random words. Then you showed up and gave them rhyme and reason and added a beautiful melody.”

I ached to hold her. “Hang on. I have to stand up.”

Edging forward, I slid to my feet, so engrossed in the moment I barely noticed my sore ribs. She fell against me, her soft form molding to me. I loved the way she felt in my arms.

Harmony was mine. Nothing else mattered.

I swayed with her, crooning softly.

*“You’re the one I want*

*Everything I need*

*Open up my eyes*

*You are all I see”*

She joined with me, her velvety voice blending flawlessly with mine.

*“You’re my everything*

*Ba-by... you’re my everything”*

We continued to move together in a silent dance. The world and everyone else in it, along with all its problems, faded into nothingness.

“Harmony?”

“Hmmm?” she answered in a dreamy tone.

“Let’s make beautiful music together... for the rest of our lives.”

“I don’t think that’s long enough.”

I pressed a kiss to her forehead, then trailed my lips down to her ear, enjoying her shivery response.

“How about forever?” I whispered.

“Yes.” Her lips curved into a lazy smile, her eyelids at half-mast. “Forever and a day.”

# EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER



**I**n my first solitary moment since I'd woken up that morning, I stood to the side and surveyed the LA hotel ballroom, teeming with happy guests. Adorned with flowers of white and soft coral, the tablecloths varied in shades of green, from deep jade to mint.

West and I had already performed together at the reception, singing our first duet as a married couple. I felt his worried gaze from the stage where he was currently singing with Race, and sent him a smile of reassurance.

I spied April, hovering around the food tables, and moved toward her.

"The forks look fine." I linked my arm around April's and dragged her away from the dessert table. "Come dance with us."

"But I wanted them arranged in a fan shape." She stumbled along sideways, still waving to attract the attention of the wait staff. "It was on the diagram. Why can't anyone follow simple instructions?"

"A better question might be, who has time to read a 500-page document detailing how each table should look?"

"It was only ninety-one pages." Her lower lip protruded.

"Let it go, April. You've done your part. Everything will be fine, even if it's not perfect." I pointed at the stage. "But right now, Dad is having the time of his life up there, and you're missing it."

“You should let me bustle your dress.” She tugged me to a stop and gathered the yards of satin and lace on the back of the wedding dress. She talked as she worked. “My idea was brilliant, wasn’t it, having Dad play and sing with the band?”

“I have to admit, his entire attitude about rock musicians has changed since he found out he was going to be a part of it. And he got to bond with West, practicing their set.”

West and Dad had joined with Race and the Hatters to perform several songs, after which the DJ would take over with recorded music.

“There’s so much fabric in this dress, your bustle is the size of Texas.”

“Are you saying I have a big butt?”

“I’m saying this bustle is so big you’d better watch where you swing that thing. But if these snaps hold, you’ll be able to dance without tripping.” She straightened, grinning. “At least, I hope so.”

I playfully stuck out my tongue. “Okay, I admit I was worried I’d get tangled and fall on my face going down the aisle.”

“I had you covered for that.” April guided us toward the mass of guests dancing to the blaring music. “I coached Dad on holding you up if you lost your balance. We practiced for days.”

“No wonder he was cutting off my circulation.” I gingerly fingered my right forearm. “I think I’m bruised.”

As we approached the dance floor, April held us back. “Camille says Dad has been playing his guitar morning, noon, and night. He’s happy as a clam.”

“I think his sudden happiness may have more to do with being married to Camille than playing the guitar.” I spotted her, standing at the edge of the stage, beaming up at my dad like a doting fan watching a rockstar.

The two had only dated for a month before tying the knot. Discovering our straitlaced father had eloped to Vegas with his

girlfriend had been a shocker. But his new relaxed and cheerful attitude was a welcome relief.

“And we have the grandmothers to thank for that.” Laughing, April nodded to the center of the dance floor where the crowd had parted around the grannies, demonstrating a dance resembling a mix of the Charleston and the Bunny Hop. Gramma was wearing a long, flowing dress in a cool shade of green, to match the wedding theme. GeeBee had opted for an almost-black jade, with hot-pink accents and accessories. “I just hope they’ll be satisfied with claiming credit for dad’s wedding and yours. I don’t want them to set their sights on me as their next victim.”

“They wouldn’t do that.” The minute I said the words, I doubted them. “Although I did hear GeeBee hinting that you should stay here in LA to jumpstart your career. I guess she could have ulterior motives.”

“GeeBee wants Race to hire me to redecorate his apartment. What if she’s trying to get us together?”

“Since when do you do decorating? Haven’t you always wanted to be a wedding planner?”

“I decided to switch. Not that I don’t love planning weddings—the colors, the flowers, the decorations. But I hate the loss of control with the final product.” She glanced over her shoulder at the dessert table and shuddered. “They piled those forks in a jumble. It’s not even sanitary.”

“I can see how decorating would be a better career choice for someone who always wants everything exactly her way.” I winked to assure her I was teasing.

“It doesn’t have to be my way. It just has to be the right way, and it so happens that those ways always coincide.”

“That’s my April.” Chuckling, I slipped my arm around her waist. “Don’t ever change.”

“Not likely.”

“That’s the truth.”

Her arm went around my waist, and we tilted the sides of our heads together. A camera flash caught my attention—I was glad the photographer had caught our sweet, sisterly moment.

“If Race offers you the job, you should take it.” I said. “Even if the grandmas were trying to match you two up, it would never work.”

“I know it wouldn’t.” April’s mouth went firm. “I decided a long time ago I’m destined to be single, and I like it that way. I love living alone. I can keep everything just so, and I don’t have to explain to a roommate why they’re wrong.”

“There’s another reason you and Race aren’t even a possibility.” With a quick glance around us, I shuffled to a deserted table and sat down with her, leaning my head close to hers. “Strictly between us, Race is in love with a woman from his past. It’s been three years, and he’s still pining for her. I don’t think there’s any chance he’ll ever love anyone else.”

Her hazel eyes sparkled, her mouth splitting in a toothy grin. “Really? What do you know about her? Is she single? Do you know why they broke up?”

“Down, April! I didn’t tell you that to give you ammunition.”

“Not ammunition—it’s information. Information I need if I’m going to help Race win his true love back.” She gnawed on her lower lip. “I bet I could get GeeBee in on it. We could strike a bargain. I’ll help her get Race to the altar if she agrees to leave me alone.”

I raised my hand in an oath. “Let me state for the record I think this is a bad idea.”

April leaned back in her chair and folded her arms, her gaze fixed on Race, who had finished his song and was descending the steps to join the guests on the dance floor.

“We’ll see...” She smirked. “I could be wrong. There’s a first time for everything.”





THE MUSIC SLOWED and West tugged me against him, his electricity-producing hands moving up and down my back. I nuzzled against his chest, reveling in his heady, masculine scent.

“I have news for you,” he murmured. “I saved it to tell you as a wedding present.”

“What?” I tilted my head up to look into his eyes. “Tell me—you know I hate waiting.”

“Blaine called me yesterday. We got our best offer yet for a recording contract.”

“That’s amazing.” I hopped up and down on my feet, which were now clad in soft ballet-type slippers. “You totally deserve it. I’m so proud of you.”

As we continued to sway in time to the music, I contemplated how my attitude had changed. I no longer felt that enormous pressure to make my singing career a success, but I wanted it for West. Offers had been pouring in since he and Race had recorded West’s song together and it had hit number one on the charts.

“We don’t have to sign if you don’t want to.” His handsome face creased with concern.

“If it’s a great offer, why wouldn’t we?”

He cringed. “It’s with Morris Records.”

“You’re willing to blow off a huge deal with Morris Records because you’re afraid it will hurt my pride?”

“Absolutely.” Beneath my hands, his broad, tux-clad shoulders stiffened. “You’re more important than any recording contract.”

My heart ached, knowing he would give up his happiness simply to protect me from getting my feelings hurt.

Gazing into his adoring eyes, I held his face between my hands. “I want you to take the best deal you can. I have nothing against Morris Records. They’re an amazing company.”

“That’s good, because—”

“But I want you to know I’ve grown past that kind of immature attitude, now. Knowing you love me is enough. I can handle success or failure or whatever life brings, as long as you’re by my side.”

He must’ve liked what I said, because he kissed me. “I love you so much, Mrs. Garrison.”

“I love you, too, Mr. Garrison. And I’m going to love being your wife, whether you’re a singing star, a manager, or a... a bank clerk.”

“A bank clerk?”

“I was trying to think of something boring besides being an accountant, since I didn’t want to bring up you-know-who.”

“Don’t you call him What’s-His-Name?”

“Shhh!” I put a finger to his lips. “His name gives me nightmares. Literally. And actually. I had a terrifying dream about him.”

“That’s never happening again.” He slid his lips down to my neck, exploding lights underneath my eyelids. “I’m driving that man out of my wife’s dreams forever.”

Delightful dynamite exploded inside my brain. “I think that may have done it,” I said, breathlessly.

He chuckled, tightening his arms around me. “But I wasn’t quite finished with my news.”

“There’s more, besides your contract?”

“One more thing, and it’s even better than the first one. Want to guess?”

He knew the curiosity was killing me. What could it be? He’d talked about trying to buy a house, but they were crazy-expensive in and around LA. That couldn’t be it...

“I give up. What is it?”

“It’s about Morris Records... their offer includes you, too.”

My pulse jumped to the speed of light. “Me?”

He nodded. “The videos of you singing that duet with Race are still hot on social media. Morris wants us to sing a duet on the album and release it as a single. If it does well, you’re going to get your own recording contract.”

I squealed. “That would be incredible!”

He tightened his arms around me and lifted my feet from the floor, twirling us in a tight circle until I was dizzy.

Giggling and tipsy when he set me down, I stumbled against him. Our legs tangled, and down we went, a mass of arms and legs and billowing satin. Bracing me safely on top of him, he hit the floor with a grunt.

“West! I’m so sorry! Are you okay?”

Excited voices shouted around us, but the expansive folds of the wedding dress obscured our faces. Only the lack of air on my legs assured me my bottom was covered.

“I’m fine.” A strained chuckle escaped his lips. “But I wish I’d worn my old football pads over my tux.”

“April wouldn’t have let you. Well, maybe if she’d painted them to match the color scheme.”

“Harmony,” he whispered.

“Yes?” I leaned my ear close to hear him.

“You’re on my diaphragm.”

“Oh! Sorry.” I scrambled off, and bystanders dug through mounds of wedding dress to help us to our feet.

“That was definitely not on the schedule.” April drummed her fingers on her arm in mock consternation. “You’ve thrown off the entire timeline.”

“I suppose you’d specified a time for us to fall?” I asked sarcastically.

“Of course. When you run out together through a rain of bird seed. That’s why I have you running across the grass

instead of a sidewalk.” She frowned at my dress. “You ripped your bustle off. I’ll go find some safety pins.”

Race brushed the dust off West’s back with his hand, speaking in a low tone. “Bro, did it occur to you when you got a wife, you’d also get three sisters?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” West said.

“I think it’s going to be a challenge dealing with all those women.” Race darted his eyes toward April, her cinnamon curls dancing as she ran. “Especially that one.”

“April’s easy to get along with,” I said. “Just do exactly what she wants.”

“That would never work for me.” Race shook his head. “I prefer women to be... less pushy.”

“You mean, submissive?” I asked.

“I didn’t say that.” He chewed his lip as if he were taking my question seriously. “Maybe just less rigid. In my business, you’ve got to be flexible.”

“Is that why you spend twelve hours re-recording one song track until it’s absolutely perfect?” West asked. “Your way of being flexible?”

Race mumbled something unintelligible and stomped toward the dessert table.

With her camera aimed toward us, the photographer motioned for us to kiss. West obliged, dipping me low across his leg for drama.

Laughing as he lifted me up, I grabbed his face and stole another kiss, applying a technique I’d never tried. His passionate response weakened my legs—only the strength of his arms kept me upright.

“Harmony, you’re playing with fire.”

“That was only number seventeen,” I murmured into his lips. “Tonight, I’m going to try number twenty-one.”

West’s growl rumbled in his chest. “This reception had better end soon so I can take you out of here.”

“No need to rush,” I said nonchalantly, though he could probably feel my heart pounding against him. “We have the rest of our lives.”

His mouth slanted across mine, his lips branding with searing heat. Claiming. Ravishing.

“You’re mine,” he said. “And I’m yours. I love you, no matter what happens. Whether we’re dancing with happiness or stumbling through a storm. I’ll always be there, at your side, wherever you go.”

Joy swelled my heart until I could barely breathe.

“From now on, I’m only going in one direction... West.”



Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed West and Harmony’s story. Want to know what happens to Race? Will April help him win back his ex? Or does GeeBee have a surprise up her sleeve?

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### Chapter One (April)

I stared at the massive wooden door, sucking air deep into my lungs hoping to calm my nerves. On the other side of that door waited Race Madden. *The* Race Madden. Famous rockstar and heartthrob. The man whose decision could determine my future.

A “yes” from his lips would be the opportunity of a lifetime. But I needed him to let me redesign his condo, and also to let *Inside Stars Magazine* cover the transformation.

That kind of publicity would launch my career into the stratosphere.

Ordinarily, I was confident. But this situation was sticky for a number of reasons; the biggest being his grandmother GeeBee. I didn't trust her. Though she'd sworn—with an innocent expression—she wasn't attempting to make a match between Race and me. In fact, I didn't quite trust either of our sly grannies, since they'd worked together under the radar to get Race's brother and my sister together.

My nerves weren't getting any calmer as I stood in the hallway fretting, so I rang the doorbell before I lost my courage. I smoothed a hand over my hair to ensure my unruly tresses were still tucked into the tight, schoolmarm bun.

My hairstyle was part of the plan. I'd come prepared to set Race's mind at ease. For this purpose, I'd purchased a prim brown skirt and blazer, with a modest white blouse. I'd abandoned my customary contacts for glasses. I'd even substituted a plain brown leather briefcase for my usual cheery blue one.

My only concession to makeup had been a dab to cover up an annoying blemish that had popped up on my forehead. I hadn't been surprised to discover it when I'd climbed out of bed that morning. One ugly red spot always arrived when I had an important occasion. I could count on it—*bam!* Every single time. *Who needs text reminders when you have event-zits?*

Appearing conservative and professional had been my Gramma's idea, and I thought it was a great one. Looking as I did, Race couldn't possibly think I was interested in anything beyond the most platonic, business relationship.

*And I'm not. Really. I mean it!*

Sure, Race Madden was hot enough to boil water. Yes, his eyes were endless pools of dark chocolate any girl would happily drown in. And his muscles in all those magazine images? Those were real, not photoshopped—I could totally see them rippling under his shirt when he was dancing at our

siblings' wedding. Okay, okay... I admit I've had a tiny little crush on him ever since he first came on the music scene.

But the fact that looking at him made my mouth water didn't mean he was my type. I wasn't into rockstars. Unlike Harmony, the oldest of my three sisters, I hated spotlights and couldn't sing in tune if you held a gun to my head.

I needed a nice quiet guy who watched documentaries about the ocean and liked discussing books. Pretty much the opposite of Race Madden. And with all my quirks, if I ever found the perfect guy, he'd probably go running for the hills, anyway. That's why I'd committed to remaining single. I was way too independent and ambitious to ever get married.

Wondering if the doorbell wasn't working, I pressed the button again, then glanced behind me at the mirrored hallway wall.

*Why are my thighs showing?*

The back of my skirt was hiked up! No wonder people had been gaping at me in the lobby. What's the matter with human beings? Couldn't one of them (at least one of the women) have discreetly whispered in my ear that the back of my skirt was so high you could almost see my underwear? Not that I would ever say such a thing to a stranger. Maybe they were all introverts like me.

I dropped my briefcase on the floor and frantically tugged at the skirt, feeling it pop out of my underwear elastic. At least I'd discovered it before I mooned my only client.

The door flung open and Race stood in the opening, wide-eyed. His hair seemed tussled, his breathing labored. If it hadn't been for the lipstick on his cheek, I'd have thought he'd been working out.

"April?" He blinked and stared. "Is that you?"

I snapped to attention, contorting to smooth the back of my skirt. "Of course, it's me. We have an appointment, but I can come back later if you're busy."

"No, no! Come in!" His arm shot out, his hand grasping my elbow. I barely managed to retrieve my briefcase as he

dragged me through the door. “I’m glad you came early.”

“Only by five minutes.”

“I wish you’d come even earlier,” he murmured into my ear. “Do me a favor. Please go along with—”

“Raa-aace!” a plaintive female voice called out.

“Who’s that?” I asked, my feet cementing themselves to his white tiled floor.

“A woman who won’t take no for an answer,” he whispered. “Please, April. Whatever I say, just roll with it. I’ll make it up to—”

“Raa-aace! Aren’t you taking me to dinner?”

The woman who rounded the corner could have stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine, so flawless were her facial features. I was proud for only being slightly jealous of her perfect nose, comforting myself with the idea that it might have been surgically altered. Likewise, her cleavage was way too perky to be real, judging from the vast amount revealed by the deep V of her top.

I could hear my Gramma’s voice in my head telling me I shouldn’t be “catty,” and immediately felt guilty. In a desperate attempt to make up for it, I called out, “I like your fingernails.” I couldn’t see much except that they were long and painted, so I thought it was a safe bet for a compliment.

Her eyes flitted toward me, performing a quick top to bottom evaluation, lingering where Race’s hand still grasped my elbow, then rolled, obviously dismissing me as a waste of time. “Race, I’m hungry.”

“Daphne...” Impatience edged Race’s tone. “For the last hour, I’ve been telling you we’re not going out again.”

“You can’t mean that.” Daphne pushed out a pouty lower lip and fluttered long dark lashes that made me painfully aware of my makeup-less state. Without mascara, my reddish blonde eyelashes practically disappeared.

“It’s time for you to go, Daphne. As you can see, I have another guest.”



“Don’t tell me this is your new girlfriend.” Her lip curled as she coughed out a fake laugh.

I would’ve been insulted by her comment if I hadn’t found the idea just as ridiculous. “We’re not—”

“We’re not official, yet.” Race’s hand gripped my shoulder and pulled me to his side. “But yes, April is my girlfriend.”

My face burned and I kept my gaze on the floor. Then my traitorous body began to tremble, probably from pure embarrassment. Or maybe because it liked the way his muscular arm pressed me against him. Whatever the reason, my shaking muscles and I were going to have a long talk later.

Race must’ve noticed because his hand moved up and down my arm in a way he probably meant to be soothing, but only made me more aware of him. This was what happened when you had a five-year moratorium on dating. I hadn’t been depriving myself. I’d simply been too busy with my career to waste time on messy relationships.

I wasn’t too concerned about my attraction to Race. It had absolutely nothing to do with emotions; it was purely physical. I’ve always been very pragmatic about these things.

“You can’t throw away everything we had together.” Daphne tossed her arm in dramatic fashion.

It finally occurred to me the only way to get this woman to leave was to convince her Race and I were dating. My briefcase slipped from my fingers and clunked to the floor, and I wrapped both arms around his waist.

“Race...” I nuzzled against him, my cheek rubbing his shirt. He seemed even taller than I remembered. And I definitely didn’t remember him smelling this good... like fresh air with a little spice. “Can’t we get your doorman to throw her out?”

He stiffened at first. Then he must’ve caught on, because his hands moved to caress my back in such a convincing manner that my heart thudded against my ribs. If he felt it beating against him, I could only hope he’d assume I was nervous, rather than responding to his touch.

“That’s a good idea, April.” He shifted, maneuvering his cell phone from his pocket.

“That won’t be necessary.” Daphne tossed her shiny hair over her shoulder with a huff as she marched to the door. She turned back and shot me a disdainful glare. “Let me know when you get tired of this jailbait and want a real woman.”

That’s what I got for not wearing makeup. These stupid freckles made me look younger than my twenty-nine years.

As the door slammed, Race jumped about a mile away from me, his expression like he’d stepped on a rattlesnake.

“Don’t worry.” I bent to pick up my briefcase. “I’m over the age of eighteen.”

“I know that.” He strode to the door and turned the deadbolt. Facing me, his brows drew down. “But I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about what happened a few seconds ago.”

“The wrong idea?” Did he think I would judge him? I could clearly see Daphne was the obsessive type, so I understood why he’d been so desperate to get rid of her.

“You know that was all an act, right? It would never work between us. I don’t want you to think I actually want to date you.”

He might as well have slapped me in the face. I didn’t want to date him, either, but I would never have told him so in such a condescending tone.

“That’s not what I thought.” Anger churned in my head.

“No offense. You’re just not my type, you know?”

He sagged against the door and shoved a hand through his hair, giving it the carelessly messy, rockstar look that I’d always found incredibly attractive until that moment.

“Simply out of curiosity…” My jaw was clenched so tightly I could hardly speak. “What makes me not your type? The fact that I possess a brain? Or the fact that I’m not fifty percent silicone?”

Keep reading Carry On Wayward Son!

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