

NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELANIE
SHAWN

because
of you



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of you

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BECAUSE OF YOU

MELANIE SHAWN

Because of You
by
Melanie Shawn

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THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE HAPPIEST DAY OF AVERY STONE'S LIFE, BUT she felt anything but happy. Her feet weren't cold; they were frozen, solid pieces of ice.

"I need a sign," Avery whispered as she closed her eyes and wrapped her fingers around the locket that hung from her neck, which held in it a picture of her grandparents on their wedding day. "I want to do the right thing, Gammy. I just don't know what that is."

Today, more than most days, she missed her Gammy. Her grandmother had been the only constant in her life until she passed away when Avery was ten. After that, she moved between distant relatives' houses. Spending a few months, sometimes a year, on a couch or sharing a room with a second cousin.

Her mother, Blanche Bardot, was a background singer who had toured with some of the biggest names in country and pop music. She dedicated her entire life to her true love, music, which was amazing, but hadn't left much time or room in her life to raise a daughter. Avery's father, Arthur Stone, was someone her mom had a brief, passionate affair with while she was on a European tour.

Avery never met the man whose last name she shared. So today, the "man" walking her down the aisle would be her four-and-a-half-year-old son Jacob. She supposed it was fitting since today was only about him. Jacob deserved the family unit that Avery never had. Sure, it had taken her nearly five years to make it to this day. But she hadn't planned on getting pregnant. That discovery had come as quite a shock to her.

Avery's stomach rolled with uneasiness as she opened her eyes and saw her reflection. She saw nothing but doubt swimming in the pools of her blue eyes. The woman staring back at her thought there was a chance she was about to make the biggest mistake of her life.

Behind her, hanging on the door of the hotel room, was a beautiful ivory lace and satin Oscar de la Renta wedding dress. The couture gown had been tailored to fit her curves like a glove. The venue was ready. There were over two hundred guests arriving to celebrate the union of two people who Avery was certain weren't in love with each other.

I can do this, she thought to herself. *This is what I've always wanted.*

Avery's childhood was not what could be classified as traditional. She'd never had a sense of home or stability. Because of that, she promised herself that if she ever had children, she would give them what she'd never had. A family. She hadn't planned it to be this way with this man, but that was how her life had turned out.

Five years ago, she'd gone to the doctor because she'd been having headaches, which she thought were related to stress, and ended up leaving with prenatal vitamins. Leave it to her to have the most uncommon symptom of pregnancy. It had been a shock, to say the least, considering she'd *never* had unprotected sex. Birth control had been a high priority for her. But she found out the hard way that no birth control was one hundred percent effective. Jacob was a result of the one percent that wasn't.

In the past ten years, she'd only been with two men. One was Jacob's father, Jude, the man she was supposed to marry in twelve hours. The other was Keaton Savage, a man she'd shared a whirlwind, two-week relationship with five years ago. A man who she hadn't been in contact with since she'd sat on the exam table and found out she was eight weeks pregnant five years ago. A man who she hadn't stopped thinking about, dreaming about, wondering about in all of those years. A man who, in her weakest, saddest, loneliest, and most selfish moments, she'd wished had been the father of her child.

She knew that made her an awful person. She knew that wasn't fair to Jude. She didn't even like to admit those thoughts to herself. But at this moment, on the precipice of such a life-altering day, she was taking a fearless inventory, and she was not proud to admit that it was not painting her in the most favorable light.

Her phone buzzed, interrupting her internal panic attack, aka breakdown.

Assuming it was the alarm she'd set, which ultimately she hadn't needed because she hadn't been able to sleep a wink, she picked up her phone to silence it when she saw it was a CNN news notification. She clicked on the message, and the headline that she saw sent a rush of emotion coursing through her.

MMA World Champion Keaton Savage to Join the Cast of the Rebooted Reality Dating Show *Fairytale Love* Filming in His Hometown of Whisper Lake

Avery's heart and stomach both sank like the Titanic, slowly and painfully, as she scrolled down the page and saw the photos they'd used for the article. The first was a picture she'd seen a thousand times. It was a shot of him winning his third consecutive and final MMA world champion title. Keaton stood in the cage, shirtless, with his tattooed, chiseled arms in the air.

Those arms had cradled her. They'd made her feel more protected and safer than she'd ever felt. They'd made her feel like she was finally home.

Was this her sign?

Was this Gammy's, or the Universe's, or God's way of telling her not to go through with this today?

Or was this just a coincidence?

The Google alert was only set up on her phone because the producer of *Fairytale Love*, Sabrina Denton, was her best friend and the show had shot the first season at a property she owned.

Six years ago, she'd found out that her estranged father had passed away and left her Stone Castle, which had been in his family for generations. Her first thought was that it had to be in the UK, but to her surprise, it was actually located in a small town in the Midwest, Whisper Lake, Illinois.

In a series of fortuitous events, Sabrina had been looking for a location to film the reality show she'd gotten greenlit, and the property turned out to be a perfect fit. They filmed *Fairytale Love* at Stone Castle five years ago and were about to film its second season starting next week. And now, it seemed, in a cruel twist of fate, the man who she'd pined over and secretly loved was apparently going to be a contestant on the reality TV show. She'd thought he was engaged to his childhood sweetheart, so this news was a shock.

As she scrolled down, reading the article, there were more pictures. Her heart swelled and broke upon seeing his light whiskey eyes, his square jaw, and his deep dimples.

Suddenly, all the cloudy doubts she'd had and all the uncertain fogginess

in her brain cleared. She knew she could not do this.

How could she marry one man when she still loved another?

No. She shook her head and tried to ignore the flashing warning signs going off in her brain. She needed to suck it up. Jacob deserved a family.

Marriage didn't have to be fireworks, friendship, and fun. Marriage was an arrangement. At least it had been for thousands of years before romantic love was brought into the equation. And look how well that had worked out. Over fifty percent of marriages ended in divorce.

And even if it was based on love, she did love Jude as a person. She respected and admired his talents for running a business, and he had a charisma and appeal that could not be denied. He walked into a room, and people took notice. They gravitated toward him. So what if they rarely saw each other and their sex life was nonexistent? People had bigger problems than that.

Taking a deep breath, she told herself this was the right thing.

So why did it feel so wrong? Why did she think that if she walked down the aisle today, it would be the biggest mistake of her life?

She glanced over at Jacob, who was lying in bed beside her mom. The three of them had shared the room the night before the wedding under the guise of keeping the tradition of the groom not seeing the bride, but the truth was, Avery hadn't wanted to share the suite with her fiancé.

If she didn't even want to spend the night before her wedding with her groom, why would she sign up for a lifetime of that?

"I can't do it," she whispered under her breath as she gripped the locket.

Emotion welled in her eyes as she watched her little boy sleep soundly. His sandy brown hair fell over his forehead, and his dark lashes rested on his round cheeks. He was the picture of innocence. Nothing had come into his world and shattered it yet. A single tear slid down her cheek as she realized that was exactly what she was going to do.

As much as she wanted Jacob to have a happy family, she knew, in that moment, that there was no way she could go through with this. Not when her heart slammed into her chest like a crash test dummy at a picture of the man who she never stopped thinking about, never stopped wanting, and never stopped loving.

There was no way she could walk down the aisle and lie.

She needed to go talk to Jude. To tell him how she felt. She hoped he wouldn't hate her. She doubted he would. The two hadn't spent three

consecutive nights together in over five years. They barely coexisted. He was constantly on the road, and she was constantly running around like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to keep all of the balls from the hotels she managed in the air while raising a young son.

Jude may not be happy about her decision, but he wasn't going to be devastated by it. Deep down, she knew that he wasn't in love with her. She believed he loved her in his own way. They'd been together for over a decade, minus the summer she'd spent in Whisper Lake five years ago. She ran all three of the Southern California hotels he was set to inherit from his family, so he could travel to get new investors, scout new locations, and basically live the life of a trust fund baby.

They met in college and had a shared history, business interests, and a child together, but he didn't want to marry her. She knew that. His family had put pressure on him once they found out she was pregnant, and since he didn't want to lose his inheritance, he'd asked her. And since she'd always wanted to have a traditional family, she'd said yes.

But they weren't in love with each other. They hadn't been there for a long time. If they had been in love, it wouldn't have taken them five years after getting engaged to finally have a wedding that neither of them really wanted.

With her decision made, she stood up and grabbed her phone. She was tiptoeing out of the room when it rang in her hand. She immediately silenced it, sending it to voicemail.

When she looked down at the screen, she saw that it was Suzanna Clarke calling. Suzanna was head of operations at Stone Castle. The castle was a popular tourist attraction, hotel, restaurant, and event venue. Normally, it was hopping with customers, but for the next eight weeks, it would be off limits to the general public because production had bought it out for the filming. She wondered if her call had something to do with a question about that.

Avery quietly opened and shut the door behind her, then made her way to the elevator banks. She hoped that she didn't run into any staff on her way to talk to Jude. There were perks to having their wedding in one of his parents' hotels that she also managed, like being free. But the downside was that any drama that occurred would run through the staff like wildfire.

She hoped that Jude would agree to present a united front and they would be able to put out a joint statement regarding the cancellation, but that was probably wishful thinking on her part. Jude was a proud man, or at least

egotistical. She hadn't noticed it when she first met him. He was born and raised in London, and his accent sort of hid his true character. It had fooled her into thinking he was smarter than he was and more confident.

But over the years, she'd witnessed just how fragile his ego was.

Actually, maybe she could use his ego in her favor. Maybe he wouldn't make a big fuss or cause a scene because he wouldn't want to be painted as the injured party. Or he might lean into it. Yeah, that was more likely. He loved attention, and she could easily see him playing the jilted groom card.

Whatever. It didn't matter to her what people were told about the reason the nuptials weren't taking place. She didn't care that she'd more than likely have to find a new job or that she wasn't going to have a place to live because his parents had bought them the house they lived in as an engagement present. Or, more accurately, they'd dangled the house in front of Jude like a carrot as an incentive for him to propose to his knocked-up girlfriend.

The elevator doors opened, and she pressed the top floor button as urgency rushed through her with the force of whitewater rapids. Now that she'd made the decision to end things, she felt like she had rocket fuel propelling her toward getting it done. She'd never been a rip-the-band-aid-off type of person before. Usually, she avoided any sort of discomfort or confrontation at all costs, but right now, she was barreling toward it with bells on.

When she stepped off the elevator, her phone alerted her that she had a voicemail. Out of habit, she pressed play and lifted it to her ear.

Suzanna's voice played. "Hey, I'm *so sorry to bother you today*. But I knew you would be more upset if I didn't tell you right away. Jovan quit last night."

"What?" Avery said out loud to the voicemail.

Jovan Castillo was one of the most talented chefs in the U.S. He'd trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and was a genius in the kitchen. Avery was shocked when he'd accepted the position in Whisper Lake, Illinois. He'd been the head chef at not one but two restaurants with three-star Michelin ratings. He'd worked in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. His leaving was a code-red emergency. They had reservations months out because of him.

Instead of listening to the rest of the message, Avery called Suzanna back.

"I'm so sorry," her COO said as soon as she answered the phone.

“What happened?” Avery asked.

“He walked out. Someone sent back a dish, and he lost it. I thought it was just one of his episodes, but I went to his house this morning, and he’s gone. He packed up last night and left.”

Avery knew this day might come. She knew that Jovan’s time in the small town wouldn’t last forever. He’d had a nervous breakdown a few years ago and had wanted a slower pace and peace, which was the only reason he’d accepted the job that was far beneath his skill level. She was actually surprised he’d lasted as long as he had.

Suzanna assured her, “I already put out feelers to—”

“Don’t worry about finding someone. Can you keep things going for the next few days?”

There was a pause before Suzanna said, “Yeah, of course, but—”

“I’m coming to Whisper Lake.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon?”

“No, I’m not—” Avery stopped herself from telling Suzanna that she wasn’t going to be walking down the aisle today. She figured she should probably let her betrothed in on that piece of information first, which she was moments away from doing because she’d just reached his room. “I’ll explain when I get there. See you in a few days.”

Avery hung up the phone and stood staring at the door to the suite. She lifted her hand and knocked quietly. If Jude was having as much trouble sleeping as her, he might be awake. If so, she wanted to alert him that she was there instead of just going in. When there was no answer, she pulled out her master key and held it against the reader.

When she walked in, she heard the distinct, recognizable sounds of sex. The room was filled with a melody of panting and moaning. As she walked down the small corridor before entering the suite, she fully expected to find him watching porn on the flat screen. It might be a little uncomfortable for her to tell him this was over when he was jerking off, but she honestly couldn’t wait a second longer.

“Jude,” she said his name a second before she rounded the corner.

When she did, she saw that the television screen was black. The sounds she’d heard were not coming from an erotic film. They were coming from Jude, who was on the bed, fucking someone with long brown hair.

Neither party noticed her enter the room. They continued going at it with more passion than she’d experienced in years. Five years, to be exact. Since

the night she'd shared with Keaton Savage.

Well, this is going to make my news a lot easier, Avery thought to herself.

She waited to see if she was going to get upset, feel sad, or be angry, but she just felt numb.

"Jude!" She said it a little louder.

That got their attention. Both Jude and his partner looked her way, and she saw that the woman he was sharing their honeymoon suite with wasn't a random hookup or someone he might have met at his bachelor party. No, she was Jacob's twenty-year-old nanny, Celeste.

Avery waited for the betrayal to hit her, but again, she just felt numb.

"What are you doing?! I can't see you before the wedding!" Jude shouted as he dismounted Celeste and pulled the sheet along with him, leaving her lying naked on the bed. She scrambled for a comforter or something to cover up with.

Avery actually felt sorry for Celeste. She knew firsthand how captivating and intoxicating Jude's attention could be when he turned it in your direction. It was like the sun shining on you. But the flip side of that was the cold and darkness that the shadow of his love left you in when it was gone.

"There's not going to be a wedding," Avery stated flatly, and walked out of the room to Jude, shouting at her to wait.

Besides feeling numb, she actually felt relieved. Maybe that was wrong, but she was glad that she wasn't going to have to carry the entire bad guy burden for this not happening.

Not that she was an angel in this situation. She knew it was wrong that she'd let the farce of their relationship go on this long. But at least her intentions had been good. It wasn't an excuse, but it was a noble reason. She wanted her son to have a family. It might have been a flawed reason, but it was certainly more noble than whatever Jude had going on.

She'd just made it to the elevator when Jude grabbed her arm and spun her around. He'd pulled on a pair of sweats but was still shirtless. She hadn't had a chance to look at his body in a light this bright for years. She noticed that he was now sporting a little gut. Nothing crazy, but his body wasn't quite as toned as it had been. Not that hers was either. Her body had changed after having Jacob. She was carrying around ten extra pounds, quite a few stretch marks, and a pouch in her gut.

She wondered if he'd noticed that she'd changed, too. She doubted it since she couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her naked. It wasn't a

judgment on either of them, just an observation of how tragically disconnected they were.

“You’re being emotional over nothing. It was my last night as a single man. What did you expect me to do?” Jude asked in a completely non-ironic, non-rhetorical way.

“Call me crazy, but how about *not* fuck our nanny.”

“There’s no need to be crude.” Avery used to find Jude’s British accent sexy; now every time he spoke, he just sounded like a condescending prick.

Avery couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m the one being crude. You were just having sex on our wedding day with a woman we pay to watch our son, and I’m the one being crude. That’s... priceless.”

“Look, I don’t know what you were expecting to find coming to my room. You were the one who insisted we spend the wedding night apart. This never would have happened if you’d shared the room with me instead of following some ancient tradition.”

Avery truly wasn’t mad before this conversation. But every time Jude opened his mouth, she was getting more and more upset. Jude was the king of gaslighting. Of course, he was going to try and turn this around on her. He was actually going to try and lay the blame firmly at her feet for him getting caught cheating.

“We’re both upset.” Jude reached out and rubbed her upper arms. “Let’s just get through today.”

“No.” Avery shook off his touch. “We’re not going to get through today. There’s not going to be a wedding.”

“You were the one who insisted on having the wedding in the States. My entire family flew over. I have two hundred friends and work associates showing up in twelve hours for our wedding. What are you going to tell them?”

“Nothing. They’re your family. Your friends. Your work associates. You can tell them whatever you want.” Avery pressed the elevator again, and this time the doors blessedly opened. When he started to get on with her, she put up her hand and, in a tone that left no room for argument, firmly stated, “Do *not*.”

“Avery, come on.” He took a step back. “You can’t be serious.”

The doors closed on him, and as she rode the elevator down, she felt a tiny niggle of guilt. Maybe she should have told Jude that the reason she’d gone to the room in the first place was to tell him it was over. Maybe that was

the right thing to do. The honest thing to do.

When she stepped off the elevator, her phone dinged, and she saw it was a text from Jude.

Jude: *Stop being a child. Grow up. This isn't a fairytale. This is real life. Get over yourself.*

No, I'm sorry. No, you didn't deserve to see that. No attempt at even the illusion of an apology.

As soon as she read that, any guilt she had about not being completely transparent with him evaporated, and she was more certain than ever she was doing the right thing. She felt lighter than she had in years, like a thousand pounds of bricks had been lifted off her shoulders.

Today wasn't turning out to be a bad day after all.

LONG RED HAIR TICKLES HIS CHEST AS SHE PANTS ABOVE HIM. HIS HANDS MOVE to her breasts, cupping them. The weight of her fullness fills his palms and makes them tingle as he massages her mounds. Her hands cover his and she flexes her fingers, causing him to squeeze even tighter than he had been.

His body surges with arousal inside of her as he gazes into her crystal blue eyes. The bluest eyes he's ever seen. She rides him with reckless abandon. Her thighs strain against his hips as she lifts her body up and then slams down on top of him, crying out with unbridled passion.

He loves her shameless desire.

He can feel her body primed and ready as her inner walls begin to choke his shaft. Even though he's certain she can get herself off riding him like this, he wants to be the one to take her up and over the edge.

Without any warning, he flips them over, gripping her hips as he drives inside of her. The angle and leverage of his weight allow him to thrust deeper into her tight, welcoming canal.

"Yes, harder," she demands greedily as she reaches back, grabbing his hip.

Her fingertips dig into his flesh. The tiny pricks of pain from her nails instantly morph into pleasure. She's gripping him so tightly that he knows she might draw blood. The thought only serves to drive him closer to the edge. The pounding of their flesh together is the steady pace of a buzzer.

She looks over her shoulder; her wanton eyes lock with his. The climax they both desperately need is just out of reach as he leans down to kiss her. The warmth of her breath fans his face as his lips brush hers. He surges

deeper inside of her as he bites down on her neck, but he can't quite reach her.

Confusion clouds his mind as he flexes his fingers into her hips, but he no longer feels her body beneath him.

He's no longer inside her.

Her scent is drifting away.

His eyes are closed.

All he sees is black.

Keaton Savage forced his eyes open only to find himself staring up at the black fan blades spinning above his bed. His heart thumped wildly as his chest rose and fell in rapid succession, attempting to catch his breath as the realization of his surroundings dawned on him.

It wasn't real. There was no redhead below him or above him. It was a dream. A dream he'd been having several times a month for five years.

The reality was that he was alone, and his phone was ringing. Ignoring the incoming call, Keaton twisted and laid back down, burying his head in the pillow. Using meditative tricks, he did everything he could to will himself back to sleep. He focused all of his mind's power to transport himself back into the dream. Back inside was the woman he couldn't forget.

He didn't care if she was real or not. He just wanted to be with her again...even if it was just in his dreams.

After several frustrating minutes of mental gymnastics, he gave up.

She was gone. Again. And just like the first time, there was no goodbye. One second, she was there, the next she wasn't.

Keaton exhaled loudly.

Her abrupt departure from his life happened five years ago, and he still couldn't get her big blue eyes, wild golden-red hair, and mile-long legs out of his head.

He knew at some point he would get over her. He just had no idea when.

His phone rang again, and he begrudgingly grabbed it off the charger on his nightstand. His eyes were still blurry, but he could see that he had *twenty-eight* missed calls and messages. He began to scroll through names and saw that it looked like everyone he'd ever known in his life was trying to contact him. Parents of the kids he taught, students and teachers he used to go to school with, coaches he'd trained with, reporters, and fighters from his days competing in MMA.

"What the *fuck?!*" he sat up in his bed.

Beside him, there was a low, menacing growl.

“Relax, Mojo. This is my bed. You have a bed on the floor.” Keaton pointed to the overpriced luxury dog bed that his very grumpy, very pampered chihuahua had sniffed once when he unboxed it then showed zero interest in.

Mojo burrowed down farther into the blankets so as not to be disturbed and Keaton moved even closer to the edge of the bed to give him the space he demanded. How a five-pound peanut of a dog took up more room than his six foot four, two-hundred-and-twenty-pound frame, he’d never understand. But somehow, he did.

Keaton’s head throbbed as he winced down at the screen to try and figure out what the big emergency was. The night before he’d gone to his cousin—who was more like a brother—Knox’s wedding and he’d had one too many. Scratch that ten too many drinks. The overconsumption was very out of character for him and also explained the reason why there was an army of woodpeckers pecking at his brain.

He hadn’t intended to drink as much as he had, but he’d been feeling sorry for himself, and he’d decided to share his troubles with a friend named Jack. Jack Daniel’s. Once he’d had his third double whiskey, he’d made the executive decision to get obliterated. The reason was simple, to numb himself. He hadn’t wanted to feel. Or think. Or *feel*.

Over the past few years that he’d lived in the small town of Whisper Lake, he’d had a front-row seat to at least a dozen people falling in love. Real love. Lasting love. Soulmate love. The kind of love that inspired beautiful poetry and catchy pop songs. The kind of love he’d always thought only existed in romance novels, angsty soap operas, and cheesy rom-coms. The kind of love that he’d thought he had with a woman he’d only known for two weeks.

Being witness to so many other couples experiencing the love that had slipped through his fingers like sand in an hourglass with an expiration time, had had more of an effect on him than he’d realized. It seemed he’d been burying his emotions for years, denying just how much he wanted that love, and last night his feelings surfaced and would not be ignored.

Over the past few years, Keaton had been aware that he’d been restless, but he’d attributed the anxiety to missing the career he’d given up in a wasted effort to prove that he could settle down. But last night he realized that the empty edginess he felt had nothing to do with his former career and

everything to do with the owner of the castle which just happened to be the location of his cousin Knox's wedding, and about a dozen other weddings he'd attended over the years. She was also the woman who had starred in his X-rated dreams over the past half a decade.

Avery Stone.

Keaton had always been good at compartmentalizing his feelings. It had served him well growing up in a childhood that had its share of tragedy and rejection and continued to serve him in his adulthood. His career in MMA had meant a lot of traveling and training that could be very isolating and difficult. It meant missing birthdays, holidays, and graduations. But when he had a fight coming up, nothing else existed in his life. He was able to put emotional blinders on. The coping mechanism had been great for his undefeated record and multiple world championship titles. Not so great for his personal life.

It took a second for Keaton's eyes to focus, but when they did, he saw the first message was just a link to a news article from CNN.

He clicked on it and read the headline.

MMA World Champion Keaton Savage to Join the Cast of the Rebooted Reality Dating Show Fairytale Love Filming in his Hometown of Whisper Lake

"What the fuck?!" he repeated his earlier sentiment.

After scrolling down, he saw photos of himself that were taken in the cage after he'd won his last belt six years ago. The article reported that sources have confirmed that he was joining the cast of the dating show.

The only connection he had to the show was that Ivy and Iris, his twenty-three-year-old nieces were interning on the show. Had they said he was going to join the cast?

"Why would they say that?" he asked Mojo, whose only response was a loud sigh indicating he did not want to be a part of this conversation.

In addition to the first article that he clicked on, he saw that there were half a dozen others. He thought gossip traveled fast in Whisper Lake, but this was on an entirely other level. News outlets in Australia, Japan, Brazil, and the UK were reporting on this false development. This "announcement" had gone global.

It had to be a slow news day because why anyone would care about this crap was beyond his understanding. Maybe, if he was still fighting, he could understand the interest. But his last match was six years ago. During his

retirement, he'd kept a low profile. He'd opened up an MMA studio called Legacy in Whisper Lake and kept his head down.

Why this fake news was popping up on CNN, he had no fucking clue.

He was racking his brain, trying to come up with where this source could have gotten their information and a vague memory of a conversation with Iris, his niece who was technically his oldest cousin's daughter but who he'd always considered a niece, came back to him.

Last night, when he was already three sheets to the wind, Iris had talked to him about the show and mentioned something about him being on it. But all he could remember was laughing at how ridiculous that was.

How in the hell had this story come out of that conversation?

He tried calling Iris several times, and she wasn't picking up. Since she wasn't responding, he texted her twin sister Ivy who was widely known as the more reliable/responsible one.

Keaton: *Where is Iris?*

The reply was instant.

Ivy: *We're at Dad and Chrissy's for breakfast.*

Then that's where he needed to go. After setting out food for his highness Mojo, and a quick trip to the bathroom to piss and brush his teeth, Keaton threw on sweats, a t-shirt and hopped in his truck. The drive over to Ford's was about ten minutes and in that time, he received approximately fifteen messages and calls, all of which he ignored.

Keaton pulled up to the ranch-style house in the middle of nowhere and as he approached the door, he could hear the sound of laughter coming from inside the house.

Ford, Ivy and Iris's dad, had been a confirmed bachelor while raising his twins. He'd been married to the twins' mom after finding out she was pregnant, but she took off when the girls were three. His oldest cousin had then sworn off relationships completely and actively tried to stay single and unattached. About a year and a half ago he moved to Whisper Lake and six months later he met Chrissy, who was a package deal with four kids of her own.

He'd seen his cousin do his best to fight his feelings for Chrissy, but ultimately, he caved and was now happily married and living his best life as a stepdad and husband. Their relationship was just another example of the real, soulmate love that Keaton had seen.

He knocked twice on the door before letting himself in.

When he stepped inside, he found his family all gathered at the large farm table in the dining room. All heads turned toward him. His Aunt Laney, her new boyfriend Michael, Ford, Chrissy, her four kids Fiona, Connor, Cassidy, Kimber, and his niece Ivy. Everyone looked at him in surprise.

Everyone, that is, except Iris, who looked down at her plate sheepishly.

“Hey!” Chrissy smiled widely. “I didn’t know you were coming for breakfast.”

“Actually, I just need to talk to Iris,” he said.

“What did you do?” Ford asked his daughter.

“Nothing.” Iris shook her head and lifted her hands in mock surrender, the picture of innocence.

“What did she do?” Ford turned his question to Keaton.

Keaton pulled up one of the articles and handed his phone to his cousin. “This.”

Ford glanced down at the phone, and he saw that there was a moment of confusion before he realized what had happened. “Iris.”

“What?” Iris asked indignantly.

“Did you say that your uncle was going to be on your show?”

“It’s not *my* show,” Iris quipped back. “And he said he would.”

“No,” he quickly set the record straight. “I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did,” Iris maintained.

Iris was a lot of things, impetuous, spontaneous, its-better-to-ask-for-forgiveness-than-permission, but she was not a liar. Or at least, she hadn’t been until now.

“When? When did I agree to be on the show.”

“We were at the bar and I was telling you that Sabrina Denton, my boss”—she motioned to her sister—“our boss...”

“Don’t drag me into this,” Ivy said.

Iris ignored her sister and continued, “I was telling you what a huge fan Sabrina is of you. Remember, her brother got her into MMA and they saw you fight twice. I was telling her about you because I got a text that a few contestants had dropped out at the last minute. I told her I was at a wedding talking to you and we took a selfie and sent it to her, remember?” Iris tapped on her screen and turned the phone around which had a photo of the two of them smiling at the camera.

Shit. He didn’t remember taking that at all.

“She said how amazing it would be if *you* would do the show and I said I

would ask you. So I did. And you said yes.”

Had he?

His recollection was fuzzy, but the details were starting to come back to him. Iris had mentioned her boss and told him that she was a fan and wanted him to do the show. He'd laughed. That was it. That was where his memory faded.

Had he agreed?

“I did?” he must have.

“Okay, so what is going on exactly?” his aunt, who was more like a mother to him than the woman who had given birth to him ever was, demanded to know.

Elaine Savage was a saint in Keaton's eyes. She wasn't his blood. She'd been married to his father's brother, but sadly both had passed away before their time. His father from a brain aneurysm and his brother, her husband, from a car accident. His Aunt Laney was left raising his cousins Ford, Knox, and Sebastian as a single mom. They were ten, six, and four at the time. But two years after losing her husband, she'd opened her home to Keaton.

Before moving in with his aunt and cousins, his life had been a Lemony Snicket novel level, series of unfortunate events. Once his dad died, his mom never recovered. Keaton liked to believe she did her best, but her best was nowhere near good enough. She went through boyfriends like most people go through toilet paper. Each one seemed to be worse than the last. Some were just verbally abusive, but others took it further.

One day, when he was eight, Keaton came home from school to find a note that said she'd gone to Vegas to marry her boyfriend, a man he'd only met twice, and that she didn't know when she was going to be back.

He'd called the only number he'd known. His cousins'. His Aunt Laney answered the phone and she was there to pick him up by dinner time. He still wasn't sure how she'd managed that because she lived four hours away from him at the time, but she'd made it in two. She told him to pack his things and brought him home.

He lived there until he graduated high school and she'd raised him as her own son, her own flesh and blood.

“Uncle Keaton was drunk last night and agreed to be on Fairytale Love,” Ivy who had always been the more pragmatic, responsible twin explained.

“You did?!” Aunt Laney squealed and clapped. She jumped out of her chair and threw her arms around his neck. “That's amazing! I'm so excited

for you.”

Keaton’s family meant everything to him. They were all he had. If him doing this show made them that happy, then he didn’t really have a choice.

“Are you *actually* going to go on the show?” Ford asked, for clarification.

“I guess so,” Keaton sighed.

Iris jumped up from her seat and joined her grandma in hugging him.

Ford smirked as he took out his phone, no doubt to text Seb and Knox the news. Thankfully, Knox had just gotten married the day before and Seb had seemed preoccupied the past few weeks. Maybe this whole thing would blow over without any more fanfare.

Ford’s phone buzzed and his cousin smiled as he turned his phone around. “Seb just sent the link to the TMZ article, they’re using your underwear ad as the photo.”

Or...maybe not.

3

SPENDING THREE DAYS ALONE IN A CAR, DRIVING FROM CALIFORNIA TO Illinois, had not been the zen, relaxing experience Avery had envisioned.

Her plan had been to listen to podcasts, audiobooks, and music. Which technically, she had. Unfortunately, she hadn't enjoyed any of them because she'd been too distracted having panic attacks and a mental breakdown.

The thing about running three hotels and having a young son was there hadn't been a lot of time to think. Avery spent her life going from one task to the next. She always felt like she was several beats behind.

At work, she was constantly putting out fires. Sometimes literally in the case of the kitchen fire last New Year's Eve. At home, she always felt like she was playing catch up. She tried to spend every free second with Jacob, but there was cooking, cleaning, laundry, bills, and random projects she'd start and never finish.

Her mom, who had moved in after Jacob was born, helped out. But Blanche Bardot wasn't the maid, as she liked to point out on more than one occasion. And the past year or so, Avery enrolled Jacob in several sports for socialization and it had worked. He'd made friends. But the success meant she'd added practices, games, and playdates to her already insane schedule.

Avery felt like her life was a treadmill that she couldn't get off. As each day, week, and month passed the speed and incline both kept increasing. It had happened in such small increments; she hadn't noticed it. Before she realized what was happening, it had gotten to the point where the only thing she'd been able to do was to keep putting one foot in front of the other, until she was running at a fifteen percent incline. She couldn't stop, or slow down,

or take her hands off the bar otherwise life would have flung her against the wall.

Which is sort of what had happened. She finally let go and boy did she hit that wall. The past three days in the car, alone with only her thoughts had been eye-opening and horrifying. The same questions kept coming up.

How had she let things get so out of control?

Why had she allowed her life to run her and not the other way around?

When had she stopped prioritizing her happiness completely?

She knew the answer to that one. It was when she found out she was going to be a mom. Even though she'd been trying to do the right thing, hindsight was twenty-twenty, and it was clear now that she'd failed miserably.

Agreeing to marry Jude was, in the immortal words of Julia Roberts, a big mistake. Big. Huge. The two of them barely spoke. They barely spent any time together. They didn't have the same morals, the same goals, the same outlook on life or family.

Jude treated his family like an ATM. He only saw them on the holidays, and even then, he used any excuse to get out of it. When they did go and visit his family in London, Jude barely spoke to them. His parents were nice enough, but all they talked about was business, their vacations, and art, which they both collected. The time she spent with them was pleasant enough, but it was cold and impersonal.

Avery had always pictured her family, her house being filled with laughter, love, and fun. She wanted her child's family home to be a safe haven from the world, which could be harsh and cruel.

She would never have had that with Jude. She'd just brainwashed herself into believing that she could because she'd wanted it so badly as a child herself. But now that she'd taken a step back, she saw that the example she would have been setting for Jacob if she'd walked down the aisle was not the example she wanted to set for him for what a healthy, loving relationship and marriage looked like.

There had to be a middle ground where she could make herself and her happiness a priority without it being at Jacob's expense. As the product of two parents who had both always put their own needs and happiness first, without any regard for how it would affect their child, which was her, she knew the damage that could cause.

But she had to believe that the pendulum swinging the other way would

be just as harmful. No child should bear the weight of their parents' marriage being about them. She hadn't seen a therapist since college, but she had to believe that wasn't healthy either.

A tiny spark of hope lit in her chest as she passed the Welcome to Whisper Lake sign. The first time she'd seen this sign, she'd been running from her life. This time, she hoped she was running to it. She rounded the corner and the lake came into view. Avery took in a shaky breath as she flexed her fingers around the steering wheel of her Audi Q7.

Instead of returning to Whisper Lake in a calm, meditative, centered state as she'd planned, she was a bundle of nerves, anxiety, dread, and excitement.

During the drive, she'd tried to convince herself that she was coming back to the castle to hire a new head chef, and even to see her best friend who would be arriving in town to shoot her show later that week, and to finally take real ownership of the property that she'd inherited instead of managing it remotely to run Jude's family businesses.

Those three reasons were all true and valid, but she was done lying to herself. The biggest reason she was here was because of Keaton Savage.

When she met him five years ago, his engagement to his long-time girlfriend Camilla, who he'd moved to Whisper Lake to show he could settle down and give up his MMA career had just ended. Keaton didn't have any social media, but Avery might or might not (she totally had) checked out his ex, who Avery had never met, on Instagram over the years. And about two years ago, Camilla posted a picture of her hand rocking, well, a huge rock with the song *At Last* playing in the background. Since Camilla only posted selfies, sunsets, and food on her page, Avery had just assumed that it was Keaton who had put a ring on it.

But now, he was going on a dating show, which meant he was single. At least for the moment.

This might be the craziest thing she'd ever done...well, besides the first time she'd been in Whisper Lake, and she basically moved Keaton, a total stranger, in with her for two weeks. This town seemed to bring out the spontaneity in her.

As she passed Goldilocks Gas N Go and The Drawbridge Diner, she couldn't help but smile at the impact the show had had on the small town. Before *Fairytale Love* was filmed there, the town had been known for the lake, of course, and the multiple festivals it held there each year. But after the popularity of the show, and Avery opening Stone Castle to the public, it had

become a tourist attraction. The town had embraced the fairytale theme. Businesses had changed their names to ones that were storybook-inspired, and from what Suzanna had told her, tourism had increased by twenty percent.

Even though Avery hadn't really had anything to do with the show, other than allow them to film at the castle, she felt an unearned sense of pride at the economic and social impact it had had on the small town.

It was nice to feel like she was part of something, instead of being on the outside looking in like she had her whole life growing up. And, even being with Jude, she was an outsider in his family. The American. Sure, she worked at their hotels, but she wasn't one of them. Even if she'd gotten married, she doubted they ever would have truly accepted her.

Really the credit for the show should go to her college roommate and mastermind behind the dating show Sabrina. Without her, Avery would never have had the capital to renovate the castle. When Avery found out that she'd inherited the property after her father passed away, her first inclination had been to sell it.

At the time, she lived in California and was already working as the operations manager for one of Jude's family's hotels. When she told Sabrina about the unexpected development, her bestie asked if she could use it to film the reality show she'd been pitching. Avery was able to sign a letter of intent to film with the production company that bought the project, and that was what the bank used as proof of income to fund her loan for the renovations.

That all happened to coincide with her breaking up with Jude. Their relationship had run its course years before that, but she'd been so busy working and putting her hotel management degree to use that she hadn't realized it until she had the opportunity to have something of her own.

When she'd told Jude about Stone Castle, he'd told her it was a money pit and keeping it would be the worst mistake of her life. She explained to him that it was the only thing she had to connect her to her father. He'd dismissed her completely telling her, "*Sentiment has no place in business.*" Which sounded even more condescending in his accent.

That was the moment she knew that she was done. Everything had to do with sentiment to her. What was the point of building an empire if not to leave it to the next generation as a legacy?

So, she'd broken up with him, packed her bags, and moved to Whisper Lake in the span of a day. She'd spent the first month and a half she was in

the new town getting a business plan together as the renovations were underway. Then she'd met him. Keaton Savage. The last two weeks she'd spent in Whisper Lake had been the best two weeks of her life.

It was strange that she'd only spent fourteen days with the man who lived rent-free in her heart and mind for five years.

As she drove up the long road that led to the castle which sat on a bluff overlooking the lake, images of her and Keaton walking hand in hand on the property appeared in her mind's eyes. Ghosts of the past. Which was funny considering the folklore attached to the property was that it was haunted.

The first day she'd arrived in Whisper Lake five years ago, she couldn't stay at the castle because it had been abandoned for nearly a hundred years. So, she stayed at the Princess & the Pea B&B, which at the time was just the Whisper Lake B&B.

That was her first introduction to just some of the characters Whisper Lake had to offer. At check-in she'd met a woman with long brown hair, which was worn in two braids and her husband who, hand to God, looked like the Brawny Man come to life.

"Welcome to Whisper Lake, I'm Karen Carpenter, not the singer, and this is my husband Sylvester, not the cat."

Those were the first words that had been spoken to her in the small town. Once Karen found out who she was, and that she'd inherited the castle, she went on to tell her its origin story.

"Well now, I know these are your kinfolk, and I would never speak ill of the dead, but this is how it goes," Karen began. *"So there was this man, he was an English Duke named William Stone, who I guess would be your..."*

"Great-great-great uncle," Avery clarified.

"Right, so your uncle was all set to marry this lady that his family chose for him, but then he fell in love with a beautiful maiden named Emilia. Now, ya see, this didn't sit real well with your great-great-great-great grandparents because she was just a chambermaid and beneath his station. They gave him an ultimatum; it was either marry the woman they chose or lose everything."

"Well, your Uncle Will decided to listen to his heart and he hopped on the first boat to America and smuggled his lady love in a crate on the cargo ship. They got to the good ol' US of A and wandered around for a bit trying to figure out where to settle. They ended up standing right there on the top of the cliff overlooking the lake and that's where they had their first kiss. Can

you believe it? Giving up your family, everything you've ever known for someone you haven't even smooched? Does it get more romantic than that?" Karen swooned before continuing. "It must have been one doozy of a kiss because Uncle Will decided to build his homestead in the exact spot they'd locked lips. They got married and were living their very own happily ever after until one day, just a normal day like any other, Uncle Will comes home to find that the love of his life, your Auntie Emilia had been brutally, gruesomely murdered.

"That sent your Uncle Will into a spiral of madness. Day and night he searched the town, the lake, and the woods surrounding the castle looking for her killer to get his revenge. He was so consumed with finding the man who killed his beloved that he forgot to eat or drink and one day he just dropped dead from malnutrition and exposure to the elements.

"When word of your uncle's death made it across the pond to your great-great-great grandmother, she was beside herself with grief and regret for sending your Uncle Will into exile. So she bought the land and the castle so she could keep the last piece of her only son. And no one had lived in it since, except for the ghosts of your Uncle Will and Aunt Emilia who roam the halls searching for each other in the afterlife."

Now, as Avery pulled up in front of the Norman-era castle, she was overwhelmed by just how impressive it was. Uncle Will, as Karen-Carpenter-not-the-singer liked to call him, had done an incredible job on its construction.

She stepped out of her SUV and closed her eyes as she inhaled the fresh, lake air. She'd spent the majority of her adult life in Southern California. As much as she loved L.A. the air quality left a lot to be desired.

There was something to be said about wide open fields of green grass, crystal blue waters, and unpolluted air.

She walked to the edge of the bluff and looked down at the lake. She watched as tourists and locals walked and bicycled on the path around it. That was exactly what she'd been doing when she'd met the man who she'd spent the best two weeks of her life with. The moment she'd first seen him was forever etched in her memory.

All of her life Avery's favorite times in any day were the twilight of dusk and dawn. The transition from day to night and night to day had always given her a sense of peace. A sense that no matter what chaos was going on around her, what house she was at, who was caring for her, or not caring for her,

those times of day were consistent.

It didn't matter what city, town, state, or even what country she was in. Sunset and sunrise were her constant.

Whenever things in her life got too overwhelming, or she felt like things were out of control, if she just took a moment to watch as the sky turned from dark to light, or light to dark she felt calm. Centered. That's exactly what she'd been out seeking the morning she'd met Keaton Savage.

"Avery!" Suzanna shouted, interrupting her internal walk down memory lane.

Avery turned and saw the woman who over the past five years had become a friend. Suzanna's long, ink-black hair was styled in two Dutch braids. She wore a black maxi dress and combat boots with a flannel tied around her waist. A watercolor tattoo of hummingbirds draped over her shoulder, adding to her edgy, effortless style that had always impressed Avery. She wished that she possessed even a tenth of self-awareness and confidence that her COO had.

After a lifetime of trying, and mostly failing to fit in, she'd been left with a large, empty hole of who she actually was. So instead of any sort of individuality, she'd just tried to be as non-descript, plain, and run-of-the-mill as possible. If no one noticed her, then there would be no way anyone would see that she was alone. That she had no friends. That she had no real family.

That was part of the reason she'd loved working behind the scenes in hotel management and not front of house. She was able to hide in her office and problem-solve from behind her desk. It served both of her strengths which were being invisible and nurturing.

"I'm so happy you're here!" Suzanna threw her arms around Avery.

The two women had never actually met in person, but they'd done so many Zoom meetings and FaceTime calls it felt like they had.

Avery hugged her back. "So am I."

"How was the drive? Is Jude here? Is Jacob?" Suzanna looked behind Avery into the car.

"Jacob and my mom are at Disneyworld." That had been the plan when Avery and Jude were supposed to be on their honeymoon in Greece. Avery didn't think it was fair to take that away from him just because the wedding hadn't happened. Also, she didn't think any four, nearly five-year-old would do well on a three-day car ride. He was going to be flying out with her mom from Florida in a couple of days. "I'm not on my honeymoon because I didn't

get married.”

Suzanna put her hand on her chest and sighed in what looked to Avery like relief. “Oh good.” The second the words fell from her mouth, her expression morphed from relief to horror. “I mean...not good...I didn’t mean good...no...that’s...no...that’s awful,” she stammered over her words before taking a breath. “I’m so sorry.”

Avery couldn’t help but chuckle. Suzanna had had the same reaction that her mom, the staff that worked at the hotel, and the few friends that were actually hers that would have attended had. It seemed Avery wasn’t the only one who had had doubts that the wedding should happen.

When she’d gone back to the hotel room after catching Jude in a compromising position and told her mom that she wasn’t going to marry him, she’d actually lifted her hands and said, “*Praise the Lord.*”

Avery asked, “*If you didn’t want me to marry him, why didn’t you say anything?*”

“*Oh, sugar you know me, the only time I put in my two cents is when I’m the one making the purchase.*” Which was her mom’s southern way of saying that she didn’t give unsolicited advice. Which was a lie. Her mom gave her opinion on everything, including Avery’s clothes, makeup, hair, career, home décor, parenting style, fitness routine (or lack thereof), and eating habits.

But apparently, who Avery promised to spend the rest of her life with and was legally bound to was where she drew the line.

“It’s fine,” Avery assured her. “You’re fine. Honestly, we should have called things off years ago.” *Which I did but then I found out I was pregnant with Jacob*, Avery thought to herself. She shook her head to try and erase those thoughts. Her plan was to keep moving forward, not looking back. “But, that doesn’t matter now. I’m here. Have you heard back from Bruce or Nanette?” Avery had put out feelers to two chefs that she thought would make excellent replacements for Jovan.

Suzanna went straight into business mode and filled her in on all the goings on at the castle. As Avery walked through the back employee entrance a feeling washed over her that she didn’t immediately recognize. It was peace.

She felt a sense of rightness that had eluded her since...well since she’d packed up her car and left this place five years ago. She had no idea what the next few weeks had in store for her. It might be torture seeing Keaton again.

What if she was going to have a front-row seat to him falling in love with

someone else, not just on television, but in 3D?

What if he was mad at her for just up and leaving without saying goodbye?

Or worse, what if he didn't remember her at all?

She didn't have a crystal ball, and unlike her Gammy who had always proclaimed to have special intuitive powers, Avery couldn't predict the future. But whatever happened, for the first time in a long time, she knew she was exactly where she needed to be. She was home.

THE SUN WAS SHINING BRIGHTLY IN THE MIDDAY AS KEATON PULLED UP THE drive to Stone Castle. The past four days had been a whirlwind after agreeing, begrudgingly, to be on *Fairytale Love*. He'd had a physical and psych evaluation. Apparently, he'd passed with flying colors because he was now officially going to meet with one of the producers Maura Simms.

His phone rang and he saw it was a FaceTime call from his publicist Jessie Sloan. Reporters had been contacting him since the news broke, but he'd been diverting them all to her. After agreeing to do the show, she was the first person he'd called. They'd worked together for years when he'd been competing. She was a rock star in the world of public relations. They still kept in touch but hadn't had a professional relationship since he'd stepped out of the limelight.

"Hey," he answered.

"Are you driving?" she asked looking at the screen.

"Just pulled up to the castle for my meeting with one of the producers."

"Good Morning Chicago wants to do a segment at Legacy before the show starts." Jessie Sloan relayed in an all-business tone. He loved that she didn't do small talk. "What morning works for you?"

Keaton didn't automatically reply. This was the first interview he'd be doing in over five years. He'd forgotten how much he hated this part of being in the world of entertainment, which although it was a sport, was what MMA was. He knew it was only going to be worse in the reality TV world.

When he didn't respond right away, Jessie pointed out, "You called me, remember? I'm just doing my job."

Jessie had always understood Keaton's reluctance to do interviews or have his personal life reported on. Not that there'd been a lot to report. Unlike a lot of the people in his field, his personal life had been tame. He'd had two serious relationships in his life. One had lasted two decades, the other had lasted two weeks.

The only one the press knew about was Camilla. No one knew about Avery Stone. Not his family. Not his friends. Not anyone.

When he'd moved to Whisper Lake, he'd been familiar with the town because his granddad had brought him and his cousins there to fish every summer growing up. But he hadn't known that many people very well. He was starting his business. She was in town overseeing the renovations on the castle she'd just inherited. They had both just gotten out of long-term relationships.

They'd just...clicked.

He would never forget the first time he'd seen her. He'd thought she was an angel. Not facetiously. Literally.

He'd been on an early morning run around the lake when he stopped in his tracks. She was standing on the path; the sun was rising behind her and the rays of light matched her golden red hair. Her eyes were the same color as the crystal blue lake beside her.

Never in his life had he seen someone so beautiful.

He'd been dumbstruck and hadn't even noticed that she was in a standoff with a wild animal. It wasn't until she lifted one arm and yelled, "*Go away! Shoo!*" that he noticed the coyote that was pacing in front of her. Her shooing worked and the coyote ran off.

That was when Keaton noticed in her other arm, she was cradling something that looked like a rodent.

"*Is that a rat?*" Keaton had asked.

Those were the first words he'd ever spoken to her.

"*No, it's a puppy,*" she cooed at the shivering peanut of a dog.

"*What's its name?*" he asked, mainly in an attempt for her to look at him, which she still hadn't done.

All of her attention was focused on the rat/puppy in her arms.

"*I don't know. I found him cowering by that rock and that coyote was about to...*" She finally looked up at him and her words drifted off.

"*To make him breakfast,*" Keaton teased, finishing her thought.

That's when it happened. She smiled. Not just any smile. It was a gut-

check smile. It hit him like a punch to his solar plexus. It knocked the wind out of him.

In his career, he'd traveled the world and met thousands of beautiful women. But he'd never seen a smile more beautiful, more glorious, more breathtaking than the one she'd given him.

He also had never believed in love at first sight, until he'd seen her. His first thought had been to get down on one knee and propose. Never in his life had he had that impulse. Not even during his relationship with his childhood sweetheart. He'd imagined what his life would be like if he and Camilla were married, but he'd never thought about proposing to her.

It had taken him a few seconds to snap out of the momentary insanity her beauty had inspired in him. But once he did, he offered to drive her to the vet to get the dog checked out. It was there that they found out that his name was Muffin and his owner Mrs. Mildred Campbell had been sick with worry since he'd escaped the day before.

Once they'd returned the dog, Keaton asked if she wanted to get breakfast at The Drawbridge Diner and she said yes. After that, they were inseparable for two weeks. Then, he'd had to go into Chicago for a meeting with Jessie to go over his retirement strategy and when he got back to Whisper Lake, she was gone.

Two years later, Mrs. Campbell passed away and she left Muffin to Keaton in her will. He'd subsequently changed his name to Mojo after Mojo refused to answer to Muffin, which Keaton understood. The dog wasn't a "Muffin" but he was a constant reminder of the woman who left him without even a goodbye.

"Keaton, are you there?" Jessie prompted.

"Yeah, sorry." Keaton blinked, snapping back to the present. "I have classes that start at ten, so any time before that."

"Got it and The Cage wants to do a day in the life article pre-show as well. You know the drill, a photographer and reporter will follow you around."

Keaton let out a sigh.

"Don't worry. It's Lucy Drummond. She's always had a thing for you. It will be easy peasy. All you have to do is smile, flash those dimples, charm the host and the audience will be eating out of your hand."

"They're going to ask me questions," he stated flatly.

"Yes, that is typically the job of a reporter."

“I’m not going to lie, Jessie. You know that.” That was Keaton’s biggest issue with this entire thing. He didn’t want to lie. He didn’t want to manipulate the audience into thinking that he was something or someone he wasn’t.

“Okay,” Jessie replied as if she wasn’t seeing the problem.

“What if they ask me why I’m going on the show, or if I want to find true love?”

“Then tell them the truth.”

“The truth?” Keaton repeated. He didn’t think it would bode well for his or the show’s image if he was honest. “You want me to say that I’m only doing the show because my niece wants to impress her boss, and my aunt got excited about it, and that I do not believe that someone can find true love on a TV show?”

“You can say that you haven’t found love through traditional routes and that family is very important to you and one day you’d like to have your own. All of those things are true, right?”

Keaton knew that it was Jessie’s job to spin things, but sometimes her knack for the gentle manipulation of the truth was unnerving. He was very happy that she was on his team.

“You do still want to have a family, right?” Jessie continued. “Isn’t that why you stopped competing and settled down in one place?”

He’d done that to prove to Camilla that he could. He and his childhood sweetheart had been together for twenty years on and off. They got together when they were twelve. She’d been patient for the first ten years of his career. But in the last five, she’d grown impatient. She’d wanted to get married. To have kids. He hadn’t been ready. He’d wanted to give everything to the sport he loved. And he had.

By the time he’d reached all his goals and been ready to walk away, she’d been done waiting. Unfortunately, it had been too little too late. But did he still want those things? Yes, yes he did.

“Yes,” Keaton confirmed.

“Okay, good. And I know that you are a skeptic, but you know my sister Becca was on the show, she won it, in fact. And she and Brian are still together and happily married.”

“Right, but weren’t they friends before the show?” Keaton remembered Jessie mentioning that to him.

“Semantics. My point is, just be open to the experience. Don’t close

yourself off and put up walls. You're not Nostradamus, you have no clue what the future has in store for you. The woman of your dreams could be waiting inside Stone Castle."

This conversation was getting a little too personal for Keaton's comfort level since the woman of his dreams owned Stone Castle. "I gotta go."

"Okay, I'll send you the confirmations of dates and times for the interviews."

Keaton disconnected the call and got out of his truck. His chest ached as his mind filled with memories of him and Avery. He should be used to it by now. It happened every time he came here, he was transported back in time, five years ago, when he'd driven up to the castle and been told that Avery was gone.

She'd just left without a note. No goodbye. No nothing.

At the time, he'd been sure it must have been some kind of emergency. He'd called but it had gone straight to voicemail. He texted and he'd been left on read. His messages had never been returned.

He did his best to avoid this place, but he was about to sign up to live here for the next two to eight weeks. Maybe this was what he needed to finally move on. To have some closure.

Maybe this would be like exposure therapy or something. Or maybe this was going to be the worst, most torturous two months of his life.

"Keaton!"

At the sound of his name, Keaton turned and saw a woman standing at the top of the steps in the impressive entrance of the castle complete with two arched cathedral oak doors adorned with gothic metal hardware. She was wearing black slacks, a white button-down shirt, and white low top Nikes. Her caramel-colored hair was pulled back in a low bun and she had on large hoop earrings. She was professional and casual at the same time.

"Hi, I'm Maura Simms one of the segment producers. We spoke on the phone."

Keaton walked up the steps and shook her extended hand. "Hi, Maura."

"Thanks for stopping by. Since you're local, I figured this would be better than Zoom."

He pasted a smile on his face and nodded in agreement, even though he'd much rather have done this meeting on Zoom. Great. He was already lying.

"So come on in. I know you're a local, but I'm surprised how many residents say that they've never actually been inside the castle proper, they've

only gone to the restaurant, spa, or events held outside. Would you like a tour before we get started?”

“No thanks.” He’d explored every inch of the castle with Avery. “I’m familiar with it.”

“Oh okay, so how long have you lived in Whisper Lake?” she asked as they walked through the foyer.

“About five years now.”

“So I’m guessing you know the origin story of the castle about William and his housemaid Emilia.”

“I do, yes.” And I know one of his direct descendants, he thought to himself as they turned down the corridor to the left.

“I think it’s so romantic. How he gave everything up for the woman he loved.” Maura stopped at the door of an office with a desk and three chairs and held out her hand for Keaton to enter.

Keaton walked inside and lowered into one of the seats.

Maura started to enter behind him, but then stopped and snapped her fingers. “Oh, actually, I think George wanted to say hi. He’s another segment producer. Let me go grab him. I’ll be right back. Also, I’ve heard that William and Emilia’s ghosts roam the halls. I haven’t seen them yet, but let me know if you do.” Maura’s eyes lit with excitement.

“Will do,” Keaton smiled, he didn’t believe in ghosts, but he wasn’t going to be a buzzkill.

Maura left and Keaton rubbed his hands over his face trying to psych himself up for what he was signing up for. When he lowered his arms, a flash of red hair in the corner of his eye caught his attention.

He turned just in time to see the face of the angel that had haunted him for five years. In shock, he blinked and when he opened his eyes again, she was gone. He was off his chair like the seat was spring loaded and he rushed to the hallway. He looked in both directions, but there was no sign of her.

Maybe ghosts were real after all.

Avery speed-walked as fast as her long legs could carry her making every turn she could in the corridor maze that made up the inner workings of the lower level of the castle. She wasn’t even sure where she was headed, just

as far away from the man she'd just seen as she could possibly get. Her heart was pounding in her throat making it very difficult to breathe.

When she'd glanced into a room on the way to the back kitchen, Keaton Savage was the last person she'd expected to see. Of course, she'd known that it was highly likely she'd see Keaton since he was going to be on a show that was filming at the castle, but she didn't think she'd see him *now*. They were still two days out from principal photography. None of the cast or crew had arrived yet. The only people here were some producers and PAs working on pre-production.

Every few steps she glanced behind her to make sure the coast was clear. So far, he hadn't followed her. Which she was both profoundly thankful for and also a little disappointed in.

She was grateful because her hair was a mess, she didn't have a drop of makeup on, and she had a large brown stain on her shirt from the unfortunate coffee-spilling incident that morning. She hadn't gone back to the carriage house, where she was staying, to change because she didn't think she had anyone to impress since the castle was officially closed to the public.

Her disappointment stemmed from the fact that she was ninety-nine percent sure that he'd seen her considering they'd locked eyes for the briefest, yet highly impactful—at least to her—moment. That meant one of three things. A, he remembered her, but he was still upset that she'd left without speaking to him. B, he remembered her, but she hadn't made enough of an impression on him that he'd want to seek her out to speak to her. Or C, and perhaps the most heartbreaking scenario, he didn't remember her at all.

Whatever the reason, the encounter had left her feeling nauseous with anxiety. Balls of nerves were bouncing in her stomach like they were on the spin cycle. Because, unlike her disheveled appearance, Keaton looked even more handsome than she remembered. His strong jaw. Deep brown eyes. Wavy hair and tattooed arms were just the tip of the sexy iceberg.

He had a dominating presence that was undeniable, even from a glance, which was all she'd allowed herself before making her great escape.

Once she was sure she'd gotten far enough away from the danger zone, she stopped and rested against a wall. Her head was spinning with dizziness the same way it had the first time she'd laid eyes on him.

At the time, she'd attributed her light-headedness to the face-off she'd just had with a snarling coyote after she'd intercepted his lunch. She'd been out on an early morning walk to catch the sunrise and noticed what she

thought was a stray dog stalking toward her. At first, she thought it was going to attack her, and she was scared. But then she heard the faintest cry and looked over to see a tiny chihuahua cowering against a rock.

Once she realized that she was not the prey, she went into mama bear protective mode, scooping the mini-sized dog up into her arms and shouting at the coyote to go away. When it did, she had a moment of relief before hearing the deepest, sexiest voice she'd ever heard say, *"Is that a rat?"*

The voice sent shockwaves of tingles rolling through her. It affected her so much, she hadn't even looked up at the person who had spoken to her. Instead, she'd concentrated on the shivering bundle of puppy in her arms.

He then asked what the dog's name was and she got herself under control enough while answering that query to look up at him. As soon as they locked eyes, she lost her train of thought completely.

At first, she assumed her reaction was based on the sheer magnitude of the man's sex appeal. He was the most attractive man that she'd ever seen. Not only that, he had an air of maleness that was like catnip to her hormones. He had an aura that silently communicated he could handle anything from a flat tire to a break-in, with command and authority.

Of course, she was basing that solely on a feeling, but it was one she'd never had before or since that moment about a man.

It wasn't until he spoke again, making a joke about the coyote thinking that the dog was breakfast, that she realized what the crux of her reaction truly was.

When he looked at her, it was like he saw her. All her life, Avery had done her best to be invisible. To blend in. To not stand out. But the second he looked at her, she felt seen. She felt exposed. She felt vulnerable. She felt like there was no place for her to hide from him.

It had been both exhilarating and terrifying.

Just remembering it now sent a shiver racing down her spine as she pushed off the wall and started to head to the safety and privacy of her office. She only made it halfway down the hall when she heard a familiar voice that caused goosebumps to rise on her arms.

"Avery?"

There was a tiny voice in her head screaming at her to keep walking and pretend she hadn't heard him, walk straight to her car, get in, and go back to California. If she did that, there would be no harm, no foul. She would never know what he thought about her, or if he thought anything about her at all.

But something stopped her. The same something that had told her not to go through with the wedding. Reaching up, she wrapped her hand around her locket and said a silent prayer to God, to her Gammy, to the Universe, to anyone and everyone who might hear her, that she wouldn't embarrass herself as she slowly turned.

When her eyes met his, the same feeling she'd had the first time she'd seen him washed over her. She felt a connection to him, that to this day, she'd never been able to put into words or even understand. She was so overwhelmed by it, she almost didn't notice that all of the color had drained from his face. It was like he was seeing a ghost.

Between them, the air crackled with tension so thick she was practically choking on it as she lifted her hand up and said a meek, "Hi."

Instead of replying, Keaton took two steps closer to her, his long legs eating up the space between them. He stopped about a foot away and whispered, "You're real?"

She looked down at herself. "Last time I checked."

"I thought..." Keaton shook his head. "I thought I was seeing things."

Avery had played out this reunion a million times in her head. She'd dreamt about it. She'd fantasized about it. None of those times had Keaton thought she was a figment of his imagination. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Oh, um, Jovan, our head chef quit."

His eyes dropped down to her hand, which she realized was still gripping her Gammy's locket. She released it and lowered her arm back down to her side.

"Congratulations," he gritted out, his voice gravelly and strained.

Keaton had a dry, sarcastic sense of humor, so she wasn't sure if he was kidding or not.

"For my head chef quitting?" she asked.

"No." He reached out and touched her hand, his thumb brushing over her ring.

She pulled her hand back as tingles rushed up her arm and down her body. His touch was just as, if not more, potent than she remembered. "Oh, I'm not." Her head shook back and forth as she took her ring off. She couldn't believe she was still wearing it. She'd been engaged so long; she'd sort of forgotten its significance. "I'm not engaged," she explained as she

shoved the ring in her pocket. “Anymore. I mean, I was but then I didn’t...we didn’t...I didn’t go through with it.”

“But you’re still wearing the ring?”

“It was um, sort of recent.”

“How recent?”

“Um...” She licked her lips nervously. “Just a few days. I was supposed to get married Sunday.”

His eyes widened. “Sunday, as in four days ago Sunday?”

“Yep.”

His gaze bore into her with an intensity that stole her breath. “What happened?”

“Oh, um, it just didn’t...I couldn’t...” Panic rose in Avery. She was so scared that Keaton would know that she hadn’t walked down the aisle because of him. That was how his stare made her feel, like he could read her mind. “Um, the morning of the wedding I caught Jude, my fiancé with someone else.”

She felt a little shitty blaming her wedding cancelation on him since she’d been going to see him to tell him she couldn’t go through with it. But, then again, he had been banging their nanny, so she wasn’t going to feel too bad about it.

Keaton’s jaw ticked and she noticed his hands fisted at their sides. Was he upset for her? Was he mad that her fiancé had cheated on her? Was that even possible after how she’d treated him?

His nostrils flared as he said, “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I wasn’t...that upset.”

“Keaton!” Maura Simms, one of the producers, called out from the end of the hall. “There you are! I thought we lost you!”

Keaton closed his eyes as a long sigh escaped his lips.

Maura rushed down the hallway and when she reached them, her eyes bounced between Keaton and Avery. “Is everything okay?”

“Yep, great!” Avery said, a little too brightly. “Well, it was nice seeing you again!”

Avery turned on her heels and walked double time down the corridor. For five years she’d wondered if she’d built up what they’d shared into something it wasn’t. If she’d fabricated or romanticized her feelings for him, or the connection that she felt when he looked at her. If she’d exaggerated the way every cell in her body lit up at the sound of his voice,

like it was tuned into a frequency only he could access.

Now, she could say without a doubt, that was not the case. If anything, time had diluted her memory of his effect.

KEATON SAT UP IN BED WITH A START AS A BEEPING SOUNDED IN HIS HEAD. His pulse was racing, his blood was pumping, and his mind was foggy as he looked around trying to get his bearings. He was in bed and from the tent in his lap, his heart rate wasn't the only thing that was up, and the beeping was coming from his alarm.

He hit the snooze and laid back down, closing his eyes as he inhaled slowly. When he did, flashes from the dream he'd been having popped into his head.

Flowing, thick red hair. Long, lean legs. Full, plump lips. Large, blue eyes.

For years he'd dreamt of Avery, but now that he'd seen her again the dreams were even more vivid. More of his senses were active making the encounters feel real. He could *feel* the silky softness of her skin and *hear* the sweet lilt of her voice. Her features, which over the years, had gotten less pronounced were now clear as a bell.

The scattering of freckles over her turned-up nose. The small scar that she had on her chin from when she was five and she fell and hit her chin on the corner of her grandma's fireplace, she'd had to get five stitches. The perfectly curved arch of her full eyebrows that framed her heart-shaped face. The sexy slope of her neck to her shoulders. The cupid's bow on her top lip, and the fullness of her bottom lip. The sway of her hips as she walked.

He was floating in her beauty, somewhere in between awake and asleep, when his alarm went off again. He reached beside him and turned it off before sitting up. His legs swung over the side of the bed and his feet hit the

floor. A low growl sounded below the covers beside him.

“Good morning to you, too Mojo.”

He inhaled as he stretched his arms up. It was so strange; he knew that it had just been a dream but he could swear he could smell her. She was that potent. Even two days after running into her, she still lingered in his sinuses.

When he lowered his arms, he scrubbed his hand over his face and stood as a yawn claimed him. Sleep had not been his friend since he’d run into Avery and known she was back in town. He’d thought she’d occupied his mind before, but now, it was nearly impossible to go more than a few seconds without thinking about her.

He’d zoned out during classes yesterday. Thankfully, Kade McKnight, who had dominated the world of MMA for ten years before retiring, had picked up the slack. He’d stopped by yesterday and was supposed to just be observing, but when he’d seen Keaton wasn’t mentally there, he’d stepped in.

“Mojo, come on,” Keaton barked.

The chihuahua didn’t budge. He was truly the laziest dog Keaton had ever known. He’d tried, unsuccessfully, to take him on runs around the lake. He’d trot along beside him for a little bit, but inevitably he’d protest by laying down and rolling on his back. Keaton had tried to coax him up with promises of treats, but in the end, always ended up carrying him. Since he only weighed five pounds soaking wet, it wasn’t the weight that bothered him. It was the fact that Mojo *refused* to walk or run that was frustrating.

“If you want breakfast, you need to get up,” Keaton grumbled, knowing full well that if Mojo didn’t come into the kitchen, he’d end up bringing his breakfast to him and serving him in bed.

He’d had the dog for two years and he wasn’t sure when it had happened, but instead of Keaton training him, Mojo had trained Keaton.

Halfway to the kitchen, a ding rang out alerting him he had a message. When he looked at it, he saw it was from Jessie reminding him that Good Morning Chicago was this morning. He also had a message from Maura with an updated call sheet.

Keaton walked past his living room and his chest tightened. He was going to have to move into the castle to live there during filming, which meant he wouldn’t be spending his nights on his recliner watching sports on his seventy-inch flat screen. He wouldn’t get to sleep next to his five-pound bed hog. He wouldn’t be able to shower under the waterfall shower head that had a hydra massage feature. He wouldn’t be able to shut his front door and

ignore the rest of the world by going into what his aunt coined as his social hibernation recharge. He wouldn't be able to eat at 5:00 p.m. sharp every night, which allowed him five hours of fasting before his 10:00 p.m. bedtime, which, in theory ensured him a better night sleep because he wasn't digesting his food. He wouldn't be able to attend the promotion ceremony for his twelve-to-fourteen-year-old class the following week.

He loved his house. He loved his privacy. He loved his routine. He loved teaching his classes.

What he didn't love was being in front of a camera. He didn't love his personal life being discussed. He didn't love small talk. He didn't love people telling him when to sleep, when to eat, where to go, and what to do. But that is exactly what he'd signed up for.

As he scrolled through the production schedule, he saw that the first elimination ceremony was two weeks away. Hopefully, he'd get voted out on the first dumping. If not, he'd suck it up, because that's what you did for family.

He was sure that his Aunt Laney hadn't wanted to have another mouth to feed when she was already raising three boys as a single mom, but she got one. She'd taught him the true meaning of unconditional love, of family. The least he could do was to go on a reality show to help out his nieces.

The morning sun poured through the bay windows above his sink as Keaton stood and poured his first cup of coffee. He was pretty sure today would be a three-cup day considering he'd spent the entire night tossing and turning thinking about Avery Stone.

He knew that what he felt for her wasn't healthy, it was damn near obsessive. What he didn't know was how to get over it. How could he retrain his brain not to hyper-focus on her? That question lingered in his head as he sat at the table to enjoy his morning caffeine fix. He was two sips in when he heard the click-clacking of Mojo's nails on the kitchen floor.

"Look who's up," Keaton said as Mojo took his sweet time strolling toward the back door.

When Keaton opened it, Mojo walked to the threshold, stopped, stretched and yawned, leaving Keaton holding the door open for him until he shook his entire body causing his tags to jingle before continuing into the backyard to take care of his morning business.

Keaton couldn't help but grin at the leisurely pace the tiny furball operated at. This was Mojo's world and everyone else was just living in it.

He sat down his food bowl, so his highness could eat after he came back to the kitchen, when he got a text on his phone. It was from his youngest cousin Seb.

Seb: *Family dinner. Tonight. Lanterns. Seven.*

Keaton stared at the text. He couldn't remember a time when Seb had called a family meeting which meant something big was happening. If this was a few years ago, Keaton would be sure the dinner had something to do with Seb's career as a world-class tattoo artist or that he was planning to move to another country or something. Now, Keaton assumed it was personal.

Over the past year or so both Knox and Ford had settled down and got married. Sebastian and Keaton were the only single Savage men left, but Keaton had a niggling feeling that might have changed and that he was the sole single Savage standing.

Last week, at Knox's wedding, he'd seen Seb dancing with Kennedy Dawes who, coincidentally, was supposed to be in the *Fairytale Love* cast but had subsequently dropped out at the last minute. It was not just a friendly dance, the sparks flying between those two were so bright he needed welding glasses. There was definitely something going on between them. When he'd heard Kennedy had dropped out of the show, the first thing he'd thought was Seb had had something to do with the pretty blonde's decision. Tonight he had a feeling he would find out if he was correct.

Keaton tapped on the message and 'liked' it, indicating he'd received it and would be there.

He checked the time and saw that he only had fifteen minutes before he was set to meet the Good Morning Chicago crew at the gym. He finished his coffee, took a quick shower, dressed, pulled the blinds up in the front room, and laid the throw blanket on the hardwood floor so Mojo could sunbathe like Aladdin on his magic carpet, and headed out.

When he got in the truck, the radio came on. Adele's version of the Bob Dylan song "Make You Feel My Love" began to play through the speakers. Keaton was instantly transported to the first night he'd spent with Avery, which was the same day she'd rescued Mojo. They'd had pizza on the roof of the castle keep and this song had played on a radio left behind by the crew working on the renovations. They'd gone up there to watch the sunset while having dinner and ended up staying there talking, laughing, and dancing until sunrise.

A melancholy cloud hung over him as he thought about those two weeks. They had been so perfect, or at least they had been on his side. His sentiment must not have been reciprocated since Avery had bounced like a Harlem Globetrotter basketball out of town.

His shoulders bunched in frustration, but he rolled them back. Since running into her at the castle, he'd been mad at himself for how he'd responded to seeing her again. He should have asked her why she left. Why didn't she say goodbye? Why hadn't she contacted him in all these years?

There were so many questions that had been rolling around his head like balls in a bingo cage for years and yet he hadn't pulled one out to ask her.

In his defense, it had been such a shock to his system that she was actually there, all his brain could think about was that she was actually standing in front of him again. When he'd caught a glimpse of her hair, he'd honestly thought he was seeing a ghost.

Over the years they'd spent apart, she'd become even more beautiful. Her cheekbones were a little bit more defined. Her eyes appeared to be larger and she'd filled out into even more womanly curves.

Seeing the ring on her hand had been the second shockwave he'd been hit with.

She was supposed to get married to a man who slept with someone else on their wedding day. Keaton couldn't say for sure, but he was 99.99999% sure that the man was her ex, Jude.

When they first met, both Keaton and Avery were coming out of long relationships. They'd commiserated and bonded over stories about their exes. One of the things that made Keaton fall in love with her—or even more in love since the U.S.S. Love at First Sight ship sailed the first time she looked into his eyes—was that she never had a bad word to say about her ex. In all the stories she told him about the harder parts of their relationship, she never put him down or placed any blame on him. If anything, she defended him when Keaton told her that he sounded like a selfish dickhead.

Surely, there couldn't be two men on this planet stupid enough not to appreciate the woman Avery Stone was. Jude had to be the biggest idiot on earth.

He was still ruminating on what a prick her ex was when he pulled up in front of Legacy and saw that the production crew was already there. After a few quick hellos where he met Lonnie and Cam who were running the cameras, Janelle, a segment producer, and Clancy Grant the reporter, the

team from the morning show got right down to business.

“Can we get some B-roll of you walking into the gym and opening it?” Janelle asked.

“Sure.”

Keaton waited for the cameras to get set up on the sidewalk and then went through the exact steps he'd just done. He walked up the street from his truck to the studio door. Then he unlocked the door.

“Great, we're going to set up cameras inside and we'll get you coming in,” Janelle explained.

Keaton nodded. Seb had been a judge for several seasons on the hit tattoo competition show *Tattoo Master*. Keaton had been on set a few times when he'd visited his cousin. He'd noticed how much of the process was start and stop, hurry up and wait. It seemed to him that twelve-hour days usually only consisted of four hours of actual filming.

It had driven him crazy. Doing press had always been Keaton's least favorite part of fighting. He loved the training. He loved the discipline. He loved the fights. He hated reporters and social media. He'd never understood why people were interested in him when he wasn't in the cage.

Once they got all their B-roll, Keaton and Clancy stood in front of the wall with the Legacy logo behind them and began the interview.

“We are here with Keaton Savage, three-time MMA world champion at his gym Legacy. Keaton, since retirement, we haven't really heard much from you. What have you been up to?” Clancy tilted the microphone toward him.

“I opened Legacy and have been focusing on teaching.”

“During your career, you were notorious for keeping your private life, private. Unlike many of your contemporaries, you shied away from the spotlight and any personal questions. What made you decide to sign up to go on a reality dating show where you will be filmed twenty-four hours a day and your private life would be up for public consumption?”

“To be completely honest with you, when the announcement came out, I was as surprised as everyone else.” Keaton smiled. “But the truth is, I haven't found love the traditional route and family is the most important thing to me. Nothing else really matters.”

“So is it fair to say that you are looking for love?”

“I think deep down most people are looking for love,” he did his best to answer the question without actually answering the question.

“And you moved here after the first season of Fairytale Love was filmed. Did you settle down in Whisper Lake because of the show?”

“No, actually I was here right before the show was filmed. No, the show had nothing to do with me choosing Whisper Lake as my home base. I’ve been coming here all my life. My granddad took me and my cousins here every summer. Those fishing trips were some of my best childhood memories. We’d spend hours on the lake in his tiny boat and Granddad would tell us stories about his life. Some were hilarious, some were scary, some were heartwarming, but they all ended up teaching me a valuable lesson. He would talk about the fact that we were his legacy and what that meant, the responsibility it carried. This town holds a special place in my heart and memories. Which is why I’ve always known it was where I wanted to settle down, put down roots, and start a family.”

“You mentioned your granddad talked about legacy, is that where the name of your gym comes from?”

“It is.” Keaton nodded. “My granddad passed away when I was fifteen, a year before my first semi-professional fight. For so long, I wished he was alive to witness my accomplishments. He was the one who taught me my work ethic. He instilled in me the discipline to be not only a strong competitor but also a good man. When I opened the gym, that was what I wanted to instill in my students. That is the legacy I want to leave when I’m not here. It’s his legacy.”

“You’re not the only World Champion in the area,” Clancy continued. “Whisper Lake is also the hometown of MMA bad boy Kade McKnight. Does he ever pop in to check things out?”

“Kade is actually going to be taking over running things at Legacy while I’m working on the show.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Janelle give the hand signal to wrap it up.

“Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us this morning, I think I can speak for everyone at Good Morning Chicago when I say good luck. We’re going to be rooting for the hometown boy!”

The interview ended and Keaton lifted his arms so one of the cameramen could remove his mic. The relief that the interview was over was short-lived because he knew that he was facing up to two months of days filled with talking, hurrying up, and waiting.

He hoped that he’d be voted off in week two. He wasn’t sure he could last

eight weeks. And, more importantly, he didn't know how long Avery was going to be in town. He wanted to see her, to speak to her, not film a TV show. He'd tried to find her after he'd met with Maura and George but the castle was huge and he'd had to leave to go teach a class.

Maybe he'd see her during filming. Or, maybe she was already gone. It wouldn't be the first time she'd just disappeared from his life.

6

AVERY SIGNED OFF ON THE MENU REDESIGN AND TRIED TO KEEP HER MIND focused on the tasks at hand. That was difficult to do when all she could think about was the dimples in Keaton's cheeks. The soft pads of his fingers brushing over her knuckles when he touched her ring. The woodsy musk of his aftershave that had wrapped around her like a heated, sherpa blanket in a snowstorm.

For so long she'd wondered what he would be like if she ever saw him again. Now, she knew. He was everything she remembered, and more. Over the past five years, he'd somehow become even more handsome. Which was a feat she would have deemed impossible. He looked even more...manly. Even more capable.

She closed her eyes and the memory of his strong hands on her when they made love, of the way he cradled her in his arms while he'd moved inside of her, flooded back to her sending a shock of bliss exploding between her legs.

No. She opened her eyes. That was how hard up she was for sex. She was about to come sitting at her desk from the distant memory of being touched.

She absolutely could not go down this path. Keaton was the worst kind of distraction because she could easily get lost not only in the memories they'd shared but also in one of the thousands of fantasies she'd had of him over the past five years. All of which seemed more real to her than any sex she'd had with Jude.

Trying to focus on work once more, she looked over the notes she'd taken from the two candidates she'd interviewed online earlier that morning who were possible replacements for Jovan. They would both be fine, amazing

even, but she hadn't got that feeling that they were the one. It was a feeling she relied on in all of her staffing decisions, and for the most part, it hadn't let her down. Thankfully, she had three Zoom meetings lined up tomorrow with three equally qualified chefs. All she had to do now was cross her fingers, toes, and eyes that one of them would give her that feeling.

She clicked on an email from Maura with accommodation requirement updates. Housing, feeding, and generally supporting not only the cast but also the production staff and crew was not an easy task. It had a ton of moving parts but after spending the past two days holed up in her office Avery felt like she was finally getting a handle on everything that was going on.

The castle had multiple avenues of revenue. There was the hotel, the spa, restaurants, and, of course, the event spaces. Stone Castle was a go-to for corporate events, weddings, birthday parties, baby showers, and even divorce parties. The latter of which she definitely would have had to throw for herself if she had walked down the aisle with Jude.

Suzanna had done an amazing job of running the entire operation like a well-oiled machine and making it look easy. But now that Avery was digging into it, she saw just how complicated it actually was. Avery hadn't realized just how out of touch she was until now. Two things occurred to her once she wrapped her head around the totality of the business. First, Suzanna deserved a raise. Second, whatever her future held, her being more involved in operations at Stone Castle was going to play a significant role in her life.

It boggled her mind that she'd allowed Jude to make her feel like this wasn't a 'real' business. It grossed more than five million dollars a year. That might not be what his parents' hotels did, but it wasn't chump change.

Avery was glad she was here for the crossover period when production took over the space and they were closed down to the public. It had given her time to immerse herself in every detail of the business. She was starting to get a clearer picture of things and although everything was going well, she had a few ideas of ways to increase her profit margin.

But after staring at a computer screen for the past three days, she was ready for a break, a distraction that wasn't Keaton Savage related. Hopefully, she'd get one tomorrow when her bestie was arriving. She couldn't wait for Sabrina to get there so she could finally tell her, in person, what had happened with Jude.

Sabrina was in Spain working on a documentary film, which is why she hadn't been able to make it to Avery's wedding that hadn't happened. The

two women weren't in touch every day, or even every week or month, but whenever they saw each other, it was as if no time had passed at all.

It had been three years since the two of them had gotten to spend any in-person time together. Sabrina had stayed in one of the hotels that Avery managed during a work trip in L.A. Avery's mom watched Jacob so they could have some girl time. The two had ordered banana splits, pizza, cheeseburgers, and every other fattening item from room service and spent an entire weekend binging *Downton Abbey*.

She and Sabrina met during college freshman orientation and instantly bonded even though they had nothing in common. Sabrina was from the East Coast and came from a wealthy family, old money wealthy. She was beautiful, smart, and had a sharp wit. Her parents were still together, and she had four older brothers. Her fifth birthday party was held at the Ritz-Carlton and her present was a horse named Honey. On her sixteenth birthday, she was gifted a Range Rover. For her graduation, she was sent to Europe for the summer. Not backpacking, staying in hostels in Europe, no she'd had first class, five-star accommodations and travel.

In contrast, Avery was quiet, reserved, and introverted. On her fifth birthday at Chuck E. Cheese she got a dress her Gammy had put on layaway at K-Mart. On her sixteenth birthday, she'd taken two buses to go to the DMV to take her driving test. Alone. For high school graduation, one of her teachers gave her a Starbucks gift card when she realized that no family had shown up for the ceremony.

Despite their differences, they'd formed an instant bond. Avery had done her best to blend into the crowd during orientation, but for some reason, still unbeknownst to Avery, Sabrina had taken a liking to her and had shoved her under her wing whether Avery had wanted to be there or not.

Avery knew her college experience wouldn't have been half as good as it was without the Sabrina Denton Effect. She lit up every room she walked into, and people naturally gravitated toward her. By sheer proximity of being next to her, some of the light she radiated fell on Avery. She was pretty sure that was the only reason Jude had noticed her. She and Sabrina had been at the coffee shop on campus and he'd come in with his friend, Marco, who hit on Sabrina. Jude had clearly been his wingman and had spoken to Avery. The two had hit it off after he found out that she was studying hotel management since his family owned nearly fifty hotels, located all over the world.

It was strange to think that's where it all started, and it ended with her

walking in on him having sex with the nanny on their wedding day.

Her phone dinged with an alert, and she clicked on the link. It sent her to a YouTube video of an interview Keaton had done with *Good Morning Chicago*. Unable to stop herself, she pushed play on the video.

For five years, she'd gone cold turkey from the man who had continued to haunt her dreams and thoughts. She hadn't allowed herself to go down the Google rabbit hole of his career or watch any of his fights on YouTube.

Even though, technically, that wouldn't have been cheating. She'd felt like it was a betrayal. In hindsight, she realized how naïve that had been of her since apparently, Jude had been unfaithful to her their entire relationship.

He'd called her the night before to "put everything on the table" and admitted to cheating on her since college. He claimed that he assumed she knew about his extra-curricular activities and they'd had some unspoken agreement about his indiscretions. She could honestly say that that was not the case, but she understood why he might think that.

She'd never questioned him about his late nights at clubs, his travel, his secretive phone calls or any other red flags that she'd been blind to. She'd let him live his life and she'd lived hers. She'd always chalked up her behavior to trusting him and being independent, but now she wondered if it was just because she honestly hadn't cared.

He never actually apologized for his bad behavior. Instead, he promised her that now that he knew she wasn't okay with his affairs, he'd stop. He wanted to put the past behind them and reschedule the wedding.

After repeating, several times, that like the Taylor Swift song, she and Jude were never, ever, ever getting back together, he'd ended the call by telling her that she would regret leaving him because he was the best thing that had ever happened to her, the best man she'd ever have.

She agreed with part of his statement. Jude helped her create Jacob and Jacob was the best thing that had ever happened to her. As far as being the best man, well, he was wrong there. The best man she'd ever had was on a thumbnail on her computer screen, which she clicked on.

The video played and when she heard Keaton say that he hadn't found love the traditional route, her heart ached in her chest. She knew that they'd only spent a short amount of time together, but she'd loved him. She still did.

He also said that family was the most important thing to him. During their whirlwind romance, affair, whatever it was, they'd spoken about how important family was. He'd told her how much he'd loved Camilla and that

she was the biggest reason that he'd moved to Whisper Lake. He'd wanted to prove to her that he could settle down so that they could have a family.

All these years, Avery believed that Keaton and Camilla had ended up together. What woman wouldn't want to be with Keaton? He was oozing sex appeal, smart, ambitious, funny, kind, and he could kiss. Like *really* kiss. He was the reason songs were sung about kissing.

Just thinking about it now had her feeling a little, or a lot, flushed.

Her phone buzzed and she looked down and saw that it was a message from her mom.

Mom: *We're here!*

"Oh shit!"

Avery checked the time and was astonished to see that it was already past three p.m. The day had completely run away from her. Jacob and her mom had flown in from Florida that afternoon and she'd sent a car service to pick them up at O'Hare.

Closing her laptop, she stood from her desk and rushed down the back hallway and out the side entrance. It was faster than going through the ballroom to go out the front.

She'd just reached the front of the castle when she saw the driver opening the door of the black SUV and helping Jacob out of it. She smiled at the disheveled condition of her son's newly trimmed hair, which she'd had cut before the wedding, and crease running the length of his left cheek. He must have fallen asleep on the drive from the airport.

A rush of warmth filled her chest. It had been nearly a week since she'd seen him. Even though her workdays were long, and sometimes she left before Jacob woke up and came home after he was asleep. Still, she saw him every day, even if it was just to kiss his forehead while he slept.

Being away from him for any length of time was brutal, but this stretch of nearly a week had been extra challenging. Last night, during their phone call, Jude had briefly discussed what arrangement they'd have with Jacob. Although they both agreed that she would still be his primary caregiver, he wanted 'flexible unlimited access' to him or he said he'd take her to court and get fifty/fifty custody. Which basically meant he wanted to be able to see him whenever it was convenient for him for whatever duration suited his needs. He was using the threat of taking Jacob away from her half the time to get her to agree to his ridiculous request.

Jude was right about one thing; she did regret her decision to leave but

not for the reasons he'd outlined. She regretted her decision because she knew that legally Jude could take him for fifty percent of the time. He'd never even spent a full day with him before and now she was going to have to hand her son over to a man who, up until this point, had barely showed any interest in being a father.

As much as she wanted to fight him and say that he couldn't just pop into their son's life whenever he wanted to, that Jacob needed structure, the truth was, she knew she was going to give in to his demands. If she didn't, he'd use all the money and power at his disposal to get as much time with their son as he legally could. Not because Jude had any desire to parent Jacob, but because he'd use their son to hurt her.

Thinking about not having Jacob two weeks out of each month made her want to hold her son and never let go.

"Jacob!" she called out as she extended her arms.

"Mama!" Jacob ran toward her at full speed.

She bent down, catching him as he leapt into her embrace. His tiny arms wrapped around her neck and she closed her eyes, soaking in the moment. It felt like yesterday the nurse was putting him in her arms after she delivered him.

How was it possible that he was going to be five soon?

Before she was ready to let him go, he started to wiggle, and she set him down.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, his chin lifted, and his brown eyes grew as wide as saucers as he looked at the castle. "Whoa! This is just like at Disneyworld!"

"Disneyworld is fake, this is real," her mom corrected Jacob as she came around the black SUV.

"Hey, Mom." Unlike the greeting she'd just had with her son, the two women did not hug.

Maternal and nurturing were not words anyone would use to describe Blanche Bardot. Avery couldn't remember any time in her childhood that her mother had just spontaneously hugged her or told her she loved her. Thankfully she was better as a grandma. She did both of those all the time with Jacob.

Maybe she was trying to atone for her shortcomings as a mom, or maybe Jacob was just a lot more loveable than Avery had ever been.

"How was the flight?" Avery asked them both.

“We landed and are alive so it did the job.” Her mother didn’t hand out compliments easily, even to an airline.

Her mom turned her attention to the castle. Avery wondered what she thought of it since it was the first time she’d seen it, but her reaction was hidden behind oversized, black sunglasses.

“So *this* is what your daddy left you, huh?”

“Does it have a moat? And dragons?” Jacob asked.

“No, but there is a moat at the diner in town. And there’s a painting of a big dragon at a restaurant.” The Drawbridge Diner had a working moat and Lanterns, which had adopted a Tangled theme, had a large mural that included a dragon.

“Can we go eat there?”

“Sure,” Avery had already planned on taking them to Lanterns tonight. “Come on, let’s go to the carriage house so we can drop off your bags.”

“We don’t get to live in the castle?” Jacob asked as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand and sniffed.

She wondered if he was coming down with a cold. It would make sense considering he’d just spent a week at one of the biggest germ-ridden petri dishes on the planet.

“No, there’s going to be people working in there so we can’t sleep there. But after we get your bags dropped off, we can go explore it if you want.”

“Yes!” Jacob enthusiastically co-signed on that plan before taking off in a full-speed run in the direction Avery had indicated.

“The flight would have been much nicer if it was first class,” her mom commented as they walked down the path that led to the carriage house.

Jude always flew first class, and over the years that Avery had been with him, so had her mom, her son, and herself.

“I thought you said you were happy that I didn’t marry him.”

“I did, darlin’. But that doesn’t mean I don’t miss the perks.”

Some people might take her mom’s comment as being harsh considering what Avery was going through. But for Blanche Bardot, that was downright supportive.

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS ABOUT?” FORD ASKED AS HE AND KEATON walked up the steps of Lanterns. Ford’s wife and kids had already arrived. He’d been working on a house that he and Knox were flipping so he was meeting them at the restaurant.

“No idea.” Keaton didn’t want to speculate as to why Seb had summoned them all because he hated when people did that to him.

“The girls are really excited that you agreed to do the show. I know you don’t want to do it. Thanks.” His cousin patted him on the shoulder. Ford was a man of few words, which made every single one he spoke even more special.

“Of course, man.”

It was the least Keaton could do, not only for his niece and aunt but also for his cousin. Ford had really stepped up to help out his aunt with the boys, himself included, when she was working double shifts at the hospital.

Ford drove him to tournaments before Keaton had a car. He’d been the one to make sure that dinner was on the table, clothes were clean, and homework was done. And that none of the boys got arrested, which was not a small feat when it came to raising Savage men. Both Keaton’s dad and Ford, Knox, and Seb’s dad had had their share of run-ins with the law for everything from vandalism to reckless driving.

Ford hadn’t had an easy job, but he’d done it. Had he been happy about it? Hell no. More often than not he was grumpy as shit about his extra responsibilities. But what teenager wouldn’t be? He’d never taken his bad mood out on Knox, Seb, or Keaton. He’d just silently brooded. Or maybe

silent brooding was just his baseline, Keaton could never be a hundred percent sure. It was the classic chicken/egg conundrum, which came first? Or the nature vs. nurture debate. Was he predisposed to silent brooding or was it due to his environment?

Either way, it was strange to think that Ford was only four years older than him. Now, it obviously didn't seem like that much of a difference. But at the age of eight, which was how old he was when he'd moved into his aunt's house, Ford was twelve and he was already nearly six feet tall. He'd seemed so much older at the time.

When the men stepped inside the restaurant that had a Rapunzel theme, the hostess Jana smiled widely. "Hey Keaton. Hi Ford."

That was one of the many perks of living in a small town, it was like Cheers, everyone knew your name.

"They're all out on the deck." Jana motioned toward the back of the restaurant.

"Thanks." Keaton smiled while Ford's response was a curt nod.

When they got out to the patio, Keaton looked at the large table filled with his loved ones and felt like he'd just stepped into the *Twilight Zone*. He was still adjusting to going from being the only Savage who lived in town, to his cousins and their significant others, his nieces and nephews, and his aunt all there.

He and Ford were the last to arrive. Seb, who had sent out the family dinner bat call was at the head of the table and Keaton was not at all surprised to see Kennedy Dawes seated beside him.

Beside them were his Auntie Lan and her new boyfriend Michael, who happened to be Kennedy's father. Next to them Chrissy, Ford's wife, and her four kids were all lined up. Ivy and Iris sat across from them and filling out the table were his cousin Knox and his new bride Laura, along with their four-month-old twins, Jackson and Jasmine.

Ford walked to the opposite side of the table and sat next to his wife. Keaton lowered down into the empty seat between Laura and his niece Ivy.

"Can you hold her for a second?" Laura asked as she was already handing Jasmine over to him.

"Of course."

Keaton stared down at the tiny bundle of cuteness in his arms and his chest ached. He'd always thought he was going to be a dad. And not just any dad, the best dad that had ever walked the earth. But lately, he'd been

wondering if he'd missed his chance.

He didn't just have the one that got away. He had two that got away.

Camilla and Avery were both women he'd seen a future with. Camilla was now engaged to another man, and Avery was, well, she had almost walked down the aisle herself. She hadn't so she was technically single. But her status didn't have anything to do with Keaton and didn't change the fact that she'd ghosted him.

The only consolation he had was being surrounded by family since they'd all migrated to Whisper Lake. Family was all that mattered to him. It was all that had ever mattered to him.

"If things go well on the show, maybe you'll have one of those of your own soon." Iris leaned over Ivy and wagged her brows.

He didn't share her optimism, but he appreciated it.

Drink and food orders were taken and Jasmine and Jackson both got passed around the table giving each person time to see them. His aunt was labeled a baby hog and was told to 'puff, puff, pass' by Knox who then got swatted on the arm by Laura for using a weed reference in relation to the twins. Everyone commented on how big the newborns were getting and how much they loved the smell of babies. The conversation flowed from the show to the flip project Knox and Ford had just started to Chrissy's event business doing well.

Once the drinks were delivered, Seb stood up, calling everyone's attention to him by clearing his throat. "First off, I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight on such short notice. Some of you might know or have guessed that Kennedy and I have been seeing each other for a few months over the summer."

Kennedy smiled widely as she stared adoringly up at his younger cousin. The look on her face made Keaton want to have what they shared. Love and adoration radiated off them both.

"We kept things on the hush for several reasons," Seb explained. "One, because Kennedy was supposed to be going on the show that Keaton is now going to be on."

The entire table erupted in cheers. Keaton, trying to be a good sport, smiled and tipped his glass accepting the applause.

When everyone quieted down, Seb continued, "Another reason was that we weren't exactly sure what this was and we didn't want people in our business. And also because sneaking around was kind of hot."

Kennedy blushed as Knox whistled and everyone chuckled.

“But, we wanted to gather everyone around today to tell you that we’re together. Officially. Today, we went to the courthouse in Chicago and got married.” Seb reached down and lifted Kennedy’s hand in the air, revealing a large diamond ring.

There were gasps from his aunt, Chrissy, and the twins. Ford was stoic, as always. And unless Keaton was mistaken, Knox and Laura weren’t at all surprised by the news as they shared a secret glance. It didn’t surprise him that Laura and Knox were in the know before anyone else. Kennedy and Laura were thick as thieves. The two had been close friends the entire time Keaton had lived in Whisper Lake.

“Knox and Laura were our witnesses,” Seb confirmed Keaton’s suspicion.

“Wait, you got married?!” Aunt Laney clarified, still in shock obviously.

“We did, legally. We are going to have a wedding later next year, after the baby.” Seb leaned down and put his hand on Kennedy’s stomach, smiling from ear to ear as he kissed his new wife on the cheek.

“A baby!” Aunt Laney covered her mouth as tears started running down her face. “The twins will have a cousin to grow up with. They’ll only be a year apart.”

Keaton noticed, at the mention of the twins having a cousin to grow up with, Laura and Kennedy exchanged a knowing look before Kennedy nodded her head in encouragement.

“Actually, they’ll have a cousin who’s even closer than that in age.” Laura looked down at her own belly. “Kennedy and I are due two days apart.”

“Another baby!” Aunt Laney exclaimed. Unable to control her enthusiasm, she hopped out of her chair and rushed around the table hugging and kissing Kennedy, Laura, Seb, and Knox.

Keaton was happy for his cousins, but he couldn’t help but wish it was him who was calling everyone together to make a big announcement. He wished he had a baby on the way that would grow up with their cousins.

As an only child, he knew the importance of having a big family. He also knew how lonely it was without one. He’d lived both sides of that coin, and having a big family took the win every time.

Dinner was served and the dominant conversations were the wedding and about how exciting it was that Kennedy and Laura were going to have babies

so close together. There were name suggestions thrown out as Chrissy, Kennedy, and Aunt Laney were planning the wedding.

Keaton looked around the table and told himself that this was enough. He was lucky to be surrounded by love, even if he was on the peripheral of it. But that zen demeanor evaporated when he caught sight of red hair out of the corner of his eye. He did a double take and sure enough, Avery Stone had just walked into Lanterns.

It had been three days since he'd seen her at the castle. Deep down, part of him thought she was just going to disappear again. But she hadn't. She was still in town, and he still had questions to ask.

He excused himself from the table and made his way to the front of the restaurant. As he navigated around tables in the dining room, he cemented in his head all the questions he should have asked her three days ago but had completely blanked on.

Keaton had them all loaded and ready to fire when he heard a kid say, "Mama."

He watched as Avery looked down and brushed the hair of a boy standing beside her that Keaton hadn't even noticed.

"Can I have my birthday party here?" he asked. "I like the dragon, it's like a dinosaur."

"It's still a few months away, but if we're still here, of course you can."

Still here. That didn't sound great.

"Hi," Keaton said, announcing his presence.

Avery looked up and this time it was her turn to look like she'd seen a ghost.

"Keaton," she said his name breathlessly.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"Oh, um, this is my son, Jacob. Jacob this is Mr. Keaton."

"Hi, Mr. Keaton." Jacob held out his hand for Keaton to shake, which was adorable and much more grown-up than Keaton would have expected from a kid that young.

"Hi, Jacob."

"I'm going to have my birthday here if you want to come," Jacob invited him as he held up his hand with his fingers spread apart. "I'm going to be five."

"Five, huh, wow that's pretty cool," Keaton said as he realized that made the kid four.

Avery said his birthday was a few months away. The kid was four. The last time Keaton had seen her was five years ago.

Could he be his?

Was that why she'd left?

Because she'd gotten pregnant and couldn't face him to tell him?

No. There was no way. She would have reached out to him. Right?

Suddenly all the other questions he'd had seemed insignificant to the newest one. Was this boy Keaton's son?

Shit. Avery could see Keaton doing the math in his head. He was trying to calculate how long ago they'd slept together, to try and figure out if this was a Maury-you-are-the-father moment.

Avery was trying to figure out how to tell him that he wasn't without making it obvious to Jacob what she was saying, when her mom came back from using the restroom.

"Well, hello there," her mom Eartha Kitt purred at Keaton before looking over at Avery. "It looks like someone made a friend while I was away."

"Mom, this is Keaton Savage. Keaton this is my mom, Blanche Bardot."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Bardot."

"Oh, please call me Blanche," she insisted.

"Mom, why don't you go show Jacob the mural? I'll be right there."

Her mother's raised eyebrows indicated in a not-so-subtle way that she thought something was going on between Avery and Keaton.

"Mom," Avery prompted her.

"Nice meeting you Mr. Savage." Her mom winked at him before ruffling her grandson's hair. "Come on, Jakey boy. Let's go check out this dragon."

Once her son and mom were out of earshot, she turned back to Keaton.

Before she could speak, Keaton placed his hand on his chest. "Is he...?"

"No, he's not," Avery assured him. She glanced around making sure that no one could eavesdrop on their conversation. She'd only spent a few months in Whisper Lake but from what she remembered gossip spread like wildfire. Since there were several people waiting to be seated, she moved into the alcove off the hallway that led to the bathrooms for privacy and Keaton

followed. When she was sure they were alone, she whispered, “I found out I was pregnant, the day after we...spent the night together.”

“But, are you sure?”

“Yes, remember I told you I had a doctor’s appointment the day you went into the city?” she whispered, hoping to jog his memory.

Keaton nodded.

“I went in because of those headaches and found out I was pregnant. I thought they were joking when they told me. I didn’t believe it. But they did an ultrasound I measured at eight weeks. There is no way that you are...” Avery couldn’t speak out loud the wish she’d had for all these years. She cleared her throat. “But just to make absolutely sure I had a paternity test done when Jacob was a year old.”

When Avery did the test, she’d known there was no way Keaton could be Jacob’s father, but she had to admit, she’d held out hope until the results came back. Even though logically, she knew it would have been impossible, seeing the words in black and white say that Jude was 99.99999% Jacob’s father had filled her with disappointment.

Keaton nodded, and unless Avery was crazy or projecting, she saw the same disappointment she’d felt mirrored in his eyes as they searched hers.

The way he looked at her was so different than she’d ever experienced before. He didn’t just look at her, he saw her. With other people, she could put on a happy face or hide whatever she was feeling. But not with him.

“Is that why you left?” he asked.

Avery felt herself getting emotional, but she forced herself to push those emotions down. She nodded. “I just... I had to go back and face my life.”

“Why didn’t you say goodbye?”

His question was so raw, so real. She’d wondered if he ever thought about her. If he ever thought about the woman he’d spent two weeks with. Or if he even remembered her.

When they ran into each other a few days ago, that question had been answered for her. She’d known that he remembered her. But now, she was seeing a totally new depth to his memories of her. She’d mattered to him.

The fact that she hadn’t said goodbye mattered to him.

“I just...I don’t know, I couldn’t. We barely knew each other, and I didn’t want to make you feel, I mean not that you would have felt any obligation but I just...I didn’t have the right words to tell you. Also, I just...I didn’t want to ruin the time we’d shared together. I just...I wanted it to be what it was. I

wanted to keep it perfect.”

It wasn't until she spoke the confession aloud to Keaton that she actually realized her own truth. She'd been scared that if she told him, it would have tarnished what was otherwise the most perfect relationship she'd ever had.

“There you are!” A pretty blonde exclaimed as she threaded her arm through Keaton's. Avery recognized her as one of the PAs of the show. “Uncle Keat, Aunt Laney says you need to come back because we're making a toast for Uncle Seb and Kennedy.” She held out her hand to Avery.

Keaton didn't respond to her, he didn't even acknowledge that she was there, he just kept staring at Avery.

After a few moments of silence, the young woman stretched her hand out. “You're Avery, right? I've seen you around at the castle.”

“Sorry.” Keaton blinked and shook his head slightly. “Avery, this is my niece, Iris. Iris this is Avery Stone, she owns Stone Castle.”

Iris's eyes lit up. “Cool.”

“Hi,” Avery lifted her hand in an awkward wave, suddenly feeling very out of place. “Nice to meet you.”

“How do you two know each other?” Iris asked, her blue eyes bouncing between her uncle and Avery.

“We met when I first moved to town,” he answered.

“Oh, did you two...” Iris waved her hand between Avery and Keaton, suggesting the same thing Avery's mom's eyebrows had.

“We were *friends*,” Keaton stated firmly.

Friends. It was such a nice word but it felt like a knife piercing Avery's heart.

“There you guys are!” Another blonde, who was the spitting image of Iris, joined them. “Aunt Laney says you two need to come back to the table for toasts.”

Keaton's eyes closed, and the same look of frustration he'd had when Maura interrupted their conversation at the castle showed on his face.

“She sent out a search party to find the search party?” Iris asked with a teasing tone.

“Ivy, this is—”

“This is Uncle Keat's *friend* Avery Stone, she owns the castle,” Iris cut in.

“Hi, Ivy,” Avery said awkwardly.

Ivy smiled warmly. “Hi.”

Keaton sighed. "I have to go."

Avery smiled and nodded as they all said their goodbyes, hoping to hide the pain his 'friend' description of her had caused. How could she be more upset about Keaton calling her a friend than she was at walking in and finding the father of her child boning the nanny on their wedding day?

She needed therapy, that much was clear.

“YOU BETTER BE A GOOD BOY FOR GAGA.” KEATON USED THE TERM THAT HIS nieces called their grandma as he kissed Mojo on the top of his head before handing him to his aunt.

As much as he appreciated his aunt watching Mojo, he wasn’t thrilled at the thought of not seeing him for two to eight weeks. The lazy five-pound couch warmer had wormed his way into his heart.

“We’ll be fine. Go, find love, my boy.”

Keaton had always loved it when his aunt called him her boy. It was something that she only called him even though she had three sons, and it made him feel...special. “Thanks again, Aunt Laney.”

Keaton waved as he climbed into his truck and drove away from his aunt’s house. He knew that Mojo was in good hands. If anything, his aunt was going to spoil the dog even more rotten than he already was. But he *really* hated leaving him. It was probably leftover trauma from his childhood. He was fairly certain he had a decent serving of PTSD with a side of abandonment issues from coming home to find his mom had moved out without even saying goodbye.

Which had made Avery doing the same thing that much harder. Now, at least, he’d understood why she’d done it. Finding out she was eight weeks pregnant after they’d only spent two weeks together must have been hard for her.

He couldn’t imagine how she must have felt in that moment. Over the two weeks they’d shared together, they’d talked a lot about their past relationships. She’d made it clear that she was done with her ex. He wasn’t

the man she wanted to be with. So discovering she was having his child could not have been easy.

It definitely explained why she'd left without seeing him again. Keaton was happy to finally have some of the questions he'd had for so long answered, but those questions had just been replaced with others. He couldn't help wondering if she hadn't gotten pregnant, or if she'd talked to him about it instead of just leaving, what might have been. Would they have stayed together? Would they have tried to make it work?

He didn't have those answers. He wasn't sure he ever would. But she was in town now. And she was single. Recently single, but very single. And he was about to go on a dating show.

The timing of their reunion wasn't great.

He pulled up to the castle and saw rows of production trucks. There were at least fifty people unloading them and setting up tents. As he got out of his truck a sense of dread came over him.

Up until this point, Keaton had lived his life without regrets. Even though he'd retired too late to prove to Camilla that he could give it up and settle down, he still didn't regret that decision. If it was meant to be with her, it would have been. He just hoped that doing the show wasn't the first decision he was going to regret.

He pulled his bag out from the back of his truck and started making his way up the steps. When he reached the top, a woman flew out of the large wooden doors. She looked vaguely familiar. He wasn't sure where he'd seen her before, but he definitely recognized her.

She had long dark hair and light blue eyes. She sort of reminded him of Megan Fox, but he didn't think that the resemblance to the actress was why she seemed familiar.

"They are taking my phone, but you have the number to call if there's an emergency, right?" she asked with concern and protectiveness in her tone. "Yes, it's one of the segment producers Maura's phone number. I want you to program it into your phone."

As he passed her, she gave him a small grin as a greeting and said into the phone. "Fun? This is going to be as much fun as getting a tattoo on hemorrhoids but it's a means to an end."

Wow. She definitely has a way with words, he thought as he walked into the foyer and a woman with a headset on and a panicked look flew past him calling out, "Zara!" When the headset woman got outside, she sounded

relieved. “There you are. You can’t be out here. You are supposed to be with the other ladies sequestered in the spa.”

Ahh, so ‘tattoo-hemorrhoids’ girl was one of the contestants.

Zara. Even her name rang a bell but Keaton couldn’t place where from. He tried to remember as he followed the signs for the sunroom which, according to his call sheet, was where he was supposed to report for the first preproduction meeting. When he stepped inside the room, he saw a handful of men were already seated. Some were sipping on coffee; others were on their phones.

In front of the room, he saw Ivy and Iris standing beside a guy who looked about their age. There were a half dozen other people standing on the raised platform. He recognized one as Maura, the producer he’d been in contact with, and another as George who had joined them for the meeting.

Keaton had barely sat down when a man in a very expensive suit walked into the room. It was clear from his entrance he expected all eyes to be on him, and for everyone to be impressed by his arrival, but Keaton had no clue who the guy was.

“Hello, my lords welcome to Fairytale Love: Kings and Queens.” He spoke in a grandiose manner.

There was a spattering of applause. Nothing close to the enthusiasm Keaton’s family had shown last night at Lanterns when Seb had mentioned Keaton was doing the show.

“As most of you know, I am Gavin Halloway, one of the executive producers. My producing partner Sabrina Denton’s flight was delayed so, unfortunately, she wasn’t able to be here. But fear not she should be landing soon.” He turned and motioned his arm behind him. “You have all probably met or at least spoken to Maura Simms, she is our head segment producer. Beside her is her team, Jennifer Martins, George White, Julie French, and Leanne Higgins.” He shifted so he was facing Ivy and Iris. “We also have four PAs who you can go to if you need anything or have any questions about call times, or protocol. We have the twins, Ivy and Iris, and the tech genius Marcus and...wait, where’s Heather?”

Iris leaned up and whispered something to Gavin.

Gavin turned back. “Apparently Heather had to go find a lady who went missing from holding.”

Heather must have been the one with the headset that flew past him.

“Now, why don’t we go around the room and introduce ourselves?” He

lifted his arms as if summoning them. “One at a time stand and tell us your name, where you’re from, what you do, and what celebrity most people say you look like.”

The guy in the front row stood up first. “Hey, I’m Harlan Mitchell. I work on my family farm and run a fitness class called Farm Strong. I’m from Firefly Island, Georgia, and most people tell me I look like Zac Efron or Channing Tatum.”

Zac Efron and Channing Tatum didn’t look anything alike, but Keaton could see similarities to both actors in Harlan.

The next guy stood up. “Hey, I’m Luca Moretti, I’m a firefighter from Destiny Springs, Indiana. Some people say that I look like Ryan Guzman.”

Keaton didn’t know who Ryan Guzman was, but Luca was a good-looking dude.

Two more guys went. Vic DeStefano, a construction worker from Long Island, New York who claimed people told him he looked like Jason Momoa. To be fair, there was a strong resemblance, especially the long hair. And Elijah Cross a lawyer from Sunset Canyon, California who said he was most often compared to Shemar Moore.

When it was finally Keaton’s turn, he realized he had no clue what actor he looked like. He stood up. “I’m Keaton Savage, I run an MMA gym here in Whisper Lake and I don’t know what celebrity I look like.”

“Dude! I thought that was you! You’re Keaton Savage!” Vic shouted as he stepped over two rows of chairs and ended up standing beside Keaton. He slapped Keaton’s hand as he pulled him into a one-armed hug. “This guy is a beast! He’s a three-time MMA world champion! What the fuck are you doing here, bro?”

Keaton’s eyes cut to Iris, who was cringing slightly. She mouthed, “Sorry.”

Thankfully, Vic didn’t wait for Keaton’s response to what he was doing here. “I think you look like that Gyllenhaal kid but only from the movie Southpaw.”

Actually, now that Vic mentioned it, Keaton had been told he resembled the actor, but only in that movie.

“Okay, now that we’ve met everyone let’s go over what comes next,” Gavin called the room back to attention.

Keaton sat back down, and Vic took the seat beside him, smiling and shaking his head at him like he still couldn’t believe Keaton was there. That

made two of them.

“After this meeting adjourns, you’ll be doing your one-on-one intake interviews then you’ll have free time,” Gavin explained. “We’ll post your videos up online and voting will be open to the public to see which lady you will be matched with. Tomorrow is the first coupling ceremony. From then on, you will be paired with your lady. You will share a bed with her in the main sleeping quarters, compete in tasks together, and attend the ball that will be held at the end of each week together. Some weeks there will be eliminations, other weeks there will be new arrivals. Every week you will get thirty-six hours off of filming. During off days, the lords and ladies will be sequestered and sleep in the bunk rooms that you will be in tonight.”

Bunk beds. He hadn’t had bunk beds since he roomed with Knox at his Aunt Laney’s house.

“After this meeting, you will be mic’d up. You have to keep your mics on at all times while filming, except when you’re using the facilities. Every day there will be challenges and activities. At the end of the second week, at least one contestant or match will be voted out of the castle. For the next two to four weeks, you will not have access to any electronic devices, the internet, or television. You will be cut off from the rest of the world and be in the *Fairytale Love* bubble.”

There was a low murmur in the crowd. Keaton felt a little bad for his fellow contestants. They were all from out of town and didn’t have a family member as an intern. He knew that he’d be seeing Iris and Ivy every day. He’d be able to keep up on what was happening with the family, and also get updates on Mojo.

“Okay, lords, it’s time to hand over your phones. Your journey to happily ever after starts now.”

Keaton couldn’t help but think that his journey to happily-ever-after started five years ago.

A very’s phone buzzed alerting her that it was time for lunch. If she didn’t set alarms, she would forget to eat. She removed her noise-canceling headphones and heard raised voices in the hallway.

“Bunk beds? We’re sleeping on *bunk beds*?” a woman’s raised voice

asked.

“It’s just for one night. Once you get matched tomorrow, you’ll be in a room with your partner. But once a week, you will have to sleep in the bunk rooms.”

“What is this, *summer camp*?!” The woman clearly used the term with a negative connotation, but a summer camp for adults sounded amazing to Avery. She’d sign up in a heartbeat, not for *Fairytale Love*, but for a summer camp. But being filmed twenty-four-seven sounded like Avery’s personal idea of hell.

She still couldn’t believe that Keaton had agreed to do this show. Even though their time together had been brief, she felt like she knew him, and she’d just never expected this would be something that he’d want to do.

Since he’d spent his MMA career doing everything he could to stay out of the spotlight, she doubted he was doing it for fame, like she was sure a lot of the participants were. And like her, he didn’t have any personal social media. He only used those platforms to promote Legacy, his MMA studio.

Which reminded her; she was thinking about signing Jacob up for classes as long as she was in town. In California, Jacob had taken karate and played soccer and tee-ball. Honestly, he didn’t really possess any natural athleticism, but he still enjoyed the sports, especially karate. From what she’d heard around town, kids loved the classes at Legacy and she thought maybe he’d make some friends.

She headed out of the office and recognized the woman who’d been upset about the bunk bed situation as Zara, a social media influencer and model who people said looked like Megan Fox, which she did.

Earlier that morning, Avery had snuck into the sunroom during the ladies’ orientation. She’d told herself she was just curious about the production, but the truth was she wanted to see the women who were going to get a chance to fall in love with Keaton. She’d regretted her decision almost immediately. She’d stayed while they all introduced themselves, said what they did, and which celebrity they looked like, but then she left because despite what her past behavior might suggest, she wasn’t a glutton for punishment.

Besides Zara, there was Sienna, a dentist who was the spitting image of Natalie Portman. Piper, a child psychologist who happened to be Blake Lively’s doppelganger. Freya, a police officer who was the spitting image of Halle Berry, and Ariel, a massage therapist-slash-Ana de Armas look-a-like.

Any hope that Avery had harbored that she and Keaton might have a

chance to rekindle something had been doused during that meeting. He was going to be dating five stunning women for the next month or two at what was basically an adult summer camp.

There was no way Avery, the single mom/runaway bride could compete with that.

She had to admit, she was feeling a little down in the dumps as she opened the front door of the carriage house. She was looking forward to drowning her sorrows in her leftover double cheese lasagna from Lanterns and getting a big hug from Jacob, who she expected to find watching his current favorite cartoon Dino Ranch, he'd been obsessed with dinosaurs lately. Instead, she found her mom knitting on the couch with a large glass of wine beside her watching her shows. Her soap operas. Jacob was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, sugar."

Avery walked by her and went into the kitchen, looking for Jacob. He wasn't there. She went into his room. Not there either.

"Dumplin' I'm starvin', can you whip me up a fried bologna sandwich," her mom called out from the couch.

Ignoring the lunch order, Avery walked back into the front room. "Where's Jacob?"

"He's off wanderin'."

"Wandering?" Avery repeated.

"Explorin'."

"Where?"

"The woods. The castle. I don't know," she shrugged as her knitting needles clicked together.

"Mom, I told you to keep an eye on him."

Her mom waved her hand in the air. "You can't keep an adventurous boy cooped up in here when there's a castle next door. It's like one big playground."

"A playground that has a television show shooting in it," Avery reminded her, not that she thought it would make any difference.

"He's fine," her mom stated and waved dismissively. "No one likes a helicopter mom."

Avery sighed as she walked back out of the carriage house knowing that her lunchtime was not going to be spent enjoying leftovers, instead she'd

have to find her son and explain to him that he wasn't allowed to go exploring alone. Then, she was going to have to have a serious talk with her mom about the rules, which she hoped she'd follow, or Avery would have to hire someone while they were in town.

Her mom wasn't a bad babysitter, and Avery trusted her with Jacob. She hadn't worried when she'd flown across the country with him alone and taken him to Disneyworld. Her mom knew not to let him out of her sight when she was in public. It was just at home, which the castle technically was, she was a lot more lax than Avery was.

Blanche Bardot was just brought up in a different time. A time when you sent kids out in the morning and told them to come back when the streetlights went on. Which Avery knew because she'd lived the first ten years of her life with her Gammy and that's how she'd raised her.

"Jacob!" Avery called out as she walked through the wooded area that surrounded the carriage house. "Jacob!"

When she didn't get any answer, she figured he might have gone into the castle. He'd been upset they weren't staying in it because he wanted to sleep in a real-life castle. She'd tried to explain to him why they couldn't, because there was a television show being made there. But he pointed out there were plenty of rooms.

Which there were. But she didn't want to be in the way. Or run into Keaton. Actually, that was a lie. She did want to run into him, just not when she'd first woken up before she'd had coffee.

She was headed to the employee entrance off the back kitchen when she heard a familiar giggle.

"Jacob!" she called out as she rounded the corner.

"Hi, Mama!" he shouted a second before he karate-chopped a man who reminded her of Tarzan in the stomach. The guy pretended it injured him and fell on the ground. That's when she saw Keaton. He was seated on one of the retaining walls on the other side of the courtyard.

"Mr. Keaton and Mr. Vic are teaching me to fight!" Jacob explained as he kicked and punched the air.

"Vic is teaching him to fight. I was just refereeing," Keaton explained as he stood.

"Hi, I'm Vic." Vic saluted her from the ground.

"Hi Vic, I'm Avery," she introduced herself as Keaton crossed the courtyard.

Each step that he took toward her caused her mouth to water more, and her heart rate to double in speed. By the time he stopped in front of her, her mouth was Niagara Falls and her pulse was racing faster than Usain Bolt.

Keaton lowered his head and spoke quietly, “We found him wandering around. I asked him where you were, and he said working so I figured I’d keep an eye on him.”

That statement acted as a one-way ticket to Swoonville.

Jude was Jacob’s father and if he’d seen him wandering around the castle, he wouldn’t have given it a second thought. But Keaton, someone who’d only met him once, made sure that he was taken care of.

“Thanks,” Avery said in a breathless whisper. “Sorry, my mom is supposed to be watching him.”

“No worries. He’s a great kid.”

Okay, that settled it. Keaton was officially the *mayor* of Swoonville. The fastest way to Avery’s heart was through Jacob. Not that Keaton needed any help getting into Avery’s heart. He’d moved in five years ago and she’d been trying to evict him ever since, but it was proving to be impossible.

She needed to get out of there immediately before she did something ridiculous like confessing her undying love for Keaton Savage.

“Jacob, come on, it’s time for lunch.”

“But Mama—”

“Jacob,” she said his name in a warning tone to let him know she meant business.

Jacob sighed and his shoulders dropped as he walked over to her.

“Bye, little man,” Keaton said as he ruffled Jacob’s hair.

“Bye, Mr. Keaton. Bye, Mr. Vic.” Jacob waved halfheartedly.

“Adios, muchacho!” Vic enthused.

“Bye,” she said to Keaton.

As she walked away, Jacob was talking about how big his muscles were going to be when he grew up and she was trying to pay attention. But really, all she could think about was the way the tiny hairs on the back of her neck were standing up, which happened when Keaton stared at her.

She turned back, and sure enough his gaze was fixed on her. A blush rose on her cheeks, and she smiled. That man was way too potent for his own good. Or actually, for her own good.

AVERY STRETCHED HER ARMS ABOVE HER HEAD AND SHUT HER LAPTOP. HER sight was bleary as she checked the time. It was nearly eleven. Today, just like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that had flown by.

It felt like her life was flying by. Jacob would be five in two months. It was like she'd blinked, and he'd gone from being a baby to starting school next year. She was scared that the next time she blinked he was going to be in high school, then college.

She needed to make some changes in her life. Her breakup had been a wake-up call. All of Jacob's life, Avery had been working ten, twelve, sometimes sixteen-hour days five to seven days a week. That had to stop.

First thing tomorrow, she was going to hand in her resignation to Jude's parents. As much as she loved the people that she worked with, she couldn't keep up the schedule that her position in the company demanded.

She hadn't immediately stepped down after calling off the wedding because she thought one life-altering decision per week was probably for the best. Last week, she decided not to get married. This week, she'd decided to resign from her job. And next week, maybe she'd decide where she and Jacob were going to live.

As much as she loved Whisper Lake, and was enjoying being more hands-on at Stone Castle, she wasn't sure this place was the right fit for her. Not to make everything about a man, but if Keaton did meet the love of his life on this show and settle down with her in town, staying there would be torture.

Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe the tight-knit community would make up

for unrequited love. Her emotions were all over the place which was why she was limiting her life-altering decisions to one per week.

She stood from the kitchen table, where she'd been working and caught her reflection in the glass French doors that led out to the back patio. She looked rough. Some women could pull off the messy bun look, hers just looked like a rat's nest perched on the top of her head. The dark circles that had taken up permanent residency beneath her eyes were beginning to look like she'd just lost a fight.

Thankfully, her appearance had never been that important to her. She was much more concerned with things that actually mattered, like Jacob, her career, and being a good, honest, hardworking person to set an example for him.

Speaking of Jacob, she just realized that she hadn't said goodnight to him. She wondered when he'd gone to bed. Avery was headed back to his room to kiss his forehead when she discovered he hadn't. He was in the living room, lying on his stomach on the floor in front of the TV, drawing. The past few weeks his sleeping schedule had been all over the place because of going from California to Florida, then to Illinois. After all the excitement of the almost wedding, five days at Disneyworld, and then coming to stay at a real-life castle he'd started napping again and staying up late. She knew that she needed to remedy that soon, but she wasn't going to beat herself up for letting it get out of control.

She was honestly doing the best she could.

"That's a nice picture," Avery commented as she turned off the TV. She figured she'd ease him into announcing it was bedtime.

"It's the dragon on Keaton's arm. It's so cool!"

Of course it was. During dinner tonight, Jacob had not stopped talking about Keaton. The man had made quite an impression on her son. It didn't surprise her that Keaton's classes were popular, she remembered during the short time they'd spent together that dogs and kids loved him. They flocked to him.

She remembered one time when they were down by the lake a kid ran up to him to ask him for his help, which he gave him. The kid's mom came over and it was clear to Avery that she was using her son as an in to speak and flirt with him. She'd teased him about it later that night and he'd told her that he would never date a single mom because of how he'd grown up. His exact words had been, "*My mom went through men like toilet paper, and all they*

were good for was shit.” He’d said that only one was a good guy, but that was almost worse because he’d missed him so much when their relationship inevitably ended. He said he’d never put a kid through what he went through.

Holy shit. She’d completely forgotten about that. Keaton didn’t date single moms. That was another reason she’d never even considered telling him she was pregnant.

Had she blocked that conversation out because she’d wanted to hold on to the fantasy that someday, somehow they’d end up together? Was she seriously that delusional?

“Did you see his dragon, Mama?” Jacob asked, snapping her out of her mini existential crisis.

That question piqued her mother’s interest who looked up from the romance novel she’d been reading. “Yeah, Mama, did you see his *dragon*?”

Her son’s query was innocent. Her mom’s, not so much. The answer to both was yes.

Ignoring the question completely, she redirected the conversation. “It’s late. Time to brush your teeth, J.”

Her son’s head fell back in a loud groan. “But I’m so hungry. Can we have breakfast?”

It was no secret that Avery suffered from a bad case of mom guilt for the long hours she worked. Because of that, she’d started a special, once-in-a-blue-moon tradition of having breakfast at bedtime. Not often, maybe four times a year, if Jacob was up when she got home from a late day, and he requested breakfast, she would whip up pancakes, waffles or whatever his sweet little heart desired.

She knew that she didn’t have any fixings in the carriage house, but she could head to the main kitchen where she was sure there were the ingredients she needed.

“Come on,” she held out her hand and Jacob smiled widely as he took it. Avery glanced over her shoulder at her mom before leaving the cottage. “Do you want anything?”

“No, darlin’, I’m stuffed full from that chicken pot pie.” Her mom patted her flat stomach. “Gotta watch my figure.”

Jacob put on his sneakers, and she slipped into her flip-flops before heading out into the night. The moonlight illuminated the path from the carriage house to the staff entrance of the main kitchen. She glanced up at the dark, inky sky and was momentarily transfixed by the bright stars dotting the

inky background.

There just weren't skies like this in Los Angeles, or at least, not that were visible through the thick layer of pollution.

It was a sky like this that she and Keaton had spent their first and only night together under. They'd gone up to the roof of the keep to have pizza and watch the sunset and ended up staying until sunrise. They'd laughed, talked, and danced. She'd thought he was going to kiss her, she'd wanted him to, but he hadn't. Not that night.

He didn't kiss her for a week, but when he did... Well, let's just say it was definitely worth the wait.

Being back here after so many years was strange. It felt like no time had passed since she'd explored the castle for the first time wide-eyed and naïve at what it would take to not only renovate it but also run it as a business. But it also felt like she'd lived several lifetimes in the years since she'd returned to California.

"Okay, we have to be quiet," she instructed her son as she unlocked the back door.

"Okay, Mama," he whispered and then tiptoed in.

She opened the freezer as Jacob climbed on one of the stools next to the large prep island. "Can we see if Keaton wants breakfast?"

"No," she snapped back.

She hadn't meant to, but the thought of Keaton seeing her like this, with her hair up in a wild bun, dark circles under her eyes, and oversized sweats made her jumpy. Even though she'd just remembered one of his cardinal dating rules meant there was no chance anything could happen between them, she still didn't want him seeing her like this. Thankfully, she knew that the men were being sequestered in the north tower.

There'd be no reason for him to come down to the main kitchen. If he wanted anything to eat or drink, he'd go to the restaurant attached to the spa, which was where craft services was set up.

Plus, production was taking the sequestering of the cast very seriously. She didn't think they had armed guards at the doors, but she wouldn't be surprised if they did.

She was safe in the back of the castle. There would not be a Keaton Savage sighting tonight.

Keaton stared up at the slats of the bed above him as he listened to a snoring symphony. Vic, Harlan, and Elijah were all very loud sleepers. If only one person was sawing logs, perhaps Keaton would be able to tune it out, but the cacophony of logs being sawed was too much to ignore. He shifted on the twin mattress so that one ear was plastered against his pillow and his hand covered the other one in an attempt to drown out the sound.

It didn't work.

Keaton had never considered himself a diva, but he had to admit he was not thrilled with the sleeping arrangements. Besides the snoring, the room was around eighty degrees. The pillows were flat. The sheets and comforter were scratchy. And the mattress was hard.

He missed his Nest thermostat being set at sixty-eight degrees. He missed his 400 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets. He missed his Brooklinen mid-plush down pillows. He missed his king-sized, memory foam Tempur-Pedic bed. But more than any of those things, he missed his growling, five-pound bed hog. He wanted to go home.

His only hope was that he'd be voted out at the first elimination.

Giving up on sleep altogether, he pushed out of the bed and pulled on his sweats. His feet were light as he made his way quietly out of the room, hoping not to disturb anyone, including the PA/handlers asleep in the next room. They were under strict orders not to leave their designated 'zone' which included the bunk room and bathroom and their dressing room. If they needed anything the protocol was to alert one of the PAs and they'd take care of it.

But he couldn't stay cooped up in the north tower. He was feeling claustrophobic being constantly surrounded by people. His aunt was right. He needed his social hibernation recharge. And he was hungry.

Dinner was buffet-style and he'd been last in line. By the time he made it to the front, it had been seriously picked over. He knew that they had craft services set up in the restaurant, but since Vic and Harlan who had formed an unlikely bromance had gone down to raid it before bed, Keaton doubted there was much left.

The one good thing about having to stay at the castle was that he knew there was another kitchen in the back connected to the ballroom. He wasn't sure what it would have, but he hoped there was something there he could whip up. He walked down the east wing and headed to the back stairwell.

He was halfway down the steep steps when his senses were overwhelmed

with the scent of pancakes. Someone else must have had the midnight munchies. When he hit the last step, he heard a sound of laughter that transported him back six years.

It was the first morning he'd met Avery and after they'd gone to the vet, returned Muffin aka Mojo to Mrs. Campbell and had breakfast at The Drawbridge Diner, they'd gone for a walk around the lake. They were about an hour into the stroll when Keaton started walking backward in front of her so he could look at her as he talked to her. That's how desperate he was to keep her in his sight, he didn't want to take his eyes off of her. He'd seen men do it before in the movies, but he'd never actually done it himself before or since. He found out why it was more of a cinematic move than a practical one.

After just a few steps, he'd tripped over a stick. All of his life, he'd been coordinated, athletic, and light on his feet. But, for some reason, this day, he was none of those things. He tried to stop his fall by reaching his arms out and flailing them in circles in a failed attempt to regain his balance. His effort was pointless and he fell flat on his ass. The entire thing felt like it happened in slow motion but was probably only a second long.

As soon as Avery made sure that he was okay, her head fell back and she started laughing. He didn't blame her. The windmill arms definitely put his fall into cartoon-slipping-on-a-banana-peel territory. Through her laughter she apologized for her reaction, but there was no need for her to, because he was as far from offended as he could be. Her laugh was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. It was a melodic representation of pure happiness. He'd fall on his ass every day for the rest of his life to hear her laugh.

He heard the same sound now, and once again, it washed over him like a cool breeze on a hot day. His breath grew shallow knowing he'd see her again. Today, when they'd spoken in the courtyard, he'd had the biggest urge to lean down and kiss her. The only thing that had stopped him was that Jacob was there. If her son hadn't been drop-kicking Vic, there was a very good chance Keaton would have made a fool of himself. He had no self-control when it came to Avery. It was dangerous. She was dangerous for him.

As he stepped into the kitchen, he saw that he was safe. Jacob was seated at the island, so there was a buffer for his self-control.

He smiled at the kid. "Hey."

"Mr. Keaton!" Jacob exclaimed as he hopped off the stool and launched himself at Keaton. Thankfully, his reflexes hadn't taken a vacation like they

had on the morning walk around the lake, and Keaton easily caught him in his arms.

As he held Jacob, he looked up at Avery and his heart swelled in his chest. She was wearing a faded, oversized UCLA shirt and blue sweats which should have hidden her curves but didn't. Her hair was piled on top of her head revealing the sexy slope of her neck, and she had flour on her face.

She was adorable. Sexy. She was every fantasy he'd ever had come to life.

He smiled. "Hi."

She blinked at him like she was coming out of a trance and her face turned bright red. "Hi, um, sorry were we too loud? Did we wake you?"

Keaton walked over and set Jacob back down on the stool he'd abandoned. "No, I couldn't sleep."

As soon as Jacob's butt hit the chair, he grabbed his fork and took a big bite of the pancakes, which Keaton noticed were shaped like Mickey Mouse.

Of course, it was nearly midnight and Avery had made special pancakes for her son. She was fucking perfect. Being a single mom had to be the hardest job in the world, hell, being any parent had to be the hardest job in the world. But it was clear from how well adjusted, bright, and funny Jacob was that Avery was doing an incredible job.

"Do you want pancakes, Mr. Keaton?" Jacob asked as he chewed his bite.

Before Keaton could respond verbally, his stomach answered for him. As if on cue, it growled louder and deeper than Mojo ever had.

Jacob's eyes widened, and Avery laughed again.

Keaton grinned, "Apparently, I would. If there's enough."

Avery's eyes sparkled. "There is."

He noticed her hand was shaking as she slid the spatula under a couple of the pancakes on the stack and put them on a plate. As she did, he reached over and brushed the white powder off her cheek.

The moment the pad of his thumb brushed along her soft skin she sucked in a shaky breath and her eyes closed. Yeah, he would have definitely leaned down and kissed her if Jacob wasn't there.

But he was.

Keaton pulled his hand away and showed her the bottom of his thumb. "You had some flour."

"Oh." She reached up and wiped her face with a towel.

"Keaton! There you are!" Keaton turned and saw Heather, who had been

nicknamed the “lord wrangler” because she was tasked with making sure the men were where they were supposed to be at all times. “I’ve been looking all over for you. You *can’t* leave your designated area.”

Everything inside him wanted to tell Heather that he was quitting the show. He wanted to stay in that kitchen and eat pancakes with Jacob and Avery more than he’d ever wanted anything in his entire life, including his three world championship wins.

But he knew he couldn’t. He’d given his word. He’d made a commitment. He needed to see it through.

Keaton looked down at the pancakes. “Thanks, anyway.”

Avery smiled, but he saw a flash of disappointment in her eyes. “Anytime.”

“Bye, little man.” Keaton ruffled Jacob’s hair before being ushered out of the kitchen by Heather.

As she escorted him back to the bunk room, she explained, again, the ‘zone’ he was allowed to be in. He felt bad that he’d obviously caused her stress. He wasn’t trying to be a pain in the ass, but he didn’t necessarily regret it. Going rogue had allowed him to see Avery again, even if it was just for a few minutes. And he’d heard her laugh, which was a sound he wasn’t sure he’d ever have the pleasure of hearing again.

“Can I get you anything?” Heather asked as she dropped him back off at the room.

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

The only thing he wanted was Avery.

THE ENTIRE CASTLE WAS BUZZING WITH EXCITEMENT. THERE HAD BEEN SOME filming the day before, but that had been more behind-the-scenes footage. Today was the first day the cast was actually going to meet each other.

Avery was doing her best to stay out of the way of production, which meant she was holed up in her office, which was just fine by her because she had a ton of work to do. She was putting together systems so that she would be able to seamlessly hand over the reins of her job to whoever her replacement was.

She hadn't realized how much she was actually responsible for until she'd had to put everything together. It was no wonder she'd felt like she was always behind and wished she could clone herself. She was doing the job of five people.

Her mom had taken Jacob out for the day. They were going to a bouncy house gym to grab lunch and then to a movie. Avery had an entire day of uninterrupted time and planned to make the most of it.

So far, her mind had been a little preoccupied. All she could think about was Keaton walking into the kitchen with his shirt off.

The first time she'd seen him without a shirt, she'd had an Emma Stone moment from *Crazy, Stupid, Love* when Ryan Gosling takes his shirt off and she says he looks photoshopped. His unreal physique made sense five years ago because Keaton had been at the top of his MMA career having just won his third consecutive world championship. He'd been in peak athletic form.

But last night, she hadn't been expecting what she'd seen. Somehow, someway, he'd gotten even sexier during retirement. His body was even more

impressive now. So impressive, in fact, she'd forgotten where she was, what she was doing, or that anyone else existed.

It wasn't until he spoke that she realized her son had jumped into his arms, and she was making him pancakes. Then, when Keaton had reached out and touched her face, she'd had another moment of total lust fog. His touch was so gentle, yet firm, just like she remembered it.

Thank god her son was there, because if he hadn't been she might have stripped naked and begged him to take her on the counter. Which would have been embarrassing for a plethora of reasons. One, after remembering Keaton's dating rules, she now knew for certain Keaton was not interested in her. Two, Heather showed up and she would have gotten quite the show if Avery had been left to her own devices. And third, unlike Keaton she was *not* in better physical form than the first time he'd seen her in her birthday suit. Between having a baby and running on junk food and four hours of night sleep most nights, her body was not in prime condition.

Avery looked down at the muffin top that sat on the waistline of her slacks. Maybe that was the reason Jude cheated on her...

No. She absolutely would not allow her brain to go down that road. Jude didn't cheat on her because she'd put on fifteen pounds, and even if he had, that said more about him than it did about her.

He'd cheated on her because their relationship was void of love. It was void of friendship. The only thing they were good at was business. And even in that, they weren't really in it together, they just happened to have complementary skill sets. Avery was good at the behind-the-scenes mechanics of keeping everything running, and Jude was good at networking and marketing himself and the hotels.

Over the past five years, her focus had solely been on building Jude's family's brand. She'd put all of her energy, time, creativity, and brainpower into making their business as successful as she could. She hadn't done it for Jude, she'd done it for Jacob. Her plan had been to build his legacy. Every late night she'd spent away from him, she'd told herself was worth it because of what he would inherit. She hadn't had any sort of help in life. It had taken her fifteen years to pay off her student loans.

She didn't want that for Jacob. She wanted more for him. It was the same reason that she'd almost walked down the aisle and married a man she didn't love. So that Jacob could have the family that she'd never had. Which was clearly misguided.

How had she gotten it so wrong? How had she missed that the most important thing to Jacob would be time with her and that he would be happy if she was happy?

Her phone vibrated on her desk, and she turned off the alarm. She'd set it to the time she'd heard Sabrina was arriving. She still hadn't told her friend that she was in Whisper Lake because she hadn't wanted to answer questions about why she wasn't on her honeymoon over the phone.

Avery stood and grabbed her keys. She checked her reflection in the mirror hanging on the wall before heading out, just in case she ran into Keaton in the halls. Last night, she'd looked like a total disaster, so today she'd gotten up extra early to blow dry her hair and put on a little makeup, in case she saw him again.

Just because nothing could happen between them, didn't mean she wanted to look like a troll when he saw her.

As she got to the end of the hall, she heard Sabrina's voice. She walked into the foyer and her friend's back was to her as she spoke to Maura.

"That's fine. She can make all the demands she wants. She is not going to hold this production hostage. You tell her that we're providing makeup and hair for the balls, but not every day. It was in her contract. We can email her a copy of it if she wants."

In what felt like conversational Double Dutch, Avery waited for a break in Sabrina's rant to jump in and surprise her friend.

"And if she really throws a temper tantrum and is going to cause us to fall behind in our schedule then she will be hearing from our lawyers."

When she saw her in, Avery tapped Sabrina on the shoulder.

Her friend barely spared her a glance as she said, "One second."

She turned her attention back to Maura and continued "She needs to be in that ballroom in ten minutes—" Then she did a double take of Avery and let out a scream. "What?!"

Avery laughed as Sabrina pulled her into a huge bear hug. For a second there she thought maybe her surprise wasn't going to be as well received as she'd thought it would.

"What are you doing here?!" Sabrina squealed as she pulled back and put her hands on Avery's face. "I didn't even recognize you because I thought you were in Greece!"

"I'm not," Avery stated the obvious.

"I can see that." Sabrina looked around. "Is Jude here? Where's Jacob?"

“I’ll explain everything later. I know you’re busy, I just wanted to say hi.”

Sabrina’s gaze landed on Avery again and her eyes narrowed a second before she waved her hand toward Maura. “I’ll be back in one minute.”

A tight grin pulled at Maura’s lips as she nodded, clearly feeling overwhelmed and not wanting Sabrina leaving her alone.

Sabrina didn’t seem to notice Maura’s reaction as she hooked her arm through Avery’s and pulled her into the first available empty room. As soon as the door was shut, she turned around and demanded, “Talk. Fast. Go.”

“I didn’t get married. On the morning of the wedding, I went to Jude’s room and found him in bed with Celeste.”

“Celeste?” Sabrina repeated. “The nanny?”

“Yep.”

“I mean, it’s a little cliché, but Jude never was an original.”

Avery chuckled. She loved how Sabrina looked at things. Everyone else that had found out what happened had either responded with relief that she hadn’t gone through with the wedding, or horror and pity over what he’d done. Sabrina was just...pragmatic. It was probably what made her a good producer.

“What did you do?”

“I told him we were done, packed up, and came here.”

“Wow. Are you okay?”

Avery nodded. “Yeah.”

A loud knock sounded on the door before a male voice announced, “Cameras up in five!”

“Shit.” Sabrina looked down at her Apple watch. “I have to go. We have the first-impression mixer. Come with me and watch.”

Avery shook her head. “No.”

“Please!” Sabrina begged giving Avery the big puppy dog eyes that had convinced her to go streaking in the quad, to go to frat parties, to have “one drink”, to basically do anything other than study, go to classes, and work which was all Avery would have done in college if it weren’t for her best friend. “You can’t just surprise me by being here, drop the Jude-fucked-the-nanny-on-my-wedding-day bomb on me, and then leave me.”

“I don’t want to get in the way.”

“You won’t. We’ll be tucked in the back in video village. You can sit and just watch. No one will see you, I promise.”

Sabrina knew that Avery hated being in front of crowds or having any attention on her.

“Okay,” Avery agreed.

She told herself that she was doing it for Sabrina, and she was. But she had to admit, she was curious to see what Keaton would be like around the women. Would he flirt with them? Would he smile and brush the hair out of their face? Would he *look* at them the same way he looked at her?

Actually, maybe she was wrong. Maybe she was a glutton for punishment.

“Okay, my lords, the time you have been waiting for has come, you are about to meet your ladies at the first-impression mixer. You will be introduced to each lady, who will offer you their hand. Once you take it, you can bow your head or, if you feel so inclined, you can kiss the back of her hand. Each of the women will be wearing dance cards on their wrists. Once you reach the end of the receiving line, you will be asked to write the name of which woman you’d like to ask to dance with based purely on your first impression. Once each man has been introduced, there will be a welcome reception where you can socialize.” Gavin took a deep breath, for what Keaton could only assume was for dramatic purposes. “Then, tonight during the first Fairytale Love Ball, each lord will have a chance to dance with every lady, including the one they selected. Then at the end of the ball, it will be revealed which lady the viewers voted for you to be matched with.”

Beside Keaton, Harlan raised his hand. “What’s the point of choosing who we want to dance with if we don’t pick who we get matched with?”

“I’m so glad you asked. The woman whose dance card has the most names on it will get to override the public vote and pick her own lord,” Gavin explained as if it was a *Sixth Sense* I-see-dead-people plot twist.

The other men seemed to be intrigued by the prospect of one woman having the control to decide who she wanted to be with.

All Keaton could think was, *fuck my life*. He really was trying to go into this thing with an open mind. He knew that every show had to have a hook. The Bachelor had roses. Love Island had text messages the contestants would receive. Love is Blind had the pods. He got it. He even understood why they

would have to write down the name of the person they wanted to dance with the most. It was to cause tension and drama if it wasn't the same as the audience pick.

He got why they did the things they did, he just really didn't want to be a part of it. All he wanted to do was be back in that kitchen with Avery. Or anywhere with Avery for that matter.

But his feelings didn't matter. It didn't matter how he felt about the cheesiness of the show. Or if he'd only agreed to do it for Iris and his aunt. Or if he fundamentally disagreed with manipulating people through editing and misinformation.

His granddad had been old school. Arthur Savage lived his life with certain beliefs, and he'd instilled those beliefs in his grandsons. He had a zero-tolerance policy for whining and complaining. He expected excellence at all times. And he loved a good idiom to demonstrate his point, especially when he was out on the boat with his grandsons. Keaton couldn't count the number of jewels he'd dropped out in the middle of Whisper Lake.

A few of which were applicable to Keaton's current situation. If his granddad was here now, Keaton knew what his take on things would be.

"A man who doesn't keep his word is not a man at all, he's just a boy who likes to talk."

"If you put your name on something, make sure it's worthy of your name."

"Half-assing something just makes you a whole asshole."

The bottom line was, he'd given his word to participate in this show. He'd signed a contract with his name on it. He wasn't going to half-ass it. For however long he was filming, he was going to do his best to show up and be the man who he and his granddad could be proud of.

"Here we go! Game time, boys!" Vic clapped his hands before the doors opened.

When they did, Keaton immediately saw Zara, the woman on the phone who he thought looked familiar yesterday. He still felt like he knew her from somewhere, but he couldn't place it. Gavin stood at the end of the line and introduced each woman as "Lady" and then their names as each "Lord" walked down the receiving line.

Vic was first up, and he kissed the back of every girl's hand. Keaton noticed he lingered a little longer on Lady Piper's hand. Elijah was next and he simply nodded. From the little Keaton had observed of him, Elijah

definitely seemed like the most reserved out of the men. Luca was next and he spoke Italian to each woman as he took their hand. Harlan winked and really leaned into his southern drawl as he greeted each woman with their own individual term of endearment as he went down the row.

Lady Sienna was sweet pea. Lady Piper was peaches. Keaton thought that he was choosing the affectionate aliases based on the first initial of their actual names, but he was proven wrong when Lady Ariel was darlin'. Then Lady Freya was sugar and Lady Zara was dumplin'.

From the look on Zara's face, after Harlan passed, she wasn't impressed with her nickname. That or she wasn't impressed with Harlan. Maybe it was both. Keaton was last and he took a page out of Elijah's book and just took each of their hands and tilted his chin down.

When he got to the end of the line, he was presented with a blank card. He knew he was supposed to write a woman's name on it, but he had no clue which one to write. All of the women were beautiful, but he didn't feel anything when he looked into their eyes. Eyes were a big thing to him. He wasn't expecting fireworks like he had with Avery, but he had thought maybe there'd be a spark or something. But there wasn't.

He chose Ariel because she had the kindest eyes. He figured he couldn't go wrong with nice. But as he wrote her name, he felt like he was lying. The only woman's name he wanted to write down was Avery.

He handed his card back to Heather and the mixer began. Sienna was the first to approach him. She told him she was a dentist, had two dogs, and in her spare time she liked to volunteer planting trees for the environment.

Next up, he talked to Piper who was a child psychologist who liked to do AcroYoga and didn't drink caffeine. While he was speaking to Piper, Vic interrupted them and asked if he could steal her.

Keaton was relieved to have a breather, but when he turned around, he saw that Ariel was waiting to speak to him. She was a massage therapist who loved horror movies, had never had a broken bone, and was once held hostage in a bank that was being robbed.

Each conversation probably only lasted a few minutes, but to Keaton, it felt like they'd taken hours.

Small talk had never been his strong suit. And small talk that was being filmed was proving to be even more difficult for him to engage in, but he'd made a commitment and he was going to give it his best. He smiled, asked questions, and tried to be as present as possible.

He was just about to pat himself on the back for doing a good job when Iris approached him. She spoke in a low voice through clenched teeth. “Can I talk to you real quick?”

“Yes,” he’d never been more relieved to see his niece.

The moment the door closed behind them, she reached behind him and turned off his mic, then demanded. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m talking.”

“*Talking?* Cool. I just have one question. Did you forget your *charm*, *humor*, and *personality* in the dressing room?” she asked, he assumed rhetorically. “You look *miserable*.”

He was.

“Sabrina is here, and she is wondering what is wrong with you. Avery tried to say that maybe you were shy, but I said you are not—”

“Avery?” Keaton cut her off. “Avery is here?”

“She was. I think she might have left when things started getting tense in the booth because you are being so...so... boring. You are supposed to be the breakout star of the season.”

“I am?” Who in the hell had decided that? It had to be someone that didn’t actually know him. But it didn’t matter. He was obviously doing a shit job and that wasn’t acceptable. He took a deep breath, before assuring his niece, “Sorry. I’ll be...better.”

“Good. Be *better*.” She reached behind him and turned his mic back on.

When they walked back into the ballroom, he found himself looking for Avery. Had she left? Was she still there?

No, he shook his head. He needed to focus on the women he was supposed to be dating. Not on the one he actually wanted to.

READ THE WORDS IN FRONT OF YOUR FACE. FOCUS, AVERY ADMONISHED herself as she stared at her computer screen.

She was doing her best not to be distracted by what she'd just witnessed. Keaton had not seemed like himself at all in the mixer. At least not the man she knew him to be. He was like a shell of that man. He looked like a robot or something. And she wasn't the only one who noticed. Sabrina kept saying how 'flat' he seemed and how she couldn't believe it because she'd been banking on him being the 'breakout star' of the series.

Avery had to admit, inside she was secretly doing the happy dance. His behavior with the women made her even more convinced that what they shared was special. Even if they couldn't have a future, it was nice for her to think that their past was what she'd thought it had been.

Or, maybe he was just uncomfortable in front of cameras. That could be the reason he froze up. She'd tried to pick up on who he was attracted to, but she was completely at a loss.

All five women were stunning. She hoped, for his sake, that he didn't end up with Zara. Although on the outside, she might look incredible, from what Avery had heard and witnessed she was not the kindest person. And Keaton deserved someone kind.

Then again, maybe it would be a good thing if he ended up matched with Zara. If she was his partner, there was a good chance he wouldn't fall in love with her. She knew that was a selfish thing to wish for, but she couldn't help herself.

She'd spent the past five years pining for a man who she'd assumed she'd

built up in her head as something more than he actually was. Cut to present day, she finds out he is all that and a bag of chips, as the kids used to say in the '90s. His behavior today withstanding, Keaton was charming, funny, kind, and magnetic. He had a commanding presence that couldn't be ignored, without him even trying.

Jude wanted all eyes on him when he walked into a room, and typically, he got the attention he craved. Keaton wasn't aware of how charismatic he was which made him all the sexier and more enigmatic.

She just hoped none of those qualities translated through the lens of the camera. If they did, then she knew he would be the breakout star and instant viewer favorite. Which meant he'd be on the show for the next two months. The longer he was on the show, the more opportunity he had to meet someone and develop real feelings for them. Sure, it was a television show, but there were a lot of couples who met and fell in love on reality TV.

She knew she was in the minority of wanting him not to do well on the show. All of Whisper Lake was rooting for him to fall in love. Everywhere she went, she saw *Vote for Coach Keaton* signs up. His being on the show was all anyone talked about. She'd heard it being discussed at the grocery store. The Drawbridge Diner. Lanterns. The gas station.

Apparently, all three of his cousins had recently been taken off the market and fallen madly in love with their soulmates. The entire town was rallying behind Keaton to find the same happiness.

Avery knew that she *should* want the same for him. She'd had her chance with him, and she'd blown it. Not that she'd ever consider Jacob a mistake. He was so far from that. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Life hadn't worked out the way that she'd imagined it would, but she had Jacob, and he was the only thing that mattered.

Her phone vibrated and she saw that it was a text from her mom. She sent her a picture of Jacob eating a piece of pizza the size of his face. As soon as she looked at it, her stomach growled loudly.

She briefly considered working through lunch. She'd barely made a dent in her work load since she'd spent the majority of the morning in a monitor booth watching Keaton meet and get to know five eligible women.

To eat or not to eat, that was the question.

After a brief moment of indecision, she decided to eat. Food was fuel for her brain. She'd make a turkey sandwich and bring it back to her desk.

On her way back to the carriage house, she bumped into Sabrina.

Literally the two ran into each other because they had both been looking down at their phones.

When her friend lifted her head and saw who she'd collided with, her luminous green eyes lit up. "Oh, I was just coming to see if you had time for lunch."

"I was just gonna grab a quick sandwich and—"

Sabrina hooked her arm through Avery's. "Nope. You're having lunch with me. Work can wait. We never get to see each other, and I miss the shit out of you."

Avery smiled. She knew there was no way she could say no to her friend. She'd never been able to.

On the way to craft services, Sabrina got a call she had to take. She was on it until they made it to the end of the buffet line.

"So, how was Spain?" Avery asked when Sabrina hung up the phone.

"It was beautiful. I think we got all the coverage we needed. Dailies looked good but I won't know for sure until I get into the editing bay." She took a bite out of the hamburger she'd chosen before they even made it to their seats. Avery would never know how her friend ate the way she did and still kept her super model figure. If Avery even looked at chips she gained five pounds.

"So when do I get to see my Jakey?" Sabrina asked after she finished her first bite.

At the mention of her son, Avery smiled from ear to ear. Sabrina didn't see Jacob often, in fact she hadn't seen him since her trip to L.A. when he was one, but she spoiled him rotten. She sent gifts on days like Labor Day, 4th of July, Halloween, and other random holidays. Her theory behind her random gift-giving was that Jacob received loads of presents for his birthday and Christmas so she sent hers on President's Day so he would remember them. And it worked. He always remembered every present she sent him.

"Mom took him to a bouncy house, lunch, and a movie. I can bring him by to see you when he gets back."

"Yes! I want to kiss his fat little cheeks!" she enthused before growing a little more serious and leaning forward. "Okay, so I know I asked you before, but are you okay? Really?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

Sabrina tilted her head to the side, not looking convinced. "Jude was, I'm sorry, *is* a prick but you guys were together a long time and I mean you were

going to get married and then...”

“I walked in on him fucking the nanny on my wedding day,” Avery finished.

“Yeah, and you seem...*fine*. Are you just numb?”

“I went to his room to tell him that I didn’t want to get married. I was calling off the wedding,” Avery admitted.

Sabrina’s eyes widened. “You were?”

“Yeah, I knew I couldn’t go through with it. At one time, I loved Jude, but I haven’t been in love with him for years. Since before Jacob.”

“Wow. Okay.” Sabrina took another bite of her hamburger and stuffed some fries in her mouth to go with it. After she swallowed, she asked. “Wait, then *why* were you going to marry him?”

“Remember that summer when we broke up?”

Sabrina nodded. “Yeah, it was right when you found out you inherited this place.”

“Right, and I came here to do all the renovations but then went back to California before you even got here?”

She nodded. “Yeah, because you two got back together.”

Avery had never told Sabrina that she only got back together with Jude because she was pregnant. She never told anyone. Except Jude, that is. “We did get back together, but that’s not why I went back. I went back because I found out I was pregnant.”

Realization dawned on her face. “Oh.”

“I went back to California and told him. He told his family, and they pressured him into asking me to marry him. He did because he wanted his inheritance, and I said yes because I wanted a family.”

“*Family*,” Sabrina repeated at the same time as Avery. “That’s what you’ve always wanted.” She was quiet for a minute before asking, “What do you think eighteen-year-old us would think of thirty-two-year-old us?”

In college, Avery and Sabrina had talked about what they wanted in life, which were very different goals. Avery wanted a family, stability, and a home that she could raise all her kids in and one they could come home to for the holidays.

Sabrina who had lived in the same house she was brought home from the hospital to until she left for college, wasn’t sure she even wanted kids or to ever get married. Her goals had always been career-oriented. Success for her was having an Emmy and an Oscar for something she’d produced.

“I know eighteen-year-old me would be proud of the mom I am,” Avery answered honestly. “And I *hope* she’d be proud of me not settling for a loveless marriage.”

“I *know* she would be. I sure as hell am!” Sabrina smiled. “I think eighteen-year-old me would be proud of the fact that I haven’t given up. That girl who had no clue how cutthroat and heartbreaking this industry can be.” Sabrina took another bite. As she chewed, her expression changed. “*Wait...* weren’t you seeing someone here? In Whisper Lake, before you went back to California?” she asked with her mouth still full.

Shit. Sabrina hadn’t been in town yet when Avery had been working on the renovations. She’d been in New York. But she had told her friend about Keaton in real-time texts during their two weeks together. At the time, it had felt like a fairytale—which was ironic considering the show he was currently a contestant on—so Avery had had to tell someone.

But, she’d never told her his name. She’d kept that part to herself because Keaton was somewhat well-known, at least in the MMA world, and she’d wanted to respect his privacy. That and she was scared if she did say his name out loud it would have the opposite effect of Beetlejuice and he’d disappear, or she’d jinx it or something. Little did she know, they never actually had a chance. She was already pregnant with Jacob.

Avery nodded, confirming her friend’s inquiry. “Yeah, I was.”

A wide smile lifted on Sabrina’s mouth. “I remember you were seriously *twitterpated*. I kept expecting a text saying that you went to Vegas and eloped.”

If Keaton would have asked, she would have. Although, that would have made the whole pregnancy situation that much more complicated.

“What happened with that guy?” Sabrina asked.

“After I found out I was pregnant, I just left.”

A crease appeared on her forehead as her eyebrows lifted. “You didn’t tell him?”

“No, I didn’t really think there was anything to say.”

A spark lit in Sabrina’s eye. Avery knew that look, it made her nervous.

“I wonder what he’s doing now. Do you remember his name? Maybe he’s still in town.” Sabrina pulled out her phone. “We can look him up.”

Avery was waffling on whether or not to tell her who he was. She wanted to, so badly, but with him being on her show she didn’t think it was right. But she didn’t want to lie to her.

Thankfully, her internal dilemma was resolved when Gavin appeared and told Sabrina they were having a 'code red' emergency.

She felt bad for whatever fire Sabrina had to go put out, but grateful that it had saved her from having to either lie to her friend or tell her that the man Sabrina had believed Avery was going to elope with was none other than the man she was banking on being the 'breakout star' of her reality dating show.

“DAMN, BRO, WHAT DID YOU EAT?” HARLAN ASKED AS HE SCRUNCHEd HIS face in disgust and lifted his arm to block his nose.

“I had that pizza for lunch. I’m lactose intolerant,” Vic explained as he fidgeted with his tie.

All the men were rocking suits and ties for the ball. Some were more comfortable than others in the formal attire. Elijah, Luca, and Keaton all got dressed without any complaints or questions. Harlan and Vic weren’t having as easy of a time. They were not happy about having to wear a suit jacket, which they both complained was too tight, and they weren’t thrilled about having to wear a tie either.

Another nasty stench wafted through the air and Harlan threw an empty water cup at Vic. “You gotta go outside if you’re gonna let ‘em rip like that.”

Keaton was no stranger to foul odors growing up with his three male cousins and then spending most of his adult life in a gym. But Vic’s gas was toxic waste-level horror. The entire men’s changing/holding area smelled like a hot sewer.

The door opened and Ivy walked into the room with a wide smile on her face. “Hey guys—” she choked and then gagged. “Oh, my god!” Her hand flew over her face, and she stepped back into the hall. “What is that? Did a toilet back up?”

“Yeah, a toilet named Vic,” Luca explained.

“I’m nervous,” Vic defended his rank gas.

“I thought you said it was the cheese at lunch,” Harlan shot back.

Vic shrugged unapologetically. “It’s both.”

“Come on,” Ivy waved her hand, ushering the five men out of the changing room.

As they all filed down the hallway, Keaton found himself glancing in every room they passed hoping to catch a glimpse of Avery. He hadn’t seen her during the mixer that morning. The last spotting he’d had of her was last night in the kitchen. She’d looked so cute with that flour on her cheek. If Jacob hadn’t been there, he was sure they would have kissed.

Which was crazy. There were so many reasons he should stay away from her. She was supposed to be on her honeymoon. He was on a dating show. He had no idea how long she was going to be in town and wasn’t sure he could handle her leaving again. She had a son, and he didn’t date single moms. The list went on and on.

But for some inexplicable reason, none of those things mattered to him. He just wanted to be near her. She was the flame, and he was a moth. She was a magnet, and he was metal. He was drawn to her in a way he’d never experienced before.

It was the strangest phenomenon, but he felt the most himself when he was near her. Like she was a part of him that had always been missing. It was seriously fucking with his head.

He shook his head, trying to erase his brain like a mental Etch A Sketch. He turned his attention to Ivy who was giving them the rundown of how the ball would be filmed. He was so proud of both his nieces. They had had a ton of success in the social media world, and they could have easily ridden the influencer wave. They could be posting athletic wear and green drinks and making a ton of money. But they wanted more than that and they weren’t afraid of starting at the bottom. Being a PA was definitely grunt work. It was taking orders and making sure all the ‘talent’ were taken care of. And Iris and Ivy were both doing an incredible job.

“Okay, so this is basically going to be like speed date dancing. You will dance with each woman, doing the simple box step that you all learned after lunch, for two minutes. When the bell is rung, the women will place their hand in yours and curtsy. You can kiss the back of their hands or nod your head and bow. When the music changes, so will your dance partner. You will stop dancing, bow, and move on to your next partner. Rinse and repeat. Once the dance is over Lance Sparrow, our host, will announce the matches as voted on by the viewers. And remember, don’t look down at your feet. Maintain eye contact.”

After lunch this afternoon, they had all taken a dance lesson. The waltz box step had been fairly simple for him to learn, but some of the guys had had a harder time. Harlan was a natural, who picked it up immediately. Luca was clearly not a novice on the dance floor. Within the first five minutes, he was adding his own flare to the moves complete with spins and dips of his partner. On the opposite side of the dancing spectrum, Vic had been so bad, Keaton was sure that he had four left feet, not two. And Elijah had as much rhythm as a rock.

Thankfully, the Savage men had always been decent dancers. From granddad, who bragged on more than one occasion that he'd won their grandma's heart on the dance floor, to his dad and uncle who had both been notorious for being the first people out on the dancefloor at any wedding, birthday party, or holiday gathering.

"You good?" Ivy asked under her breath. He could see that she was nervous for him. He wasn't sure if it was because she thought he was going to do badly on the show after this morning at the mixer, or if she thought he was going to do well and have to stay on longer than he wanted since she knew the only reason he'd agreed was because Iris had roped him into it. Either way, he appreciated her support.

He gave her a quick nod and a wink. "All good."

The doors opened and all the men filed in. The women were all out on the dance floor wearing cocktail dresses. They looked incredible. Music was playing over the speakers and the room was filled with flowers and candles. It reminded him of prom.

Vic beelined directly to Piper. Since Sienna was the person closest to him, Keaton walked up to her and took her hand. As they started to dance, he couldn't help but notice beside him, Vic seemed to be mesmerized by his partner. He could be just following orders and maintaining eye contact, or he was really feeling her. Keaton had a sneaking suspicion it was the latter.

The dance with Sienna was nice, but Keaton didn't feel any chemistry or romantic sparks. Not that he was expecting to feel any. At least not like he felt with Avery.

He wondered what she was doing right now. Was she back at the carriage house? Jacob had told him they were staying there. Had she had dinner? If she had, what had she eaten?

Each partner made small talk, but to Keaton, it seemed like they were just reciting dating profiles. But maybe that's what dating was, he really wouldn't

know because he rarely did it. His dating life had been as dry as the Sahara since moving to Whisper Lake.

Part of that was because he'd still been hung up on Camilla and then Avery. And part was because he refused to date anyone in town. Owning a business in a small town and dating was a recipe for disaster. If things didn't work out, which nine times out of ten, they didn't, then he'd have to deal with the fallout which could include losing clients.

And another part was his policy not to date single moms. At his age, most women had kids. Not because he didn't like kids, but because he did. He would never want to come into a kid's life only to leave it after attachments were formed.

But Avery had Jacob. He'd never been tempted to break his rule before, but with her rules didn't exist. Like Justin Long said in *He's Just Not That Into You* to Ginnifer Goodwin's character, Avery was the exception to his rule.

During the dances, he was trying to be present and engaged, but his mind was miles away. Well, not miles. It was however as far away as the carriage house, if that's where Avery was.

The thing that was driving him crazy was that their conversations had been so brief, and they kept getting interrupted. They clearly had unfinished business and they needed to talk. Really talk. He wasn't sure how that was going to happen while he was filming.

He just hoped she didn't leave before he was off the show.

He was so lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed the switch in dance partners. After Sienna, he'd danced with Ariel, whose name he'd written on his dance card. Then Freya, Piper, and finally Zara.

The interactions were all basically extensions of the morning mixer. They felt more like job interviews than actual conversations until he got to Zara.

"You don't remember me, do you?" Zara asked as she glided across the dance floor with him.

"You do look familiar," Keaton admitted.

"I was a ring girl in your last fight."

Oh shit. Now he remembered her. He'd been so removed from that world, it hadn't clicked with him before. That night was sort of a blur, but from what he remembered she'd offered to come back to his room. He'd told her he was tired, but she'd been pretty insistent until he finally had to shut her down rather harshly. Camilla had broken up with him just two days before the

match and he was pretty upset about it.

He wondered if she remembered that had happened. It wasn't exactly something he was going to bring up. *Hey, do you remember when I turned you down?*

The music stopped and the women and men were separated while they reset the cameras and lighting. They didn't want anyone to have a conversation that wasn't caught on tape. It was only day one, and he was already irritated by the stop and start, the hurry up and wait.

"I feel like we're at a middle school dance, boys on one side, girls on the other," Elijah commented.

"Psh, maybe *your* middle school," Vic let out a forced laugh. "At mine we had personal space monitors that walked around with rulers and made sure everyone was at least two inches apart so nobody got pregnant."

"Only two inches, huh?" Elijah pondered. "*Hmm.*"

From the look Keaton and Luca shared, it was clear they knew that Elijah was insinuating that Vic's penis was less than two inches, which was why that distance apart would ensure no one got pregnant. But the comment seemed to go over Vic's head completely.

After several delays due to a bulb blowing out and audio issues, the cast was finally asked to return to the dance floor and positioned on black X's made out of gaffer tape.

When they were all on their marks, Lance appeared on the stage in front of the room. A spotlight shone on him and the director yelled, "Action!"

"Welcome to Fairytale Love: Kings and Queens. I am your host, Lance Sparrow and I'm thrilled to be back as your host and guide through this journey to happily ever after. Tonight is our first Fairytale Love Ball. As you saw, our couples just shared their first dance. I don't know about you, but I saw some sparks flying."

Keaton wondered if he was talking about Vic and Piper, or he was just trying to hype up the show.

"This season on Fairytale Love, we're doing things a little differently. You, the viewers, are going to have *all* the power. You will decide what challenges our lords and ladies do. What our matches will be, and most importantly, your votes will determine when a couple will be exiled from the castle and what couples will continue their journey to happily-ever-after.

"The result of your first vote is in. And I can now reveal who you, the public, have chosen to match. Our first match is Lady Piper and...Lord Vic!"

Keaton and the other cast members clapped as Vic picked Piper up and swung her around in excitement. The guy was like a golden retriever puppy. He was loveable, had a ton of energy, and even when he pissed on the couch it would be hard to be mad at him.

The next couple was Harlan and Freya. Then Elijah and Sienna. And Zara and Luca. Keaton was surprised when he ended up being paired with Ariel, whose name he'd written on the card. He wondered if the whole voting thing was a hoax and really, they just paired people up with who they'd chosen since he was one hundred percent sure Vic had picked Piper.

He was still ruminating on that theory when Lance made another announcement.

“Earlier today our lords met our ladies at the first impression mixer. They had to write the name of the lady they wanted to dance with on a card. The lady whose dance card is the fullest, will have a very special power to overrule the viewing public and choose her own match. Or she can stay with the match chosen by the public.

“So without further ado, the lady who had three gentleman’s names on her dance card is...” Lance loved a good dramatic pause, and Keaton was sure it built up suspense for the viewer, but they were getting on Keaton’s last nerve. “Ladyyyyyyy Zaraaaaaaa!” Lance announced like he was MCing a wrestling match. “Zara, would you join me on stage, please?”

The cast all clapped as Zara walked up the steps to the stage.

“Lady Zara you are currently matched with Lord Luca, but he was chosen by the public. Do you agree with the public’s vote, or would you like to forge your own path of happily-ever-after and match with another lord?”

Keaton figured she would stay with her match. Luca was, objectively, the most attractive out of all the lords. And Zara seemed like someone who would seek the public’s approval. Changing matches would be going against the people she wanted to vote to keep her on the show.

“I would like to rematch.”

There was a collective gasp from the other ladies. Clearly, Keaton wasn’t the only one surprised by her decision.

“And which lord has caught your eye?” Lance asked.

Zara’s eyes locked with Keaton’s a second before she said, “Lord Keaton.”

There was more clapping as she walked down the stage and stood beside him.

“Okay, now that leaves Lord Luca and Lady Ariel without a match. Would you two like to spend the week single or would you like to match up with each other?”

Ariel and Luca both agreed to match up and Lance did the outro of the show. As soon as the lights went out, the men and women were separated to go back to their changing rooms for bed.

Keaton wasn't sure how he felt about Zara choosing him. He assumed she'd done it because they shared a common past, or maybe she thought they had unfinished business. Which they didn't.

As he walked back to the north tower, he couldn't stop wondering what Avery would think about Zara choosing him. Would she care? Would she be watching the show? Would he see her more around the castle? Would she be gone before he was off the show?

When it came to Avery, as always, he had more questions than answers.

WATER DRIPPED DOWN AVERY'S FACE AS SHE BLINDLY WAVED HER HAND beside her in search of the hand towel.

After finding out that Zara had used her advantage to choose Keaton as her partner, Avery decided to do some self-care in the form of an Australian clay face mask. She wasn't sure why the news had upset her. Maybe because Zara struck her as a woman who got what she wanted, a force to be reckoned with. If her sights were firmly set on Keaton, there was a good chance she would get her man, which made Avery start thinking.

What if Keaton liked that sort of confidence?

What if she was exactly what he was looking for?

What if he fell madly in love with her?

Instead of wallowing in what-ifs, Avery had slapped some clay on her face. The problem was, after applying the mask, she'd started working and lost track of time. Now, the sucker had basically fused to her skin. She'd spent the past ten minutes dousing her face with warm water trying to remove it. Each time she thought she'd managed to get it all, she'd discovered another clump that was hanging on for dear life.

Her eyes were shut tight as she felt the soft fibers of terrycloth brush against her fingertips. She grabbed the towel and patted her face dry. When she opened her eyes, she was relieved to see that it was free of any purple remnants. She bent over the sink to get a better look in the mirror as she touched her cheek.

She knew that it was probably just a placebo effect, but she would swear that her pores were smaller, her skin felt as soft as silk, and the large bags

that had been camped out beneath her eyes since her great escape on her wedding day, had shrunken considerably.

Placebo or not, she was going to take this fresh face as a win and enjoy it. Fresh face. Fresh start.

She'd just started applying her night serum when her phone rang loudly. She grabbed it quickly so it wouldn't disturb Jacob who was sound asleep in the next room. Thanks to her mom wearing him out today at the bouncy house gym, Avery had managed to get him to sleep at a reasonable hour tonight.

"Hello," she answered quietly, realizing she hadn't even bothered to check who was calling. She just assumed it was Suzanna or Sabrina. It wasn't.

"What are you doing?"

When Avery had first met Jude, she'd thought his accent was so sexy. But sometime over the past decade that she'd known him, it had lost its appeal.

"Just getting ready for bed."

"Have you thought about what I said?"

Jude had said a lot of things since she'd called off the wedding. Some had been civil, others not so much. She couldn't quite get a read on the temperature of this call yet.

"Can you be more specific?"

He sighed indicating her request was tedious. "About next week."

"Next week?" She had no clue what he was talking about.

"I told you I'm going to be in Chicago on business for ten days. I want Jacob."

He had *never* told her that. Jude coming to Illinois and taking Jacob for *ten days* was definitely something she would have remembered.

"You want him the whole ten days?" she clarified. He'd never even had him by himself overnight. The most time Jude had spent with Jacob alone was when he'd taken him to an L.A. Galaxy game last year. Jacob had come home from that outing in tears because Jude had gotten upset at him for calling it soccer instead of football.

"Yes. All ten days."

"If you're going to be working, how are you going to watch him?"

He sighed again. Apparently, this phone conversation was really putting him out. "Obviously I'm bringing Celeste with me."

Was that obvious? Avery thought to herself.

“I’ve made myself clear. If you won’t let me have access to *my* son, I will take you to court and get fifty/fifty custody.”

Avery hated that he was basically holding her hostage with his threats. She knew that this arrangement was not sustainable. He couldn’t just call and demand time with him anytime he wanted. Jacob needed stability and a routine. At some point, they would need to work things out legally. But for her and Jacob’s sake, she needed to get her feet under her before she did that.

“Fine,” she agreed.

“I’ll be there next Monday at six.”

“A.M or P.M.?”

“Avery,” he said her name in a warning tone as if she was testing his patience.

“I’m serious. Are you going to be here in the morning or evening?”

“Evening. I want him packed and ready to go.”

“Yes, sir,” Avery said sarcastically.

“And Avery, please don’t make a scene. The staff are still talking about that little stunt you pulled.”

The little stunt she pulled?

“I didn’t pull any—” her words trailed off when she heard a click. “Hello?”

She looked at her phone. He’d hung up.

What a prick.

Tears filled her eyes before slipping down her cheeks. She wasn’t sure why she was crying. Frustration over the fact that she was going to have to deal with Jude for at least another fourteen years. Anger at herself for ever allowing herself to be in this position in the first place. She could take her pick of reasons to cry.

There was a knock at the door, and she expected to find Jacob on the other side asking for water. She wiped her face and took a deep breath in through her nose and out through her mouth to try and pull herself together. When she opened the door, it wasn’t Jacob asking for water. Her mom was standing in front of her with a full glass of wine in one hand and a bottle in the other.

“I heard ya on the phone and thought ya might need this.”

Avery took the glass, lifted it to her lips, tipped her head back, and drained it in three gulps. When she lowered the glass, her mom didn’t skip a beat before filling it back up again.

“Thanks,” she said.

Blanche Bardot might not have been there for her childhood, and she might not be the most affectionate or effusive mother, even now, but since she’d come back into Avery’s life when she found out she was going to be a grandma, every time Avery needed her, she was there, usually with wine.

For that, Avery was eternally grateful.

Keaton stood at the sink and washed his hands as a knock sounded at the door. “Keaton?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Everything okay in there?” Heather asked.

He was glad it was Heather and not one of his nieces. They would have insisted on him opening the door.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he called out. “I’ll be right out.”

The toilet was the only place he could go where there weren’t cameras and he didn’t have to wear his mic. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been in there, but apparently, it had been long enough that Heather had been dispatched to find him.

He’d ducked in there after the men had been sent back to holding to change and get ready for their first night of co-ed sleeping. If it was up to him, he’d curl up in there and sleep. The last thing he wanted to do was crawl into bed with Zara. Nothing against her, it was just that he didn’t sleep well when someone else was in his bed. With two exceptions, that is. Well, three including Mojo, but as far as people, there were only two.

Camilla and Avery. Those were the only two women that he’d actually been able to sleep beside. Usually, unless he was alone, he just laid in bed wide awake. He knew that it had to do with trust issues. Sleeping was when he felt the most vulnerable, and he didn’t like feeling vulnerable. Also, he had intimacy issues. And to him, sleeping in bed with someone was somehow even more intimate than having sex with them.

He wasn’t sure if the cameras filming them while they slept was going to make it better or worse. He hoped better.

After a few more minutes of stalling Keaton knew that he’d hid in the bathroom long enough. He took a deep breath, clicked the light off, and

opened the door. He made it one step when he felt a hand flatten against his chest and push him back inside closing the door behind them.

Out of instinct, he grabbed the wrist the hand on his chest was attached to, twisted it, and secured it behind the person's back. His hold on the wrist wasn't hard enough to hurt, just hard enough that he had control of the person it was attached to.

He flipped the light on and saw that the person was Zara. As soon as he did, he dropped her wrist and took a step back. She didn't speak, she was just staring up at him with a funny expression.

He waited for her to explain why she'd just bum-rushed him into the bathroom. When she didn't, he prompted, "What are you doing?"

She blinked and then shook her head slightly. "Sorry, I got distracted. That was *really* hot."

"Pushing me into the bathroom was hot?" he asked.

"No, your reflexes," she explained as she rubbed her wrist, and a visible shiver ran down her body. "And your strength. And your...control. I bet you are really good in bed. It's probably all that grappling and MMA training."

"Zara? What are you doing in the bathroom?" he prompted again, not feeling comfortable talking about his sexual prowess. "We're not supposed to be alone together unless it's being filmed."

Keaton didn't really give a fuck about the rules, but since Ivy and Iris were PAs who really wanted to impress Sabrina Denton, he decided he was going to toe the line for their sake. Also, he didn't really feel comfortable being in a confined space with Zara.

"I needed to talk to you. Privately." She took a deep breath and stared directly at him. "You don't *like* me, right?"

He wasn't exactly sure how to answer that. She didn't seem upset, or even curious about his answer. If anything, it had sounded more like a statement. He wondered if this whole thing was because she did remember when he turned her down and wanted to confront him about it. "I don't know you."

"Yeah, I know, but what I'm trying to get at is you're not on this show because you want to *find love*, right?"

Now it was his turn to take a deep breath. This was exactly what he'd been worried about. Just because he didn't believe in finding love on reality TV didn't mean that wasn't his partner's goal. He didn't want to upset her, but he also didn't want to lie.

“Look,” she smiled. “I know that Ivy and Iris are your nieces and I’m guessing you’re only doing the show as a favor to them.”

Keaton hadn’t been advertising the fact the twins were his nieces. So, unless the girls had said something or slipped and called him Uncle in front of someone, he had no clue how she would know that. “Who told you that?”

“No one told me. I follow them on TikTok. You’ve been in their videos. And I could tell from the first time I ran into you outside when I was on the phone with my sister, that you did not want to be here. You looked like you were turning yourself in for a prison sentence not signing up for a dating show. And I remember during all the interviews you did before your last fight you talked about how important your family is and that you’d do anything for them. I put two and two together, which brings me to why I’m in the bathroom. I think if this is gonna work...” She waved her hand between them. “...then we need to be completely *honest* with each other. Don’t you agree?”

“To being honest? Sure.” He hated lying.

“Good. Like you, I am also not here for love. I came here for two reasons. First, I need the money from the grand prize. I was just awarded full custody of my two little sisters. My mom has some issues with drugs...well, no that’s not true, actually her relationship with drugs is fine, she has some issues being a mom. Anyway, not the point, they are typical teenagers who are not taking high school seriously, which means they won’t be getting scholarships. I want them both to go to college and I don’t want them to be paying off student loans for the rest of their lives. *And* I don’t want them to end up on Only Fans, so the prize money I’m going to win is their college fund.”

That was the last thing Keaton had expected her to say. He admired and respected her reason for being on the show. Once he heard she was an influencer and model, he’d just assumed she was doing it for followers or fame. Which, meant the saying was true, assuming made him an ass.

“But that reason isn’t why I picked you.” She continued. “I can win with anyone. I picked you for the second reason I came on the show. I need to light a fire under my ex. I don’t want to find a new king. I have a king. Mario just needs to get his head out of his ass and realize that he wants to marry me. That is only going to happen if he thinks he has some *real* competition. I think you are just the man for the job.”

“You chose me to make your ex jealous?”

“Partly, and you should be flattered. He has a healthy ego and would not be threatened by anyone else on the cast. He loves MMA and is your biggest fan.” A slow smile appeared on her face. “He is not going to be happy that we’re paired up together or that I was the one to pick you as my match.

“But mainly, I chose you because, since you turned me down after your fight, I know that you *won’t* fall in love with me, which could make things sticky. I might be doing this show for my own reasons, but I don’t want to fuck with anyone's emotions.”

He definitely agreed with that. The last thing he’d want to do was fuck with someone's emotions.

“So listen, I know what to do to win this. All you need to do is follow my lead. When the cameras are on, I’m going to flirt with you, I will be touchy-feely and lovey-dovey and there will probably be tears at some point to show that you are breaking down my walls and I can be ‘vulnerable’ with you. We’ll have small fights along the way, so that you can demonstrate breaking down my walls. And when the time is right, I will pick a ridiculous fight with you so I can come back later, apologize, and say that I was trying to push you away because what I feel is too perfect, and I always self-sabotage when things seem too perfect. We will make up and complete our redemption arc, and be crowned the King and Queen of Fairytale Love.”

Keaton stared at her and wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or terrified. “You actually think that will work?”

She looked at him like his question was cute, if not naïve. “No, I don’t *think* it will work. I *know* it will,” she responded confidently. “I just need to make sure that you’re in.”

Keaton wasn’t sure what to say. He didn’t want to stay on the show till the end, but he’d also given his word to do the show. “I’m in as long as we’re paired up together.”

“Deal.” She held out her hand and he shook it.

He was slightly concerned that he’d just made a deal with the devil, but he guessed the alternative would be worse. Like Zara, he also didn’t want to fuck with anyone’s emotions. Especially someone innocent who was just there to fall in love.

“Okay, partner. Let’s do this.” Zara turned and opened the bathroom door and they stepped out.

His timing could not have been shittier, though, because at that moment Avery was passing by in the hallway. When she saw them, she had a deer in

headlights look as if she was about to be run over by a tank.

“Hi,” he said lamely.

“Hi, I was just, um they needed the key for the linen closet.” She held up a large metal key ring and then hurried down the hall.

As she rushed past him, he mouthed sorry. He wasn't even sure what he was apologizing for, other than inadvertently doing exactly what he hadn't wanted to do i.e. fucking with an innocent person's emotions.

“HOW ARE THINGS GOING?” AVERY ASKED SABRINA AFTER HER FRIEND BURST into her office and collapsed in one of her chairs.

“Busy, but great! We’ve already hit a million views on YouTube and viewers are making Insta reels of their favorite couples. Oh, and someone started a TikTok dance featuring the opening credits song that is trending.” Sabrina seemed more relieved than excited.

“That’s amazing!” Avery exclaimed hoping not to show the disappointment she felt from not getting the information she was really asking about. Of course, she was happy that her friend’s show was doing well, but what she really wanted to know was how Keaton was doing.

It had been four days since she’d run into him and Zara in the hallway, and the look on his face was seared into her mind. He looked...guilty. At first, she was imagining his reaction to seeing her, but then when she walked past him, he mouthed sorry.

Sorry. Why was he sorry? What could he possibly feel guilty about? What were they doing in that bathroom that he felt he had to apologize to her?

He didn’t owe her anything. They were nothing. More than nothing. They hadn’t seen each other or spoken in almost five years. They’d only spent two weeks together.

Sure, those weeks had been the best weeks in her entire life, but that was beside the point.

So why did he look so sheepish when she’d run into them and then silently apologize?

Normally, she wasn't a jealous or paranoid person. The last ten years that she'd been getting cheated on and she'd been completely oblivious was proof of that. But her mind had been obsessing over what the two of them could have been doing in the bathroom.

She wanted to believe that it had just been a kiss, but would he apologize if it was just a kiss? It had to be sex. That's the only reason he'd say sorry.

Not that he had any reason to apologize to her even if it was. He could do whatever he wanted with whoever he wanted. Still, the look in his eyes had haunted her.

Avery was busy silently overthinking when Sabrina got a text. After she read it, she opened her mouth in a silent scream and mimed throwing the device on the floor and smashing it with her heel.

"Good news?" Avery asked flatly.

"Gavin and I are butting heads again because he keeps wanting to push the boundaries of what I think is ethical for our cast's mental health, but hey, what else is new?" Sabrina sighed and flopped back in the chair. "I don't want to talk about it or me or the show. Tell me about you. How are *you* doing?"

"Okay. Jude is going to be in Chicago for work, so he's picking Jacob up in a few days."

"If he's working who is going to..." The realization of who might be watching Jacob dawned on Sabrina. "No. He is not bringing the nanny he banged."

"He is. But, honestly, I'm okay with that. Celeste is really good with Jacob, and Jacob loves her. I'd rather it be her than someone else."

Sabrina shook her head. "You are a much better person than me."

"No, I'm not." Avery sighed.

"Yes, you are. You are a fucking saint."

"I don't think nearly marrying a man who I wasn't in love with qualifies me for sainthood."

"Whether or not you loved him is irrelevant. You didn't have an open relationship and you caught him balls-deep in your nanny on your wedding day. Most people would freak out, whether they loved the person or not. That's betrayal. It's disrespectful. It's disgusting."

Avery hadn't really thought about it like that. She'd just been so relieved that he'd made it so easy for her to walk away.

Sabrina's phone buzzed again and this time she didn't look like she

wanted to smash it on the ground. “Oh, they're doing the mud pit challenge. Let's go watch!”

“No.” Avery was not going to cave this time like she had for the first impression mixer.

The last thing she wanted to do was go watch Zara and Keaton competing in games together in real life. It was bad enough watching them on TV. Which, of course, she had because how could she not?

“Come on, please! It will be fun! You need to get out of the office!”

Sabrina walked around the desk and grabbed Avery's hands to pull her out of the chair.

“No,” Avery insisted, tugging her hands away. “I'm too busy.”

Sabrina looked at her, then got a small grin on her face as she tilted her head to the side and declared, “Yahtzee.”

“You can't call Yahtzee,” Avery protested.

“Yes, I can. I haven't called Yahtzee this year.”

“You haven't called Yahtzee in *ten* years,” Avery emphasized.

“Exactly!” Sabrina said as if Avery had made her point for her.

In college, if one of them called Yahtzee, the other had to do whatever was asked of them. Avery couldn't remember the exact origin of Yahtzee, but she did know they'd come up with it during Sophomore year when they were drunk and playing the popular dice game. The only rule in their Yahtzee was it could only be called once a year.

Avery had used it to get Sabrina to go volunteer with her at a retirement home, visit a museum, and attend a Michael Bolton concert.

Sabrina had used it to make Avery do the Underwear Run, get a nose piercing, and go to a midnight screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* dressed as Tim Curry's character Dr. Frank-N-Furter, garters and all.

Logically, she knew that she was an adult and Sabrina calling Yahtzee didn't obligate Avery to go to the mud pit challenge. But when Sabrina was around, logic went out the window.

The sun was beating down on Keaton as he stood behind Zara and waited to hear what the challenge of the day was. Yesterday, the couples had to fight to the “death” in a game of lake jousting. The women, who were on the

shoulders of the men, were armed with inflatable flumes. They had to hit each other, and the last woman standing—not in the water—was crowned the winner.

Zara was a beast and the last lady standing. They took home the third consecutive win, which meant they were currently the undefeated champions. The title had definitely put a bullseye on their backs in a few of the other contestant's eyes. Namely Harlan and Vic. Keaton wasn't sure if it was because they wanted to win the show, or if they were just used to being top dog.

So far, he hadn't minded being matched with Zara. She'd played the game exactly how she told him she would. When the cameras were on, or people were around, she laid on the flirting thick and was very affectionate. The few times the cameras were off and they were alone, she'd been all business.

She'd already started a few minor fights and then resolved them within hours. The first time she'd gotten upset had taken him completely by surprise. They'd been at breakfast, and she'd started crying. He'd asked her what was wrong, and she'd asked him if he had anything he needed to tell her. He'd stared at her blankly for several seconds before saying that he didn't. Then, she'd started crying and told him that she knew that he'd chosen to write Ariel's name on his card.

He'd just stared at her blankly, not sure where the outburst was coming from since they weren't even real partners.

She'd cried and demanded, "Just be *honest* with me."

That jogged his memory of the conversation they'd had in the bathroom, and he realized what she was doing.

"Yes, I did," he'd told her honestly.

"I knew it." She stood from the table in tears and Piper and Sierra followed behind her to console her.

He had to hand it to her, she really did know what she was doing. And he respected the fact that her reason for doing it was to put her sisters through college. He was pretty sure Zara was going to attain world domination. Using her powers for good and not evil was the only hope for humanity.

Keaton had to admit, he was having more fun on the show than he'd thought he would. The only thing that was bothering him was that he hadn't seen Avery since the night she'd caught him and Zara coming out of the bathroom together. He wasn't sure if she was keeping her distance on

purpose, or if she'd just been busy and hadn't been out of her office much.

He had been worried that she might have left town, but earlier that morning he'd seen Jacob and Avery's mom picking flowers in front of the carriage house, so he knew that she was still there.

It was driving him crazy that he couldn't just go and see her, to talk to her. He'd tried, several times, to sneak away and go to her office. But he'd gotten caught. Since being matched up, the schedule had gotten a lot busier. The only time he had alone was when the guys were all waiting for the women to get ready for the day or for cocktail hour. But Heather had been camped outside the holding area and hadn't fallen for it when he said he needed to go get air. She'd gone with him.

He'd thought about writing Avery a note to give to Ivy or Iris to pass to her. But he didn't want what he had to tell her, which was that he and Zara weren't really a couple and she'd only chosen him because he *wasn't* interested in her, written down anywhere. *He* didn't care about getting in trouble. He just didn't want to fuck up Zara's chances for winning.

So he'd just been biding his time and waiting for the moment when he could slip away unnoticed. He didn't even know if Avery would care that his and Zara's relationship was fake, but he had to tell her. He needed her to know.

Marcus, one of the PAs walked in front of a mud pit and lifted a bull horn to his mouth, which was overkill since they were all standing ten feet away from him.

"Okay, today's challenge is going to be tug-of-war bracket elimination. Keaton and Zara since you won yesterday's jousting challenge you have the advantage. The four other couples will compete in the first heat. Then the two couples who win that heat will move on to the second round. The winner of that heat will then face Keaton and Zara. The couple not in the mud when the whistle blows will be crowned Couple of the Day."

The first round was over fairly quickly. Vic and Piper easily defeated Elijah and Sienna. Luca and Ariel put up a little bit more of a fight against Harlan and Freya but ended up taking a mud bath after about five minutes.

Before the whistle blew on the Vic and Piper, Harlan and Freya faceoff, Zara turned to Keaton and under her breath said, "I *do not* want to go in that mud."

He wished he could assure her that wasn't going to happen but there was no way he could promise her a win. As far as he could see it, the best-case

scenario was that Vic and Harlan would wear themselves out in the battle against each other and then whoever the victor was wouldn't have time to regain their strength before they were on the other side of the rope from him. Otherwise, Keaton was sure that they would in fact end up in the mud.

Both men had a few inches and about twenty pounds on him. And Zara might be a fierce competitor, but both Freya and Piper had more upper body strength than her. He'd found that out during the first competition they'd done called Picnic Games. During the wheelbarrow races Zara's arms kept collapsing. Thankfully, that was only the first leg of the race. Team Zeaton, as he and Zara had been nicknamed, made up time in the egg-spoon relay and cornhole, so they'd still brought home the W.

Keaton watched Harlan and Vic grunt and strain as they fought with everything they had to hold their ground. He wasn't sure who he was rooting for, just that the tug-of-war lasted as long as possible.

It was almost ten minutes before Vic's feet started to slip and Harlan went in for the kill. The country boy leaned back and let out a warrior cry as he jerked the rope sending both Vic and Piper sliding into the mud.

The whistle was blown, and Keaton and Zara moved into place. Harlan and Freya both looked worse for wear as both teams took their starting positions.

"Stay low, keep your center of gravity as low as you can, but don't lose your footing," he instructed Zara.

She nodded her head.

"Ready, set...." Marcus looked back and forth between the teams. "Pull!"

Keaton gripped the rope and his muscles burned as he pulled it backward. It actually felt good. He hadn't rolled with anyone in over two weeks, and he'd missed the feeling of using every muscle in his body. He missed pushing himself to the limit of what he thought he was capable of. He missed the exertion, and he even missed the pain.

He was just getting into his zone when he noticed across the pit Freya's feet began to shift in the dirt. Harlan was straining so hard two large veins had popped out on his forehead. Keaton knew they had it in the bag when he heard Harlan groan. It was nowhere near the warrior cry he'd let out just minutes before against Vic.

Keaton took advantage of his opponent's exhaustion and kicked it up a gear. He'd found the trick in any competition was not to max out in the first few minutes. Wait for your opponent to get tired and then switch it to full

steam.

His tactic worked and within seconds of Keaton pulling with all of his might, Harlan and Freya ended up face-first in the mud.

The whistle blew and Zara turned around and jumped into Keaton's arms. He spun her around, celebrating their victory, and the next thing he knew she'd planted a kiss on him. Not a peck. A *real* kiss. She'd been getting more and more affectionate each day, but it had just been cuddling and quick pecks here and there. This was a NSFW smooching.

He froze for a second, but then remembered they were being filmed. If he moved away, viewers would definitely pick up on it. Since they hadn't stipulated rules of engagement, in a split-second decision he went along with the kiss. After this, he'd set up some ground rules, one of which was no make-out sessions.

After a few seconds, Keaton broke the kiss and set Zara down. Before her feet hit the ground, he heard wolf whistles and cheers from the other teams. He smiled as she lifted up his arm, declaring them the champions.

Marcus walked over to them to crown them Couple of the Day for the fourth day in a row. Keaton had to bend down for him to reach. He smiled as Marcus put the crown on his head but that grin slipped when he straightened back up and saw flowing red hair behind the camera.

For a brief moment, his eyes locked with Avery's. This time she didn't have a deer in the headlights look. Now, she looked like she'd just seen a horrific car crash and was about to cry or throw up. He was still getting over the shock of her being there, when she turned and walked away.

He wanted to go after her. To explain everything. But he couldn't because there was a microphone being shoved in his face for his reaction to the win.

He didn't have any clue what he said in the post-tug-of-war interview. It was all he could do to force a smile on his face and keep his feet planted so he didn't take off running after Avery.

Keaton didn't know how, but even if he had to use Morse code or smoke signals, he would get a message to her. He didn't know if it would matter at this point, but he needed her to know that this reality TV show was *not* reality.

“WHERE AM I GOING WITH DADDY?” JACOB ASKED FOR PROBABLY THE thirtieth time since Avery had told him Jude’s plans to spend the week with him.

“Chicago,” Avery told him again. She’d noticed when he was nervous or unsure about something, he kept repeating the same questions. “Remember the pictures we looked up last night of that big silver bean and the bridges and the pizza?”

Jacob nodded as he waded on the shores of the lake, kicking the water with his feet.

The property the castle sat on had private lake access that was not open to the public. There was a small trail hidden behind an overgrown bush that led down the wooded area to the water. Avery had found it, by accident, when she’d been on a walk with Keaton. This was the location where they’d shared their first kiss. It was where they’d spent the entire night lying on the grass just talking under the stars.

It was strange but she felt like they’d crammed an entire relationship into two weeks. Keaton hadn’t officially opened Legacy yet because he was waiting for his business license before he could start classes, so his schedule was pretty open. Avery was just on site to oversee the renovation, but thanks to hiring an incredible GC who she checked in with for a quick update every day, there hadn’t been a lot to do, so she’d just hung out with Keaton.

They’d gone down to the lake, on trail-walks all through the wooded area around the castle, and explored every inch of the castle. They’d talked and talked and talked, and hadn’t ever run out of things to say. Those days were

like a dream, one that she'd never wanted to wake up from.

"When is Daddy coming to get me?" Jacob asked.

"He's coming in four more sleeps." The thought of Jacob being away from her for ten days made her sick to her stomach.

But not as sick to her stomach as watching Zara and Keaton make out had.

Avery thought that after seeing them flirting on TV the past few days, she could handle seeing the PDA in person. She'd been wrong.

Seeing them lock lips had caused her to have a physical reaction. It was like someone punched her in the stomach. She thought she was going to throw up. It was horrible. But just like a car crash, she hadn't been able to look away.

It was insane to her that she'd gotten so much more upset seeing Keaton kissing Zara than she had when she'd walked in on Jude and Celeste naked in bed together.

After she left the set, she'd gone back to her office and cried. She'd cried over Keaton, a man she'd technically never had a relationship with, and hadn't spoken to in five years, a man who kissed a woman he was "dating" on a reality TV show.

There was something seriously wrong with her. After her sob session, she'd made an appointment with a therapist named Anne Perkins. She'd clicked on her website because *Parks & Rec* was one of her favorite shows and Anne Perkins was the character she most identified with. But she scheduled the appointment because Anne Perkins, the therapist, not the television character, had a doctorate in psychology from Harvard and a Yelp score of 4.9 with over five hundred reviews.

As someone in the hospitality industry, Avery knew that was damn near impossible. Her first appointment was tomorrow evening, and she was actually looking forward to it.

Between the developments and changes in her life, and her completely unhealthy obsession with Keaton Savage, it was clear that she needed professional help.

Jacob sighed loudly as he picked up a stick. His shoulders dropped as he poked around at the rocks. Her mom-spidey-senses told her he was worried about being with his dad which she understood since he'd never gone on a trip alone with him before.

"You guys are going to have so much fun!" Avery made sure to infuse

genuine excitement in her voice even though she was not comfortable with the thought of Jude taking him for a week.

To say that Jude had been a hands-off dad was an understatement. In the first year of Jacob's life, he'd only been home nine weeks, and none of that had been consecutive. If it hadn't been for her mom showing up and helping her, she wasn't sure how she would have made it through.

"Is Celeste going to be there?" Jacob asked.

"Yes, she is," Avery assured him.

A huge smile spread on Jacob's face. "When are we going home?"

"I don't know." Since Jacob's birthday missed the cutoff date for him to start Kindergarten this year, and she'd handed in her resignation, there was nothing pressing she needed to return to California for. "Do you want to go home?"

"No. I like it here."

So did Avery. Which is why she was crossing her fingers, toes, and eyes that Anne Perkins could fix whatever was short-circuiting in her brain so she didn't have to leave the only town that felt like home over a man who she barely had a past and absolutely no future with.

Today was an off day from filming, which meant the men and women were separated. The guys were being held in the south end of the property where the library and gym were. The women were in the north end where the spa and restaurant were located.

Keaton was happy that he had access to the gym. Although he preferred running outside, he'd taken advantage of having a treadmill and spent the last hour trying to wear himself out. He wasn't allowed to have his phone which had his workout playlists on it, but there was Spotify available through the gym sound system. Vic pulled up a classic rock station and "Barracuda" by Heart was currently blasting through the room.

Sweat dripped down his back as he ran at ten miles per hour on an eight incline. He just wanted to exhaust himself and try and wring out the tension and stress that being on the show caused in him.

His Aunt Laney always said when she was raising her kids the days were long but the years were short. Being on a reality show was sort of like that,

except the hours were long and so were the days. But somehow the week flew by. The schedule was basically the same every day. They woke up and had breakfast. The women got a few hours to get ready while the men waited in a holding area. Then there was a challenge, and after that, they were separated again. Next up was getting ready and going to dinner, then an after-dinner cocktail. Lastly, they separated again to get ready for bed before heading into the main sleeping quarters that had five queen-sized beds in them.

Keaton had never gone to camp as a kid, but he had a feeling this was sort of the adult, reality television version of camp.

The only time he'd lived with anyone as an adult was with Camilla. They'd lived together for five years. During that time in his MMA career, he was traveling more than he was home so it didn't really feel like he'd lived with her although he'd been on the lease and paid the rent. Since moving to Whisper Lake, he'd lived alone. He wasn't used to being around people twenty-four seven. He needed some space.

He felt like he was suffocating.

Keaton was hoping his workout would burn off some of the pent-up anxiety he had. The digital clock turned to sixty minutes on the treadmill and both the incline and speed decreased. He cooled down walking at four miles per hour for ten minutes. He grabbed a towel and was headed to the weights when the door opened and Iris walked in.

She had a strange look on her face and he wondered if something was wrong. Had something happened with Kennedy or Laura, who were both pregnant? Was Aunt Laney okay?

Alarm bells went off as he started across the gym in her direction. His strides halted when he saw her lift her hand in the universal symbol of stop and tilt her head toward the back door like she wanted him to meet her outside. Then, without saying a word, she turned on her heels and walked back into the hallway.

He had no clue what all this cloak-and-dagger shit was. Why hadn't she just asked him to follow her? With a sigh, he turned and walked out the back exit that led to the cliffs. When he got outside, he looked around, but she was nowhere to be seen. No one was.

Then, he heard a familiar sound. It was the tinkle of Mojo's collar. He knew that sound anywhere. A smile was pulling on his face when his five-pound nugget of a dog came around the corner and raced toward him at full

speed. Mojo was not a runner. He was a stroller at his most excited. Seeing his pup's enthusiasm proved to Keaton that his usually aloof canine companion had actually missed him.

Keaton felt himself getting emotional as he bent down and scooped Mojo up in his arms.

Iris, who had followed Mojo, looked behind her like they might have been followed before turning back to Keaton and whispering, "I snuck him in. I talked Heather into getting a massage at the spa, so you have one hour before she's going to come looking for you to be at dinner. I'll meet you back here for the drop-off. Go somewhere that *no one* will see you. Do you have a place?"

"Yep." Keaton smiled widely. He knew just the place. He and Avery had found a private beach when they'd been out on a walk and, as far as he knew, no one knew about it.

"Here." She handed him a walkie talkie. "Keep this on channel five *only*. If I call you with a code red, that means you need to get your ass back here ASAP. And remember, do *not* let anyone see you."

"Got it."

Iris double-timed it as she walked back the way she came, and Keaton was faced with a moral dilemma. He had sixty minutes of unsupervised time and he wanted to use it to go to the carriage house and explain to Avery what was going on between himself and Zara, which was nothing. But if he did that, there was a very good chance someone would see him, and Iris might get in trouble for smuggling Mojo onto the set.

He looked down at Mojo, who had curled up in his arms and was resting his head on Keaton's forearm. "What do we do, man? Do we take the risk?"

Mojo sighed with total and complete disinterest.

"You're right. No carriage house." If it was just Keaton that would get in trouble, it would be a no-brainer. He'd risk anything just to get the chance to speak to Avery. But he wasn't going to do something to put Iris in the line of fire. She'd gone out on a limb by sneaking his little guy in to see him and that would be a shitty way to repay her.

Keaton easily found the bush that the path was hidden behind and within a few minutes, he'd made it to the clearing that opened up to the lake. He set Mojo down so he could run around and was hooking the walkie talkie Iris gave him on the waistline of his shorts when he heard a kid scream, "Look Mama, a dog!"

No. It couldn't be. Keaton walked out of the trees and saw Jacob on his knees with Mojo in his lap. Avery was looking down at the dog like she was seeing things.

"Muffin?" he heard her ask as he walked toward her.

"Actually, It's Mojo now," he said.

"Keaton!" Jacob exclaimed when he saw him.

Keaton couldn't deny he felt pretty good about the fact that Jacob's enthusiasm at seeing him matched his excitement at seeing Mojo.

"Keaton, what are you doing here?" Avery looked around, probably checking for cameras or Zara.

"Iris snuck the little guy in to see me and told me to stay out of sight. So, I came down here." He heard his voice get deeper as he said the last sentence. He hadn't meant for it to. That just happened when he was around Avery.

"Okay, so is this?" Avery looked back down at Mojo who was kissing Jacob's face. "You said this is Mojo?"

"It's Mojo now. I changed his name."

"So, this *is* Muffin?" she clarified.

"Yes."

"And you changed his name?"

"Actually, he did. When Mrs. Campbell passed away a few years ago she left Muffin to me in her will. When I got him home, he wouldn't answer when I called him. He barely ate. He didn't want to go on walks. He just laid on the couch and looked out the front window. I think he was depressed because he lost his person.

"One day, about a month after I had him, I told him that we needed to get his mojo back and he looked up at me and barked. So, I said it again. I said we needed to get his mojo back and he hopped up and wagged his tail. He's been Mojo ever since."

Avery clasped her hands over her chest. "Aww, that's so sweet." She bent down and scratched him behind his ears and was rewarded with several kisses on her nose.

Jacob giggled. "Mama, can I take him by the water?"

Avery looked up at Keaton.

"Sure. Mojo loves the water. He's a little fish."

"Stay inside the rocks," Avery instructed her son as he ran to the water's edge.

"I will, Mama!"

She sat down on the blanket that Jacob had been sitting on and positioned herself so she could keep an eye on Jacob. “Wow, I can’t believe you have Muffin, I mean Mojo. That’s crazy.”

As much as Keaton would love to take a walk down memory lane, he was on borrowed time and he had things to say.

“I’m not actually with Zara,” he blurted out.

She looked over at him, her brow furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“Sorry, I just... I’ve been wanting to talk to you since I saw you in the hall after we came out of the bathroom together and then yesterday when you saw us at the tug-of-war... It’s not real. The reason that we were in the bathroom was because she wanted to tell me why she picked me. She did it because she knew I wouldn’t develop feelings for her. She figured out that I was only doing the show for Iris—”

“You’re only doing the show for Iris?” Avery asked.

Wow. There was a lot she didn’t know. “Yeah, I don’t even remember agreeing to do it. I was at my cousin Knox’s wedding, here at the castle. I’d had a few drinks because, well this place has a lot of memories of us. It’s been hard for me to come here, to watch people fall in love. And I guess she asked me to be on it and I said yes. Somehow the press got a hold of it, and it was in the papers when I woke up the next morning. I didn’t want to back out because her boss, Sabrina Denton, is a big deal and I guess she wanted me on the show.

“That’s why *I’m* doing the show. Zara’s doing it because she needs the prize money. Her mom deals with substance abuse and she just got custody of her two teenage sisters. She wants the money to be their college fund. She’s not interested in a relationship. Actually, she is but only with her ex, Mario. She thinks that him seeing her with me will light a fire under his ass and make him want to settle down.

“She chose me because she knew I wasn’t really in this for love. And she pulled me into the bathroom that first night to ask me to go along with it. Everything you see, the fights, the flirting, the kiss, it’s just all for the show. It’s not real.”

Avery stared at him but didn’t say anything. He was starting to feel like the biggest idiot in the world for explaining all of that when she hadn’t even asked how the show was going. She probably didn’t give a shit if he and Zara were real or not. He’d probably been projecting how he felt about her, about the time they’d spent together, onto her.

He was about to apologize for word vomiting on her when he noticed her eyes began to fill up with tears.

“You still think about us when you come here?”

He blinked. “That’s what you took from everything I just said?”

“I didn’t know if you even remembered...or I mean, that you ever thought about us, about me.”

His heart slammed in his chest seeing her raw vulnerability. “I never *stopped* thinking about you.”

Avery sucked in a shaky breath and turned her attention back to Jacob and Mojo who were both running around in the shallow water by the rocks. He stared at her profile and could see that she was trying to hold back emotions.

He wanted to say something, but he was scared if he opened his mouth, he’d say something stupid like, “*I love you. I’ve loved you from the first second I saw you and I’ve never stopped loving you.*”

As he was staring at her, he noticed a fleck of purple paint right beneath her earlobe. He reached up to wipe it off at the same time that she turned back toward him. Her cheek ended up in the palm of his hand. Instead of pulling away, she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

Without running it by his brain first, his eyes closed too. He wasn’t sure who leaned toward who but the next thing he knew he felt her breath fan his face at the exact moment he heard his niece’s voice over the walkie talkie.

“Code red! Get back to base camp! Code red.”

Keaton opened his eyes and leaned his forehead against Avery’s. “I have to go,” he whispered.

“Okay,” she said breathlessly.

“I don’t want to, but I have to.”

“Okay,” she repeated.

“CODE RED!” Iris screamed through the walkie talkie.

“Fuck,” he mumbled beneath his breath as he stood. “Mojo!”

The dog raced toward him, and Jacob was on his heels as Avery stood as well.

“Does he have to go?” Jacob asked as Keaton picked Mojo up.

“Yeah, little man. He does. But maybe you can play with him another time.”

“Yes!” Jacob pumped his hands in the air and did a victory dance before racing back toward the water.

Keaton looked over at Avery who looked as shell-shocked as he felt. “This conversation is *not* over.”

“Okay,” she nodded.

“Uncle Keat! Code red! Do you copy?!”

He picked up the walkie talkie and pressed the button on the side. “I’m coming.”

When he looked back up at Avery, she was staring out at the water. He wanted to say goodbye, but he was scared if he looked into her eyes again, he wouldn’t leave.

So, instead, he turned and walked back to the clearing and up the path with one thought and one thought only in his head.

That conversation was *not* over.

NEW SOCKS. AVERY MENTALLY ADDED THAT TO THE EVER-GROWING LIST OF items Jacob needed before his dad came and picked him up as she sat folding laundry. He also needed new jeans, shirts, and underwear.

He'd hit a growth spurt over the summer and the only clothes that fit him were his basketball shorts and a few t-shirts that Avery had bought purposely a size too big at the beginning of summer.

One of the only drawbacks to being in Whisper Lake was also one of the reasons she loved it so much. It was a small town. Which meant the nearest Walmart or Target was thirty minutes away. She would make the drive tomorrow.

She was actually looking forward to it. She'd love some time alone to process everything Keaton had told her today. It had been a lot of information, and she wasn't sure what any of it meant.

He'd seemed desperate to tell her that he and Zara weren't a real couple. He'd insinuated that he'd had to drink because being at the castle brought back too many memories.

Did that mean he still had feelings for her?

They almost kissed. Which, thinking about it now, mortified her.

What if Jacob had seen her? Yes, her son knew that she and his dad weren't together anymore, but that didn't mean she should be kissing random guys in front of him.

Not that Keaton was random. He was very specific. In fact, she specifically loved him.

And after today, there was definitely a chance he had feelings for her, too.

But what about his rule not to date people with kids? Was that still how he felt?

That had been five years ago. Maybe his stance had changed.

He'd said that the conversation was not over, and she wished, more than anything, they could finish it now.

She was going to drive herself crazy with what-ifs.

Avery's mom came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her head and a robe on. After Jacob had gone to bed, she'd announced she was going to soak in the bath, read her latest romance novel, and enjoy a glass of wine.

She lowered onto the couch beside Avery. "Y'all looked like you were havin' a real fun time by the lake today?"

"Yep. Jacob loves the water." Avery pointed out, purposefully dodging any insinuation her mom might be making.

Her mom had shown up at the lake minutes after Keaton left wearing a knowing smirk on her face. Avery had a feeling that she'd either seen her and Keaton sitting on the blanket together or she'd seen Keaton leaving the private beach and was just assuming he'd gone there to meet her. But, so far, she'd yet to bring up anything about it.

She hadn't even asked Avery about what happened when all Jacob talked about at dinner was seeing Mr. Keaton and playing with Mojo.

"I wasn't talkin' about Jacob, sugar. I was talkin' about you and Mr. Savage getting real cozy on that blanket. What's goin' on with you two?"

"I told you. He's a friend."

"Oh, y'all looked *real* friendly to me."

Avery did not want to get into this with her mom. Mainly because she had no idea what this was. And she wouldn't until she and Keaton got to finish their conversation. "Mom, I just got out of a ten-year relationship. I'm supposed to be on my honeymoon. He's on a reality dating show. Do not make more of this than it is."

"Honey, I'm not blind. That boy's got the hots for you, and I think you might just have a sweet spot for him too." For someone who claimed not to meddle, or give her unsolicited opinion, she sure had a lot to say about Keaton.

"Mom, nothing's going on." Avery really wanted to nip this in the bud. She knew that if she didn't, her mom would be like a dog with a bone. Once she got it in her mind that something should or had happened, she wouldn't

drop it.

Her mom tsked her tongue against her mouth as she picked up her knitting needles and cast on.

Avery breathed a sigh of relief that she'd dropped it when she said, "You know, I was wonderin' why his name sounded so... familiar. I just couldn't shake the feeling I'd heard it before. I wracked my brain tryin' to figure out why it was ringin' so many bells. Then I remembered the day you got your wisdom teeth pulled. You remember that?"

Crap. She'd actually totally forgotten that three years ago after she got her wisdom teeth pulled her mom drove her home from the dentist. She'd been totally out of it but the next day, her mom looked at her and asked, "*Who's Keaton Savage?*"

Avery had spit out the soup she'd been drinking. "Why? *Why are you asking about him?*"

"Because, sugar, you kept saying his name over and over again on the drive home. You told me you loved him and were going to marry him. You made me sing 'Goin' to the Chapel' over and over again until you fell asleep on the couch."

"I don't know why I said that. He's just a friend."

That had been her story then, and she was sticking to it now.

"I told you, we're friends." Avery maintained.

"Darlin' you can tell me to mind my own business, but please don't insult me by lyin'."

Avery sighed. She hated it when her mom guilt-tripped her. Which make no mistake, that was. "We met when I came here to do the renovations. He was new to town. He'd just gotten out of a long-term relationship and so had I. We hung out when I was here but after I left I didn't talk to him. That's it. Really."

Her mom's eyes rose over the rim of her glasses. "You didn't talk to him in all those years?"

"No," Avery answered honestly.

"You didn't even look him up on Facebook?"

"No, I didn't look him up on Facebook."

"Sugar, I love you and I know that you always try to do the right thing. But darlin' sometimes the wrong thing is a lot more fun."

Avery felt tears fill her lower lids again. She wished she could do the wrong thing. But she didn't even know if that was an option because the

person she wanted to do wrong with was fake dating someone on a reality TV and sleeping with her in a bed two hundred yards from her.

Her mom set down her knitting, reached out, and pulled the laundry basket in front of her. “Let me do this. You go take a walk. You look a little flushed.”

“No, Mom, you do enough. Really.”

“Darlin’ I think we both know that I have years of *not* doing enough to make up for. So, go, take a walk and look at the stars. Ya seem like you got a lot on your mind and you know ya always feel better when you look at the stars.”

Actually, it was sunsets and sunrises that made Avery feel better, but at this point, she’d take stars.

Keaton flopped on his side in the bottom bunk and wanted to turn his head into his pillow and scream. The men were back in the north tower for their off day and everyone around him was knocked out. He could blame his sleeplessness on Vic’s sonorous snoring, or the uncomfortable mattress, but that wasn’t what was keeping him awake. He couldn’t sleep because of a certain redhead with heartbreaking baby blue eyes, pinup-worthy curves, and legs that stretched miles long.

Since coming back from the lake, every time Keaton closed his eyes, all he could see was her aqua gaze staring up at him. All he could feel was the warmth of her breath fan against his face. All he could smell was the light, floral, feminine scent that was uniquely her and was his kryptonite. Every time he smelled her, he lost all self-control.

Not being with her, especially after their talk today, was making him want to crawl out of his skin. He couldn’t stay still. He was agitated. Restless. And really fucking horny.

Avery Stone awakened the beast that was always dormant in him unless he was in the cage. The primal, savage man in him who replaced the logical, measured man he normally was. She was the only woman to ever access that side of him. The only other time he felt that much passion, had that much drive, and was that amped up was when he faced an opponent for a fight. The moment he knew it was him or the other guy and only one was going to be

victorious, something snapped in him, and he knew he would do anything to beat him. When he faced Avery, something snapped in him and he knew he would do anything to be *with* her.

He was the first to admit that his obsession over her wasn't healthy. She was like a drug. One hit and he was addicted. The last time they'd been together, it had taken him years to get over her. Not that he really ever had.

He was worried about what another round would do to him. What if they did rekindle something only for her to leave again? She lived in California. She had a life there. The father of her son was there.

A year ago, Keaton wouldn't have thought twice about uprooting his life and moving there. But that was before his entire family had moved to Whisper Lake, the place he'd always envisioned putting down roots. Having his family. Leaving his legacy.

Would he give that up for her? Should he give that up for her? Did she even want him to give that up for her?

Fuck.

The more he thought about it, the more the walls felt like they were closing in on him. He sat up in bed and swung his legs over the side. He pulled on his sweats and left the room. He wasn't even trying to be quiet.

He didn't care if someone tried to stop him. He needed some air, and he was going to get some. He hadn't had a plan of where he was going, but when he got to the keep, he realized where he was.

The first night they'd spent together, it had been up on the roof of the keep. They'd watched the sunset and laid under the blanket of stars. The only physical interaction they'd had was holding hands, but that had been enough.

It took them another week before they kissed and another week after that before they made love. Their relationship had reminded him of the innocence of first love. Just holding her hand had caused him to walk on cloud nine the next day.

He still couldn't believe it was only two weeks that they'd spent together. When he thought about it logically, it seemed like a short time. But emotionally, it felt like a lifetime.

They'd spent every second from the time they met together until the day she left. Thankfully, it was before anyone in town knew him, and since she was overseeing the renovations of the castle, they'd spent ninety percent of their time there and not in town.

If that same relationship happened today, it would be front page news. If

they took a walk around the lake in the morning, he could guarantee that parents would be asking him about who she was in his afternoon classes.

As he walked up the steps of the keep, he knew that subconsciously he'd probably come here because it reminded him of Avery, but it was the only building that had roof access and it did have the most beautiful view of the town, the lake, and the sky.

If any place could cure his claustrophobia, this was it.

When he opened the door and walked out, he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He was counting to ten when he heard someone shout, "Wait!" a second before he heard the door shut behind him.

He opened his eyes and saw Avery getting up from the ground.

"Avery," he said her name, not really believing that she was there, in front of him.

"What's wrong?" he asked as she rushed past him and pulled on the door but it didn't budge.

"The door, it gets stuck. I've been up here for four hours."

"Four hours?" he repeated.

She turned around and slumped against the door as she nodded. "I came up here to look at the stars and when I went to leave, I pulled on the door and it wouldn't budge. When I realized what happened, I texted my mom to come and get me, but while I was waiting for her, I laid down and fell asleep." She motioned to the blanket that she'd been lying on.

"So, we're stuck up here?" he asked.

As soon as he said that, her entire demeanor changed. Her cheeks flushed and her breathing grew shallow as she licked her lips. "Yep. We're stuck."

Keaton's timing with Avery had always been bad, but maybe, just maybe, this time, it was perfect.

“I WANTED TO KISS YOU TODAY. DOWN BY THE LAKE,” KEATON LIFTED HIS hand and cupped Avery’s face. The pad of his thumb brushed along her bottom lip leaving a trail of tingles in its wake. “I want to kiss you *right now*. And I don’t know what to do about that.”

Avery wasn’t sure how to respond to Keaton’s statement. She’d wanted him to kiss her, too. But if they’d thought their situation was complicated before, this was an entirely different level of complicated.

Even if he’d only agreed to be on *Fairytale Love* as a favor to his niece, and his partner’s feelings weren’t genuine, that didn’t mean that they should act on what they were both feeling. She had Jacob to think about now. And up until a couple of weeks ago, she’d been engaged to the father of her child.

The con column of her Why This is a Bad Idea mental Word doc had a laundry list of reasons below it. But none of them overruled the singular reason on the pro list.

She *wanted* to kiss Keaton Savage.

She wanted to kiss him more than she’d ever wanted anything in her life.

She wanted to kiss him more than she wanted to breathe.

If one of them was going to be strong, it wasn’t going to be her. She was powerless against the attraction and affection she felt for Keaton. There was just too much chemistry between them, too much history of her wanting him, missing him, needing him, and loving him to ignore.

She could feel the need, the desire, the desperation radiating off of him. It mirrored what she was feeling.

In one final attempt at being rational, Avery managed to say, “Don’t we

have a conversation to finish?”

There were things to say, things that needed to be discussed. She had no idea when they'd get a stolen moment of privacy again. It could be weeks. It could be months if he stayed on the show. And with Zara as his partner, she was more convinced than ever that he would make it to the finale.

“Yes, we do,” he conceded as he rested his forehead against hers in resignation.

Her heart sank at his concession. She loved that Keaton had a level head, that he was measured and controlled. But deep down, she'd hoped his passion for her would override his logic.

“But...” he continued, and her entire body lit with anticipation. His voice was deep and gravelly as he confessed, “I want to taste you, to feel your soft lips pressed against mine, to lose myself in your kiss so bad I can't think of anything else. Needing you is all-consuming. It's driving me crazy.” His hand slowly slid back to the nape of her neck. His hand flexed and the tips of his fingers pressed against her skin. The pressure sent shockwaves of pleasure vibrating through her. “*You* drive me crazy. I want you, Avery. I want you here, now.”

Avery's entire body lit with anticipation. She was done worrying about what this meant or what the future held. If all they had was *now*, was this night, she didn't want to waste it talking.

“Then take me.” Her statement served as both permission and demand.

A deep male groan ripped from his chest as his fingers threaded through her hair, then fisted. He tugged lightly causing her head to tilt back and her lips to part. Keaton took advantage of the new angle and covered her mouth with his, giving them both what they wanted so desperately.

The kiss was leisurely, exploratory but with purpose. It was exactly how she'd remembered it. Keaton could teach a Ted Talk on the Art of Kissing. He'd mastered the sensual seduction of the act. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty in his touch, just command and authority as he gripped the base of her neck and deepened their kiss.

He took a step closer, bringing their bodies into full contact. Her nipples hardened as they brushed against the hard contours of his chest beneath the cotton barriers of their t-shirts. The sensation caused desperation and need to collide in her creating an urgency that could not be ignored.

She wanted to feel his bare skin, to see his bare skin, to touch his bare skin. Her hands shook as she pulled Keaton's shirt, tugging the material up

his body. He broke their kiss and took over. His arms lifted and within seconds the shirt he wore was on the ground.

Avery greedily drank in the lines and contours of his chiseled torso that were highlighted by the moonlight shimmering off his tattooed skin. Her hands lifted as her eyes and fingertips lazily explored his body. His chest rose and fell in labored breaths beneath her touch and gaze.

The sheer maleness of his physique was both intoxicating and arousing. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his skin, which was hot beneath her kiss. She explored his upper body with her mouth as her hand reached between them and her fingers grazed the rock-hard evidence of his arousal.

“If you keep doing that, I’m going to come in my sweats,” he gritted out.

A blush heated on Avery’s cheeks as her eyes lifted up to meet his. “I’ve thought about the night we were together *so many* times. It was perfect, but I do have one regret.”

His eyes darkened, with need or concern, she couldn’t tell. “What do you regret?”

“Not tasting you.” Her thumbs dipped beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs and sweats and she slid them down, releasing his erection which bobbed in the space between them.

As he stepped out of his clothes, Avery wrapped her hand around his thick shaft and lowered down to her knees in front of him. His cock throbbed heavily in her palm as a tiny drop of his arousal appeared on his rounded head. Seeing the physical evidence that he was just as turned on, just as on the edge as she was, emboldened her further to ask for what she wanted, exactly how she wanted it.

She released her hold on his thick member and lowered her arms placing her hands on her thighs as her eyes lifted to meet his and she spoke words she’d never dared say to another lover, “Feed me your cock.”

At her provocative request, his jaw ticked, and his nostrils flared as one hand moved to the top of her head and the other gripped his dick. A moan escaped her as he slid his hard column of flesh into her open, waiting mouth. Her lips closed around his girth as her tongue slid along his straining cock. She enveloped him in the wet suction of her mouth as he guided her head down and up with his hand at a steady pace.

When the head of his sex hit the back of her throat, she choked as she felt him swell in her mouth and her inner walls began to contract as pleasure swirled between her legs. The submissive nature of this act, the sensation of

his silky-smooth skin wrapped around a steel hard shaft gliding along her tongue, and the way his body grew thicker in her mouth was everything she'd fantasized about.

She did like doing the right thing, but the wrong thing was *definitely* more fun.

Keaton had been dreaming of this moment for years. Literally. He'd fantasized about being with Avery again since the night they'd spent together. He'd just never thought it was actually going to happen.

Having her on her knees before him, taking him in her mouth was one of his most erotic, ecstasy-filled fantasies come to life. But knowing that she'd been thinking about doing this to him for years was the knowledge that pushed his pleasure threshold to its breaking, or should he say bursting point.

His balls tingled and tightened to his body as his cock pulsed with pre-ejaculate in the wet, warmth of her velvet mouth.

As much as he'd love to continue this, he knew that he wouldn't be able to hold back a second longer and he didn't want to come like this. With a groan of both satisfaction and frustration, he wrapped his hands around her upper arms and lifted her to her feet.

She panted as she licked her swollen lips. "You taste good."

Another groan vibrated through him as he yanked her sweats down and off. She stepped out of them using him to steady herself.

"Spread your legs," he instructed her gruffly against her ear as his hand slid between her thighs and cupped her sex.

She gasped and gripped his upper arms as his fingers glided along her slippery folds. She was so ready for him and he knew that he could drive into her now, this moment, but he wanted to make sure she got off before he was inside of her. It had been a while since he'd had sex, and he was so turned on a strong wind might make him explode.

As he rested his head on her forehead and stared into her eyes as his middle finger found her swollen clit. He began to massage it gently and her breaths grew choppy. Slowly, he started to pick up the tempo of his touch until the pad of his finger was flicking her pleasure nub in a quick motion.

"Yes," she whimpered as her nails dug into his biceps. "Just like that."

Right there.”

Within seconds her stomach contracted as her mouth opened in a silent cry as she came against his hand. He continued to rub her most sensitive spot until her final spasm subsided.

Not giving her even a second to recover, he gripped her hips and picked her up, pressing her against the thick wooden door. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her sex pressed against his straining erection that was standing straight up against his stomach. As soon as he felt the slippery satin folds of her sex brush against his cock, he realized something. “I don’t have protection.”

“I have an IUD and am on the pill,” she quickly replied.

His brow furrowed as he stared down at her, not sure if she was kidding about being on two forms of birth control or not. “You are?”

She nodded. “I didn’t want another accident.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with me not—”

“Yes!” she nodded emphatically.

He snaked one arm around her and using the door as leverage he tilted her hips up then bent his knees to get in a better position to line himself up to her opening. He reached between them and took his shaft in his hand.

Avery gripped his shoulders as he guided his engorged tip along the seam of her opening. Without protection dulling his senses, he could feel her pussy pulse with need against his head in anticipation of his entry. The sensation sent a surge of urgency rioting through him. Without any warning he pushed past the barrier of her taut slit, thrusting inside her body in one forceful motion. Her inner muscles clamped around him so tightly his jaw locked and he hissed through clenched teeth as pleasure infused his bloodstream. Every cell of his body was alive with tingles.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he rasped as he felt her canal begin to pulse around his shaft.

“So do you. So good.” Her breath fanned over his neck as her nails scratched his back.

He began to roll his hips, pulling out and then pushing into her—each time with a little more power. Every pump caused his body to shake with arousal. For years, he’d thought about the night they’d shared together, dreamed about it, and ultimately decided that over the years he’d created a fantasy in his mind of the encounter that was more than what had actually happened. But now he knew, he hadn’t. His memory hadn’t been nearly as

good as the reality of being with Avery.

Each time he sank into her flesh, the pressure and friction of her inner walls built up the tension in his body until it was bubbling up inside of him like a pressure cooker about to explode. He knew that he was close, and he wasn't sure he could hold off much longer when he felt her thighs begin to tremble against his hips as she whimpered, "Yes, just like that. Fuck me. Yes, yes, yes."

Hearing her illicit encouragement and demands snapped the tiny string of self-control he'd been clinging to. With one final stroke, he surged into her until he was completely embedded in her slick heat and he lost himself in his soul-shattering climax. As his world exploded into a million tiny bursts of pleasure, he felt her inner muscles contract around him, and her hips buck as she rode out her own release before she slumped against him.

As they both recovered from their orgasms, he remained buried inside of her, kissing her bare shoulder as she nuzzled her face into his neck.

He wasn't sure how long they'd stayed there, intimately joined as he peppered her shoulder with his kisses and held her tightly against him. Time seemed to stand still as they floated in the afterglow of their coupling.

Their love bubble burst when the doorknob started to twist, and he heard a woman's voice on the other side. "Avery!"

The door budged slightly, but with the weight of both their bodies against it, didn't budge.

Avery jerked her head up and her eyes widened as she whisper-mouthed, "It's my mom. She must have got my text."

He felt like a teenager getting caught with a girl in his room. Except he'd never gotten caught with girl a in his room. Mainly because he'd shared a room with Knox who was notorious for having girls over and he'd never wanted to cause his aunt any more trouble.

"The door's stuck, sugar!" her mom called out. "I'll go get Chuck."

Chuck was the night security guard. Keaton had gotten close to him because he was tasked to follow him outside whenever Keaton needed to get air.

When they heard her footsteps leaving, Keaton set Avery down and they quickly got dressed.

"We can't go out *together*," Avery spoke quietly, her eyes wide with panic.

"You go, and I'll go in a few minutes."

“But the door will lock,” she protested.

“No, it won’t. I’ll make sure it doesn’t shut all the way.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he assured her as panic rose in him that their time together was over and although they’d had the best sex he’d ever had in his life, they hadn’t actually discussed anything they needed to. “Promise me you won’t leave town until we talk.”

“What?” She shook her head. “No. I won’t.”

“Promise me,” he insisted she say the words.

“I promise,” she assured him.

“Avery!” Her mom knocked on the door. “Chuck’s here! He’s gonna open it.”

Keaton stepped to the side, out of view as the door easily opened. Avery greeted her mom and Chuck and quickly rushed off the roof. As the door shut behind her, he grabbed the handle to make sure it didn’t latch.

He felt it jiggle and heard Chuck’s voice. “It’s not locking.”

“It’s fine. I’ll call someone to come look at it.” He heard Avery say through the door.

As their voices grew more distant, he rested his head on the wooden surface he’d just had her naked against. She hadn’t promised him forever, but she had promised that she wouldn’t leave before they could talk. That was enough. For now.

THE DESK CHAIR SQUEAKED AS AVERY SHIFTED TO GET MORE COMFORTABLE. Every time she sat down or stood up or walked, she was reminded of what she and Keaton had done up on the roof the night before. Her body was sore in places it hadn't been sore in a long time.

She still couldn't believe she'd done what she had. It was very unlike her. Keaton brought out a side of her that was usually locked away and only came out in her dreams and fantasies. When she'd woken up on the roof and seen him, that's what she'd thought. She'd thought she was having a dream. It wasn't until she saw the door closing that she remembered where she was and that she'd been stuck up there for hours. Then she realized that he must be real and actually there.

Then, the night turned into a fantasy. One that she'd been having for five years. Being with Keaton again had awakened something inside of her that she'd thought was dead after having her son. A passion that she didn't think she'd ever experience again. She'd stopped thinking of herself as a sexual being and just fallen into the routine of motherhood and career. But with Keaton, she couldn't deny her deepest desires. And he'd fulfilled them in ways no other man, ever had and she feared ever would.

She was lost in thought when her office door opened. She thought for a second that she'd been so zoned out that she hadn't heard the knock but then she saw Sabrina quickly slip inside and shut the door quietly behind her.

"Hey," Avery said, unsure what was going on and why her friend appeared to be sneaking around.

"Shh!" Sabrina admonished, glancing over her shoulder before turning

back and pressing her ear to the door.

Avery froze and stopped working. Not that she'd been working that much before her friend had come in. She hadn't.

After a minute or two, Sabrina let out a sigh of relief, turned around, and sank into Avery's large armchair that sat facing her desk. Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes.

"Everything okay?" Avery asked.

Without lifting her head or opening her eyes, Sabrina slowly shook her head back and forth. "No. It's not. Which is why I'm hiding in here."

Avery didn't know the stresses of being an executive producer of a reality show, but she did know the pressures of running three successful hotels. There had been countless times that if there had been an available office to hide in, she would have hidden too. "Who are you hiding from?"

"Piper, Ariel, Freya, and Sienna. They are all freaking out about whether or not someone is going to be eliminated at the ball. Sienna's having a meltdown. Ariel is sure she's leaving. Freya hates her dress. And Piper is scared that she's going to be rematched with someone other than Vic. They all want to know what the format is going to be. Are they going to get to have to rematch with someone? Is one or more of them going home? Are more contestants coming? Just so many questions they know I can't answer. And the tears. Where are the tears coming from? They've been here a week."

"What about Zara? How's she doing?" Avery knew that Zara's relationship with Keaton was fake, but she still felt a little strange about the fact that they were matched up and she'd slept with him on the roof.

"Zara's fine. That girl is a pro. Seriously, I can't believe this is the first reality show she's done. I wouldn't be surprised if she and Keaton win this thing. I knew Keaton would be the golden goose for the show and he is! The public love him."

Avery had mixed emotions about that. She was rooting for Zara to win so she would have the money for her sisters' college fund. And she was happy that Keaton was so well-liked, but selfishly, she wanted him to get kicked off the show.

Sabrina let out a long sigh. "I just want five minutes to close my eyes and have some peace and quiet before I have to go face them."

Avery went back to working or at least pretending to work. It was really hard to concentrate on anything when all she could think about was last night. Thankfully, she was just finishing up the systems that she'd put together for

whoever they hired at her old position. She was up to speed on everything at the castle and once she sent off the files she'd put together to send to her assistant in California, she'd be totally caught up.

Sabrina's phone buzzed and she opened her eyes. "Ugh, I have to go. It's the first elimination, and they have lighting questions."

Avery's heart skipped a beat. She knew it was a long shot, since the public loved him, but maybe in some amazing plot twist Keaton would be voted off the show. If he was, then they could have that conversation. And maybe even an encore of last night. She was secretly crossing her fingers, toes, eyes, and legs that he'd be the first to be eliminated.

"Have fun," Avery smiled, hoping her friend didn't still possess the talent of reading her mind like she had when they were in college.

Sabrina stood up and started to leave before turning around. "What are you doing right now?"

Avery looked down at her desk, thinking the answer would be self-evident. "Working."

She tilted her head toward the door. "Come with me."

"What? Why? No," Avery shook her head.

If she showed up at the ball, she was scared that Keaton would think she was being a stalker or something. Did she want to go? Sure. Any chance to see Keaton again was a chance she wanted to take. But she absolutely could not.

"Please, pretty please with pumpkin spice on top," Sabrina begged. "What's the point of having my best friend down the hall if she won't come and support me when I *need* her?"

"You're laying it on a little thick," Avery grinned.

"It's because I miss you and I haven't had any time for us to hang out because this show runs twenty-four hours a day and I just want my best friend there if one of the ladies at court has a meltdown."

"I have a lot of work to do."

"No, you don't," Sabrina stated flatly.

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't. I mean, I'm sure that you have work you *could* do but it's nothing that *has* to be done right now."

Crap. Maybe Sabrina did still possess the power to read Avery's mind like she had in college. "How do you know what my workload is?"

"Because you've been twisting your hair."

Had she? Avery lifted her hand and sure enough, there were two thick portions that were clumped together from being twisted.

“You only twist your hair when you daydream, and you only daydream when you’re all caught up with homework. Or, in this case, regular work.”

“Fine.” Avery checked the time and stood up. “But I have an appointment in an hour.” Her first meeting with Anne Perkins, the therapist not the character on *Parks and Rec*, was a Zoom call, so she’d have to be back to her office by then.

Sabrina clapped her hands and cheered, “Yay! If we’re not done filming, you can just sneak out.”

They left the office, and as they walked down the hallway, Sabrina turned toward her. “Oh, I heard you got stuck on the roof last night.”

“Where did you hear that?” Avery’s cheeks flushed at the mention of the roof. She hoped her very perceptive friend did not pick up on the sudden blush.

“Chuck told me he had to go rescue you at three in the morning.”

“Oh, yeah. He did.”

“What were you doing up there?”

Keaton Savage. “Um, I was just looking at the stars, trying to clear my head, and the door got locked. I texted my mom to come get me. But she didn’t see it until three a.m. because she’d fallen asleep on the couch watching *Housewives*.”

“Did you see Keaton when you were up there?” Sabrina asked.

Avery’s head spun toward her friend. Did she know something? No. She couldn’t. If she did, she would have busted down Avery’s door and demanded the details. Sabrina didn’t really do subtle.

“Why would I have seen Keaton?”

“He snuck out of the men’s holding last night. Chuck was actually looking for him when your mom found him to come let you out. When he got back from walking you and your mom to the carriage house, Chuck said he went back to check on the door and saw Keaton going back to his room.”

“Oh, really?” Avery replied, not sure what else to say but trying to sound surprised but not comically so.

“Did you see him?” Sabrina asked her again, this time she definitely suspected something. And why wouldn’t she? Avery hadn’t exactly nailed the innocent act.

“There you are!” Gavin rushed toward them. “We have a *code red*?”

“Who?” Sabrina asked.

“Lance, he wants to do more improv with the scripts. Apparently, he started doing standup.”

“Standup?” Sabrina repeated.

“Standup,” Gavin confirmed.

As the trio continued down the hallway toward the ballroom and Gavin and Sabrina discussed how not funny their host was and how giving him the green light to improv could seriously damage the show, Avery breathed a sigh of relief and said a silent thank you to Lance Sparrow’s improv aspirations. They’d saved her from having to come clean to her best friend by telling her that she had a past, and maybe present with the man she was banking on being the golden goose of her show.

Avery knew she would tell Sabrina about Keaton one day, but she was glad that day was not today.

“I heard about last night,” Iris whispered conspiratorially as she finished steaming Vic’s suit jacket beside Keaton.

The last person he wanted to discuss last night with was his niece. How in the hell had she found out about it? The only person that even knew he’d been on the roof was Chuck. He’d seen him when Keaton was going back to his room. Even if the security guard suspected that he’d been on the roof with Avery, he didn’t think he’d go around gossiping about it. Chuck was good people.

“Last night?” Keaton repeated.

“Yeah, Heather said you were missing for an hour. She practically had a heart attack before Chuck radioed that he saw you going back to your room.”

“Oh, yeah.” Keaton exhaled in relief that his niece was whispering conspiratorially about ‘last night’ because he’d broken the rules and snuck out, and not because she’d known what happened. “I just needed some fresh air.”

Iris set the steamer down and gave him a hug. A tight hug. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her back.

When she stepped back, he asked. “What was that for?”

“For doing this show. I know you hate it, so if I haven’t told you enough,

thank you, Uncle Keat. You are one of the best three uncles a girl could ever have.”

He grinned. “No worries.”

She’d just picked up the steamer again when her walkie talkie went off, calling her to the ballroom.

“Duty calls,” she said as she unplugged the steamer and wrapped up the cord. Before she left, she patted his chest. “Oh, and by the way, you clean up nice. Very handsome.”

Keaton glanced at himself in the mirror. He had worn more suits and tuxes in the past two weeks than he had in the past two years. He was way more comfortable in sweats and jeans. But he had to admit, he looked alright.

Once Iris left, he walked out of the changing area and into the men’s holding room. As soon as he entered, he could feel the tension in the air as Luca explained why he thought he and Ariel should stay on for another week.

“We’ve barely started to get to know each other. She was so shy the first few days, but I really feel like we’re getting somewhere now.”

Out of all the guys there, he thought Luca and Vic were the sincerest in wanting to find love. Not to say that the other guys didn’t like the women they were with, but Luca and Vic were definitely true romantics at heart.

If Keaton had to guess, he’d say Harlan was just there for a good time and he wasn’t quite sure what Elijah’s motives for doing the show were. Not that Keaton had any room to judge.

While all the guys were discussing what they thought everyone’s chances were, Keaton was hoping that he’d get sent home. As much as he wanted to be there for Zara, he wanted to be with Avery more. In his life, he’d learned that timing is everything.

Last time they were together, the timing hadn’t been right. He didn’t want to miss his chance this time by wasting her stay in Whisper Lake by being on this show. He was sure that Zara had this in the bag whether or not he was at her side. The woman was made for reality TV. She’d studied it. She had a serious game plan, which he was sure included contingency plans.

“I heard that the couples might be the ones voting off who leaves,” Harlan relayed. “Just like last season.”

Keaton had never watched the first season of Fairytale Love. He’d been dealing with a broken heart after Avery had ghosted him. Watching all the scenes being filmed in the castle had brought up too many memories.

“If one of us has to go, I’m fine to leave. No hard feelings,” Keaton

offered.

The guys all stared at him in confusion.

“Seriously, if you have to vote for someone, it’s fine if it’s me.”

“What are you talking about?” Harlan asked. “You and Zara are for sure going to be in the finale. You’ve won couple of the day every day. You guys are perfect for each other.”

Vic and Luca agreed as Maura popped her head in the doorway. “Alright, lords, follow me!”

The men all headed down the maze of hallways to the ballroom. On the way, Keaton kept an eye out for Avery. He was hoping to even just catch a glimpse of her. He missed her. Even if he couldn’t talk to her, he just wanted to see her. Sadly, he had no Avery sightings.

When they got to the ballroom, all the men were instructed to walk to the door and wait as each of their partners joined them, then the couple would enter into the ballroom together. He and Zara were the first up. As soon as she saw him, she reached up and gave him a quick kiss.

After the tug-of-war competition, he’d told her that he didn’t feel comfortable with real make-out kissing aka tongue. She’d apologized and said she honestly got carried away because she was so happy that they’d won. They both agreed that pecks were fine, but they were going to keep things very PG.

That’s the agreement they’d made two days ago before he’d been up on the roof with Avery. Now, even a quick peck felt like he was wrong. Like he was cheating or something.

Zara must have noticed his discomfort because as the other couples made their entrances, she subtly covered her mic and asked, “You good?”

He gave her a quick nod and told himself that this was a TV show. It wasn’t real life. And Avery knew what the arrangement was. Not that that’s why he didn’t want to kiss Zara, it wasn’t. He just didn’t want to kiss anyone but Avery.

Once the couples were all inside, Lance appeared and did his welcome to Fairytale Love schtick. He threw in a few corny jokes that some of the cast courtesy laughed at. Keaton was pretty zoned out for most of it. All he could think about was how fucking amazing it had felt to be with Avery again. Not just the sex, although that had been incredible, but to connect with her again. To be able to touch her, to kiss her, to tell her how he felt. At least some of how he felt.

When he was with her, it was like the rest of the world didn't exist. When he was with her, he felt whole. Complete. Like he'd finally found a part of himself that he'd been missing his entire life.

The lighting and music changed suddenly, and it snapped Keaton out of his inner musings. The room darkened and a spotlight shone on Lance as he announced that not everyone in the ballroom would be continuing their journey to happily ever after tonight.

The tension in the room amped up as all the cast exchanged glances. Most of them looked worried. Keaton was doing his best not to look eager. He told himself to make sure not to smile if he was the one who left.

Lance pulled out an envelope from his jacket. "In this envelope, I have the results from the online poll. You, the public were asked to vote for your favorite lord and lady. Tonight, whichever lord and lady received the least amount of votes will end their journey to happily ever after."

Internally, Keaton was doing a touchdown dance, but he made sure to keep his expression neutral. This meant that he could get voted off and Zara could stay. That was the best-case scenario.

"I will now reveal the names of the lord and lady who received the *most* votes from the public and will be continuing their HEA quest. With forty-two percent of the public votes, a woman who clearly has the favor of her people...Lady Zara!"

The cast all applauded and Sienna and Freya took turns hugging Zara.

"And the lord who garnered *fifty-four* percent of the public votes, which is the most votes any couple or contestant has received in Fairytale Love history is..."

Please don't be me. Please don't be me. Please don't be me.

"Lord Keaton!"

Fuck.

"Told you, man!" Harlan said as he pulled Keaton into a bear hug.

Keaton forced himself to put on a smile he didn't feel as Zara turned around and pressed another kiss to his mouth before hugging him. As soon as he wrapped his arms around her, he saw Avery out of the corner of his eye standing behind the monitors. She was clapping and smiling widely.

He had no idea what his expression was, but when she saw that he was looking at her so she lifted her fingers to her mouth and made a half-circle as she mouthed, "Smile."

This time, he didn't have to force himself. The corners of his mouth tilted

up as she nodded in approval and kept clapping and cheering him on.
Damn, he loved that woman. He really did.

AVERY DOUBLE-CHECKED THAT SHE HAD EVERYTHING ON HER PACKING LIST IN Jacob's suitcase. Jude was supposed to pick him up yesterday but never showed. When Avery texted her ex, he told her his schedule had changed, he was coming today, and he'd extended his trip by ten days, so to make sure Jacob had enough clothes for three weeks.

Three weeks.

She wasn't sure what she was going to do without her little man for three weeks. That was going to be the longest amount of time she'd ever been away from him.

Avery wasn't worried about Jude taking good care of him. Well, scratch that. She wasn't worried about *Celeste* taking good care of him. She knew that Jacob would be safe and looked after. It was just...she didn't want to spend three weeks without being able to see him.

But she knew that she needed to get used to it. Jude had mentioned to her that he was thinking about moving back to the UK. If he did that, there was a very good chance that Jacob would be spending at least six weeks in London every summer and heading across the pond every other holiday.

Why had she procreated with a man who wasn't from this country? she thought to herself. And for the first time in her life, she might actually have the answer.

When she'd spoken to Anne, the therapist pointed out that Avery's relationship with Jude was most likely an attempt to rewrite the history she had with her own father. She'd said that she'd chosen a British man who was emotionally unavailable to try to fill the void that her father's absence had

had in her life.

At first, Avery thought Anne's hypothesis was far-fetched, but the more she thought about it, the more it actually made a lot of sense. And it explained why she'd felt so obligated to stay with him after she got pregnant. She literally wanted to make sure Jacob didn't have the same father that she'd had. Her way of doing that was to get married to him, which was why she'd said yes.

Anne also pointed out that although most people wanted to right the wrongs they'd had in their childhood with their own children, it didn't really work that way. Jacob's childhood would never be anything like hers because Avery was his mom. She was present and gave him unconditional love. Those were two things Avery had never had from a parent.

The session had given her a lot to think about, and they hadn't even scratched the surface of Avery's life. She'd already made her next appointment and was really looking forward to getting Anne's take on the Keaton Savage situation.

"Dad's here!" Jacob ran into the front room.

The knot that had been in her stomach all day doubled in size as she tried, and failed to close the suitcase. She sat on top of it and tried to zip it between her legs. It wouldn't have been overflowing if Jude hadn't extended his trip by ten days.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?" Avery asked, knowing if he didn't go now, five minutes down the road, he'd be saying he needed to stop.

Jacob shook his head no.

"Why don't you just try," she said as she struggled with the zipper.

His shoulders slumped and he sighed before turning and walking into the bathroom.

"I take it his highness has arrived," her mom observed as she walked into the front room. "Is *she* with him?"

"Mom, it's not her fault."

"Well, sugar, it's not *not* her fault. She knew that man was engaged to get married. Hell, she acted like your friend and looked after your baby." Her mom said as she walked over and easily zipped the suitcase close.

"How did you do that?" Avery asked.

"Years of practice, darlin."

Avery lifted the case and walked out of the carriage house just in time to see the driver open Jude's door. He stepped out, looking the castle up and

down. Avery had asked him, on more than one occasion, to come and see the property, but he'd never had any interest in it. Probably because it had nothing to do with him.

That was a new standard she had for any relationship she was ever in again. Avery would never settle for a partner who wasn't interested in her life. Also, even though her relationship with her mother wasn't conventional, she was still important to her. Jude never made any effort to get to know her mom. She didn't think he'd ever had an actual conversation with her.

She'd made excuses for him for the first five years of their relationship since her mom hadn't lived in California, and they only saw her a few times. But these last five years since she'd not only lived in California, she'd lived in their backhouse, and he still hadn't.

It was strange, as she observed him clearly judging the castle and finding it lacking, he looked different. It hadn't been that long since she'd seen him last. When they'd been together, she'd gone months without seeing him.

But now as she studied him, he seemed *less* somehow. Not so much in stature, he still stood six foot two and still had an athletic frame, but just his presence. His being. For so long, she'd thought of him as magnetic, but now he was just common. Ordinary. Nothing special.

"Hi, Avery."

Avery turned and saw that Celeste had gotten out of the SUV.

"Hi," Avery greeted her with a warm smile.

No matter what her mom said, when Avery looked at Celeste, she just saw a naïve young woman. She'd only turned twenty, three months ago. When they hired her, she'd been a teenager. Yes, she knew that Avery and Jude were engaged, but Jude could be very persuasive. Avery was sure he'd told Celeste that they had an arrangement that he could see other people, which apparently was what he thought they had.

Celeste took a step forward toward Avery, her nervous energy was palpable. "I just wanted to say, I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Jude cut her off, stepping beside her and wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her against him.

Celeste's gaze dropped to the ground.

Avery ignored her ex. "It's fine, Celeste. Really."

"Celeste!" Jacob exclaimed as he rushed past Avery.

Celeste bent down and Jacob ran into her arms.

"Hello, Jacob," Jude said as he touched the top of his son's head.

“Hi,” Jacob waved at him with a weak smile.

Avery handed the driver the suitcase and gave Jacob a big, monster bear hug before watching them all pile into the black SUV and drive away taking her heart with it. She knew that she would get through this. She had to; she didn't have a choice. But it wasn't going to be easy.

For the first time ever, she was upset that she'd gotten all caught up on work. It was crazy how much easier running one property was compared to running three.

Tears filled her eyes as the Cadillac turned and was no longer in view.

She was turning to go back inside when her mom appeared beside her with her large purse slung over her shoulder and pulled on her arm toward the car. “Come on.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

“To the knitting club I told you about.”

“Wait, you were serious?” Her mom mentioned that she was going to take her to a knitting club, but she thought she was kidding.

“Yes! I saw Doris today and told her that your lyin', cheatin', two-timin' ex was going to take your son away from you for three weeks, and she said you needed to go to the Needlepoint Mafia meeting tonight.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Avery said sarcastically as she wiped the tears from beneath her eyes as she climbed in the passenger seat. This was a small town, and the last thing she needed was for everyone to know what Jude did. She didn't want people to look at her with pity or as a woman scorned. It really hadn't burned that bad, or at all. “There is one problem with this plan, I don't know how to knit.”

Well, that wasn't true. She knew the basics, thanks to her mom who had picked it up when she toured. She said that and romance novels had helped her pass the time.

Her mom waved her hand dismissively. “It's just a stitch 'n bitch.”

“Stitch and bitch?”

“It's more of a socializin' club. 'Cept, I *did* hear that you're not allowed to talk.”

“Wait, it's a knitting club but you can't talk?”

“You can, but it's frowned upon.”

Avery was more confused by the second. But she figured anything would be better than sitting at home feeling sorry for herself.

In less than five minutes they pulled up in front of the Whisper Lake

community center and for some reason, Avery felt nervous as they walked inside. She remembered Karen Carpenter, not the singer, telling her about these meetings being exclusive, invite-only when she was staying at the B&B. She remembered it because the name had stuck out to her. The Needlepoint Mafia—that wasn't a name you'd forget.

Avery and her mom walked in and she saw that it was filled with about forty women and it was pretty quiet. There were a few murmurs of talking, but no lively conversations. A woman who reminded her of Mrs. Santa Claus greeted them, "Hello Blanche, I'm so glad you could come. And you must be Avery."

"Hi." Avery lifted her hand in a wave.

"I'm Mrs. Dobrinski, but you can call me Mrs. D. Why don't you head over to the kid's table."

"The kid's table?"

Mrs. D pointed at a group of women who all looked to be around Avery's age. She recognized one of them as Kennedy Dawes, who was the realtor that Avery spoke to when she inherited the castle and had considered selling it.

Her mom handed her a ball of yarn and two knitting needles. "Have fun, darlin'."

Avery felt like the new kid at school as she joined the group. "Hi, I'm—"

"Avery!" Kennedy exclaimed as she stood garnering a chorus of *shhhs* from the room.

"We're really not allowed to talk?" Avery whispered as Kennedy pulled her into a hug.

"It's frowned upon," Kennedy responded using the same phrase that her mom had, speaking in a quiet tone. Kennedy motioned to the empty seat and introduced Avery to the group, continuing to speak in a whisper.

Kennedy motioned to the pretty blonde at the end of the semi-circle "This is Chrissy, she is a super mom of four amazing kids, just started an event planning business and is now my sister-in-law." Then she pointed at the woman Avery had sat next to who she recognized as the hair and makeup person who worked on the show. Avery had been impressed with her 1940's pinup style. Tonight she was wearing a tight white t-shirt that had a ball of yarn with two hooking needles stuck through it that said I'm a Knotty Knotty Hooker below it. "This is Jess, she is a badass makeup artist and hair stylist who owns The Mane Attraction.

"And this is Laura. She is the mom of the most adorable twins Jackson

and Jasmine and owns the Snack Shack. She is my bestie and, like Chrissy, also my new sister-in-law.” Kennedy lifted her hand displaying a diamond ring she was wearing.

Avery smiled at the group at large. “Hi, I’m Avery I—”

“Inherited Stone Castle,” Chrissy and Jess chimed in quietly.

“It’s a small town,” Jess said in a hushed voice.

“Avery and I met when she was in town five years ago, right after she found out about the castle,” Kennedy explained to the group. “It’s great to see you again.”

“You, too. And congratulations.” Avery motioned to her ring.

“Thanks,” she enthused in a whisper.

“You are all sisters-in-law?” Avery waved her hand between the three of them.

“Yep.” Laura nodded. “Savage men are hard to resist.”

“Savage men?” Avery parroted.

Holy shit.

She’d heard that all of Keaton’s cousins had recently gotten married, she just didn’t have any idea she was in a knitting circle with their wives. She wasn’t sure what she should say, or if she should say anything.

“Avery Stone?”

Avery looked up and saw Karen Carpenter, not the singer, standing beside her.

“Karen, hi.” Avery stood and hugged her.

“I heard you were back in town. You staying over at the castle?”

Avery nodded. “In the carriage house.”

“Oh right, because they’re filming in the castle. Speaking of, did you all hear what happened to those poor girls?” Karen asked as she sat down in the seat across from Avery and leaned into the group.

“No,” they all responded barely above a whisper.

Avery had just been over at the castle, and even she hadn’t heard what happened to the contestants. But she was all ears.

“Well, we have three girls staying at the B&B and they are supposed to be going on the show as new ladies in waiting or whatever. Anyhoo, today they all got poison ivy so bad they had to go to the hospital.”

“Poison Ivy?” Jess repeated.

“Hospital?” Kennedy questioned.

Karen nodded. “Oh, yeah. Poor girls were broken out in boils from head

to toe.”

Avery’s phone vibrated and she grabbed it, thinking it had to be Jude calling because something was wrong with Jacob. It wasn’t. It was Sabrina. She sent her to voicemail and put the phone back in her pocket. As soon as she did, it vibrated with a message.

She pulled it back out and saw it was a text saying that Avery needed to call her 911.

“Sorry, I have to go make a…”

Before she could stand up, her mom came over and shoved her phone toward Avery. “Sabrina says she needs you to do the show.”

“The show?” Avery asked at a normal volume.

“Shhh!” hushes came from the room.

“Yes, the show,” her mother whispered.

Avery was shaking her head as she took the phone and walked out into the hallway so she could speak to her friend. “Hey Sab—”

“You have to help me.” Sabrina cut her off and then talked as fast as she’d ever heard her friend talk. “We had three girls quarantining at the B&B waiting to go on the show and they are currently in the ER being treated for fucking poison ivy. All three. I know you hate attention, and cameras, and anyone looking at you and I wouldn’t ask if I had any other options, but I *need* you to be a contestant on the show.”

“Sabrina, I can’t go on the show.”

“Why not?”

Because I’m sleeping with your golden goose, Avery thought to herself.

“It would be a conflict of interest. I own the castle it’s filmed at.”

“So,” Sabrina shot back with an elementary school defense.

“I’m best friends with the executive producer.”

“Do you have any idea how many contestants you see on reality TV that are there because they have a parent or sister or in-law as a producer? Welcome to Hollywood, baby.”

“I have Jacob.”

“Jude just took him for three weeks.”

Shit. She was running out of excuses.

“You and I both know there’s a very good chance Jude will drop him off early.” Avery knew her ex was just making a point that he could see their son whenever he wanted for however long he wanted. She was pretty certain that the actual responsibility of having a four-year-old twenty-four hours a day

would make an even bigger point and Jude would cry uncle within a week.

“If he comes back early, your mom is here. She can stay with him the nights you film. You can be with him every day at breakfast, lunch, and dinner and during the breaks that the cast has to get ready. The only time you’ll be away from him is when you’re filming. You worked longer hours and were away from him more than that in California.

Avery’s mind was racing. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t go on the show that the man she was in love with was currently on, and faking a relationship with someone else. What was she supposed to do? Fake a relationship of her own?

What if Keaton decided not to play along with Zara and it messed up Sabrina’s show? She couldn’t have that on her shoulders.

“Sabrina, I have to tell you something. Keaton was the guy I was seeing when I came here to do the renovations. The guy *you* thought I was going to elope with. And he was with me on the roof the other night. And we...well...you know. And just...I can’t go on the show.”

The line went silent, and Avery thought the call must have disconnected. When she pulled it away from her ear, she heard her friend scream. “Are you fucking kidding me? This is amazing! That’s the best news I’ve heard all day. All week. All year! Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? I would have put you on as an OG cast member.”

“Sabrina, no. I can’t.” Avery’s heart was racing a million miles a minute.

“Avery, you *have* to. I know I already called Yahtzee, but this is a super Yahtzee.”

“There’s no super Yahtzee.”

Avery heard a bunch of commotion in the background of the call and her friend said, “Shit, I have to go. Get your ass back to the castle. You have to do a psych eval and physical to be ready to film tomorrow. See you in five.”

“Sabrina!” Avery called out, but this time the line really was dead.

Avery turned around to head back inside the knitting club and jumped in start when she saw her mom, Kennedy, Laura, Jess, Chrissy and Karen Carpenter standing two feet away from her.

“How much of that did you hear?” she asked as she clutched her chest.

Her mom grinned. “Enough to know you’re gonna be the next contestant on Fairytale Love.”

“LET’S GO!” VIC STARED IN THE MIRROR AND PUMPED HIMSELF UP LIKE HE was getting ready for the big game. “You got this, man. You got this.”

Keaton was familiar with pre-game rituals. Some athletes and performers liked a party atmosphere with loud music and people around. Some liked to have a handful of people around that hyped them up. And some, like him, preferred solitude so they could get in the zone.

Whenever he had a fight, he needed at least thirty minutes alone so he could get his mind right unlike Vic who clearly needed to get pumped up.

Everyone’s nerves, except his, were definitely on edge. It had been strange being down two people. Elijah and Ariel had been voted off. Luca had been pretty bummed that Ariel left, but Keaton was pretty certain that Sienna would happily try and do everything she could to take his mind off of it. Unlike Luca, she did not seem upset about losing her partner. And unless he was mistaken, she had her sights set on Luca to match up with next.

All the men, except Keaton, were pacing around the room when Maura collected them and they walked to the ballroom for the nightly cocktail hour.

Tonight, Vic was up first to enter. He waited by the doorway and Piper joined him wearing a very short red dress. Her blonde hair fell in waves around her shoulders and her lips were the same shade as her dress. Luca was next, and since he and Sienna were both unattached, they were going to enter together.

When Keaton saw Sienna, all doubt that she was interested in Luca was erased. She was wearing a white dress with a revealing low V-cut neckline that was form-fitting displaying her curves like a billboard in Times Square.

The deep crimson lipstick she wore drew attention to her full mouth and matched her red fuck-me heels. This woman came to play. She wanted her man, and she was going to get him.

From Luca's response when he saw her, Keaton had a feeling that she'd achieved her desired goal. His tongue might as well have rolled out of his mouth like a cartoon wolf.

Harlan, who was in front of Keaton in line, turned around and mouthed, "*Damn, bro.*"

Keaton just grinned.

Freya followed Sienna wearing a more understated little black dress with an open back and strappy heels. Keaton could tell she felt a little self-conscious by the way she kept glancing down and adjusting her shoulder straps as she approached Harlan. When Harlan saw her his eyes lit up and he whistled. When she reached him, he held her hand in the air, spun her around, and then dipped her dramatically. Her head fell back as she laughed and any insecurity she might have felt disappeared.

They really were a cute couple. If Keaton was at home voting, they would be the couple he'd want to win.

Zara was the last lady to arrive. Tonight, she wore a strapless green dress that molded to her curves with a slit that ended right before her hip revealing her entire thigh. Her legs were toned and long. She definitely knew how to dress to accentuate her body.

Keaton wasn't blind or dead. All of the women on the show were attractive, including Zara. He appreciated their beauty like he did the beauty of nature, the lake, the trees, sunsets, and sunrises. It was objective and not personal. Not at all what he felt when he saw Avery. When he saw her, it was personal. She affected him on a cellular level.

Zara's lips curled in a private smile, and he grinned down at her as she wrapped her hand around his bicep and he escorted her to the ballroom. He had to give it to her, she was a good actress. She could turn on the charm in the blink of an eye.

When all the couples were on their marks, the music stopped and the double doors opened once more. Lance Sparrow walked into the room, which was unusual. He'd only ever been there for balls and tonight was just a cocktail hour.

"Hello lords and ladies. I know that you must be surprised to see me, but I am here to bring you good tidings. Unfortunately, two members of the royal

court were exiled yesterday. But fear not, for we have another lord and lady that will be joining your ranks.”

Some of his castmates seemed excited for the new arrivals, while others seemed nervous like newcomers would increase their chances of being exiled. He could care less. All he cared about was getting out of the ‘royal court.’

He just wanted to be with Avery, even if she did end up going back to California. If she was only going to be here a short time, he wanted to spend every second he could with her. Part of him knew that he was only setting himself up to be heartbroken again, but another part of him didn’t care.

Whatever was between them was worth risking his heart.

“Our two new arrivals will join Lord Luca and Lady Sienna as singles. They will spend the week getting to know each one of you. At the next ball, the viewers will decide which couple, or couples will be rematched with one of our singles, which will remain in their matches, and which will be exiled. So, without further ado, lords and ladies, please join me in welcoming, Lord Anton.”

The doors opened and a tall, good-looking guy with blond hair, and a beard appeared. The cast and crew all clapped as he walked in. Just as he made it to the center of the room there was a loud pop and someone yelled, “Cut.”

George stepped out from behind the monitors and explained that a light had burst so we had to do the entry again. “We need to take ten to reset. Stay close.”

As they fixed the light and reset the cameras, Harlan turned to Keaton and fisted his hand to give him a pound. “Hell yeah, no exile today. I almost shit myself when I saw Sparrow walk in.”

Keaton had had the opposite response. He’d hoped that meant that he might be able to go home. As they waited, Keaton stepped back out of the bright lights. It was ridiculously hot standing under them, and he hated getting sweaty.

Unless he was on the roof with Avery, then he very much enjoyed getting sweaty.

Zara turned her head so it looked like she was just gazing off in the distance but covered the mic discreetly, so Keaton did the same.

In a low whisper, she said, “Feel free to flirt with the new girl. We need a redemption arc.”

Keaton was not going to be “flirting with the new girl.” Yes, this was a game. But he wasn’t going to mess with anyone’s feelings. He didn’t give a shit about a redemption arc, he just wanted off this show. Which he knew was a shitty attitude to have.

“Okay, we’re back. If everyone could go back to one,” George announced.

‘Back to one’ basically meant back to the spot that you were standing when they began to film. He and Zara returned to their places.

They did a take-two on Anton’s entrance and everyone applauded again.

“And now, ladies and lords, we have a very special addition to the court. The lady of the manor we are all residing in, Lady Avery.”

Lady Avery!? Keaton thought he must have been hearing things. There was no way that Avery was going to be on the show.

The doors opened and Avery walked in wearing a blue dress that matched her eyes, offered just a hint of cleavage, and hugged her hourglass figure. Her red hair, which was normally wavy, was perfectly straight and hung down to her waist. And her lips had a sheer cranberry gloss that was calling to him like a lighthouse in a storm.

Keaton was wrong. He was *definitely* going to be flirting with the new girl.

A very felt like she was going to pass out as she walked into the room. There were bright lights, people staring at her and clapping, and cameras pointing in her direction. Being on the roof with Keaton had been living out her dreams. Being here was living out her worst nightmare.

She still wasn’t exactly sure how she’d let Sabrina talk her into this. The past twenty-four hours had been a blur. One minute she’d been at the community center telling her best friend there was no way she would do this and the next she was sitting across from a shrink answering how she would handle getting negative publicity from the show.

Then today, Sabrina had called in a favor with some designers she knew and Avery spent the day getting fitted for a new wardrobe. After that, she spent two hours in Jessa’s chair getting a new haircut and her makeup done. Then the next thing she knew, Maura was telling her when the doors open go

in and walk to the first black X on the floor and stop.

So there she was. Her legs felt like Jell-O beneath her, and she was pretty sure she was going to throw up. She could hear that the host was talking, but it just sounded like the adults in Charlie Brown, “Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah.”

She wasn't sure how long she was standing there, reminding herself to breathe when the whole room started spinning and the noise around her muted like she was underwater. She felt like she was floating away.

I'm going to pass out, she thought to herself when she felt a large hand on her back.

“Breathe,” Keaton whispered against her ear.

His touch, his voice, his presence brought her back into her body. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them she saw that the entire cast was gathered around her. She wasn't sure how long they'd been there. They were all introducing themselves to her and Anton.

The second her legs were steady, Keaton dropped his hand and she instantly missed the contact. He stood beside her for a few moments before Zara placed her hand on his arm and the two stepped away as she whispered something to him.

“Hi, I'm Luca,” Luca introduced himself to her. I've seen you around.”

“Yeah, I um work here,” she said.

“Oh, I thought...didn't they say you owned the castle?”

“Yeah, but, that sounds...I don't know, pretentious, cringey.”

Luca laughed and she could feel the heat of Keaton's stare boring into the side of her cheek. She wished she could talk to him, to tell him why she'd come on. But she'd signed an NDA that stipulated she was not allowed to tell the cast about the poison ivy or talk about anything else outside of the Fairytale Love bubble. She was mic'd so she knew that even if she got him alone, she wouldn't be able to explain the situation.

Suddenly she understood why he'd been so desperate to talk to her down at the lake. Why he'd rattled off all that information so quickly because he didn't have time. He was being watched, monitored at all times.

Luca continued talking to her and she did her best to pay attention to what he was saying. But being this close to Keaton and not being able to say what she wanted to say, to touch him, to even really look at him, was much harder than she thought it was going to be.

This was going to be absolute torture.

To her surprise, the cocktail hour went by faster than she'd expected it to. Before she knew it they were being separated to get ready for bed. As the men walked out to head to the north tower, Keaton's knuckles brushed the back of her hand, sending a tremor rushing through her body and a tingle between her legs.

Then again, maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

KEATON STOOD BESIDE ZARA AND GLANCED DOWN AT THE END OF THE LINE where Avery was next to Anton. Today she wore plain yoga pants and a sports bra, like all the other women, but there was nothing plain about how she looked in them. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. The black leggings clung to her rounded hips and shapely thighs. A hint of cleavage spilled over the white sports bra. The two items of clothing hit her in the perfect spot to accentuate the hourglass shape of her bare skin between them.

Since she'd walked into the ballroom four days ago, he had been looking for any opportunity he could find to speak to her. But since she'd been announced as a new lady, they hadn't had a moment alone.

He wanted to ask her what was going on. Why hadn't she said anything about joining the competition when they were on the roof? Had she joined because of what had happened on the roof?

If that were the case, he'd be flattered. But he knew it wasn't. That didn't make any sense. There had to be a reason he wasn't seeing.

They'd spoken a few times, but it hadn't really been about anything real because they'd been mic'd up. They'd both tried to disguise what they were actually trying to say with coded language, but that was harder to do than you might think. Also, despite Zara instructing him to "flirt with the new girl" she'd been static cling film stuck to his side like a dryer sheet that he couldn't get rid of. Every time he thought he'd extracted himself from her, she popped up behind him.

Being so close to Avery and only sharing stolen looks, secret touches, and coded words was frustrating, but it was also kind of hot. He felt like the past

ninety-six hours had all been foreplay. The level of his pent-up, unreleased passion, need, and desire was hitting critical mass. He was about to explode and those yoga pants and sports bra weren't helping his condition.

“Okay, lords and ladies welcome to our Knight in Shining Armor Challenge.” Heather spoke into the bullhorn, which again, was not necessary. “Today our lords will don a suit of armor, cross the moat, scale the wall, slay the dragon, and rescue their ladies from the tower.”

Keaton looked around the course. They'd set up a makeshift moat which consisted of filling a ditch with thick black mud that was several feet deep. A rope hung down from the stone wall on the east side of the castle. On the parapet walkway, there was a large mechanical dragon standing guard in front of the southeast corner tower.

“Our newcomers to court will be able to choose their partners in this challenge. Lords, you will be scored on your time, your style, and of course, your swoon factor and the match with the lord who has the highest score will be crowned Couple of the Day.”

Out of everything that they had to do on this show, Keaton actually enjoyed the physical challenges the most. Not just because he and Zara were undefeated. Anytime he didn't have to talk about his feelings or discuss other people's feelings, it was a win for him.

The first couple to go was Harlan and Freya. Harlan had a little hiccup slaying the dragon because he dropped his sword off the side of the wall. Keaton threw his up to him, and he was able to disarm the animatronic beast by stabbing it in the sensor on its chest. Then he easily made his way up the stairs of the tower to rescue Freya. His time was five minutes and fifteen seconds.

Luca and Vic ran nearly identical courses time-wise. They both waded through the moat, made it up the wall, slayed the dragon, and saved their lady in four minutes thirty-two seconds and four minutes thirty-seven respectively.

Keaton took a different approach than his other competitors, instead of wading through the swamp-moat Keaton ran about fifty yards down the 'moat' to where there was a path of rocks. He knew they were there because he and Avery had found them when they'd explored during her renovations.

He didn't know his time, but he felt like he got to the wall faster than it would have taken him to wade through the mud that Harlan, Vic, and Luca had all had trouble with. His arms burned as he shimmied up the wall. The men before him had made it look easier than it actually was with the damn

costume they had to wear. The chest plate and shoulder plates were not easy to move in.

Once he made it to the walkway, instead of rushing the dragon and immediately engaging, Keaton walked up close enough that it activated its motion sensor. Then he waited as it thrashed its arms and blew out “fire” which was just sprays of water. Once it stopped moving, Keaton easily stabbed its chest in the sensor. He’d noted while watching his other opponents that the dragon only moved for about thirty seconds after it was activated before freezing again. Harlan, Vic, and Luca had all tried to kill it while it was flailing around. Killing it ate up half their time because they couldn’t get a clear shot at its chest.

After slaying the beast, Keaton ran up the steps. Unlike Harlan who had picked Freya up and spun her around in the tower when he reached her, Luca who put Sienna over his shoulder in a fireman carry, and Vic who Piper jumped on like a monkey, wrapping her legs and arms around him, Keaton picked Zara up like a groom carrying his bride over the threshold. She placed the back of her hand over her forehead dramatically, really playing up the swoon of it all, before cupping his face and planting a kiss on him that felt like it lasted longer than the time it had taken him to do the course.

He knew if he challenged her on the smooch crossing the PG line they’d agreed on, she’d claim it was for the swoon points. But he had a feeling she wasn’t happy with his interest in ‘the new girl’ because it was real, which threatened the very fake couple status.

Once she finally released him and they came up for air, his eyes instantly searched for Avery like they always did and found her cheering them on enthusiastically. When their eyes met, she even gave him two thumbs up. Each day, her unwavering and unconditional support of him during this complicated time made him fall even more in love with her.

He had no idea how, or when, but one day he was going to make that woman his wife.

“I’ll be right back and then let me know who you want your knight to be,” Iris told Avery before heading over to help Anton with his suit of armor. He’d chosen Zara as his lady. Avery wasn’t sure if he’d done it because he

was genuinely interested in her, or if it was because she'd won the majority of the popularity votes. Anton seemed very calculated in how he was playing this game. She wasn't judging him for that, the reasons she shouldn't be a contestant on this show were like buried IEDs in the plains of moral ground.

Another reason Anton might have selected Zara was that Keaton and Zara were currently undefeated in their Couple of the Day wins. And Keaton had gotten the best time out of all of the lords. His time was a full thirty seconds faster at four minutes, two seconds. Anton might just be competitive and want to dethrone the reigning king.

As she waited at the end of the line of couples, she caught Keaton staring at her out of the corner of her eye. When she looked at him, he winked as if to say he knew she was going to pick him as her knight. Which, obviously she was. But something about the challenge wasn't sitting right with her.

Avery had watched as each knight crossed the moat, scaled the wall, slayed the dragon, and saved their lady. For some reason doing that seemed much more appealing to her than waiting up in a tower to be rescued. Not because of the patriarchal undertones of the setup, this wasn't an I-am-woman-hear-me-roar situation. It was the opposite, actually. Standing in a tower with three cameras pointing at her, capturing her every expression, breath—and she feared, thought—as she watched Keaton be a badass knight, sounded like medieval torture to her.

Over the past few days, she'd found that when she was doing a challenge, she wasn't even thinking about the cameras filming her. The cocktail hours were much worse for her. When the only direction she was given was to stand somewhere and talk to people, she turned into Will Ferrell in *Talladega Nights* when he was being interviewed and didn't know what to do with his hands. He kept awkwardly lifting them into frame.

If she didn't have somewhere for her brain to focus her anxiety, it turned inward on her. She started hyper-fixating on everything from how loud she was breathing, to if she touched her face too much, to where to put her hands. The movie was slightly more exaggerated than what she felt like she did, but only slightly. It was the strangest phenomenon, if a camera was pointed at her, she didn't know how to hold her arms naturally, where her hands went, or even how to walk. She would literally have to mentally instruct herself to put one foot in front of the other.

“Okay.” Iris returned with a wide smile on her face. “You are up as soon as Anton and Zara go. Which lord do you want to rescue you from the

tower?”

Avery’s heart was racing. All her life, she’d been a rule-follower to a fault. She didn’t go in exit doors, she didn’t walk up escalators that went down, she never even snuck her own food into a movie theater. She didn’t have a rebellious bone in her body.

Her palms dampened at the thought of breaking a rule. But right now, that’s exactly what she was going to do. She was going to break a rule. Well, she was going to *ask* if she could break a rule.

“Can I rescue a lord?”

Iris tilted her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, can I be the knight, wear the armor, and save one of the lords?”

Iris’s eyes widened as did her smile. She pulled out her walkie talkie and Avery heard Sabrina’s voice answer the call she put out. Iris walked away as she explained the situation, so Avery didn’t hear the conversation. A minute or two later, she was back with an even wider smile on her face.

“We got the green light. Which lord would you like to save from the tower?”

Avery hesitated a second. She felt like she knew Keaton and he wouldn’t be upset if she picked him. But what if he was? What if he was offended or it somehow made him feel unmanly? He was a world-champion MMA fighter. What if he felt embarrassed? What if doing this ruined any chance they had?

No. She wasn’t going to go down that path. She’d spent the past ten years with a man who had treated her as lesser than. He’d spoken down to her and never valued her dreams or goals. Case in point: she’d inherited Stone Castle six years ago, but the first time he’d seen it was five days ago.

She was tired of taking the backseat to a man and their ego. Still, she couldn’t help feeling a little nervous. Iris was Keaton’s niece, maybe she would know if he would be offended.

“I was going to choose Keaton but...”

Before she could even finish, Iris let out a small squeal of delight and was on the move and back on the walkie talkie. Avery held her breath as she watched Iris walk up to Keaton. She could see him listening and recognized the look of confusion on his face as he shook his head and put his hand on his chest.

Shit. She’d fucked up. He didn’t want to be rescued. Her first reaction to his reaction was to be upset at herself. This was why she was a rule follower.

But then she heard her mom’s voice in her head say, “*Darlin’, if a man*

was gonna get his panties in a bunch over you wantin' to slay your own dragon, don't ya think it's better to find out now instead of ten years and a baby later?"

Her inner-Blanche-Bardot-voice was right. Avery needed a man who wasn't threatened by her, her success, her goals. And on the flipside, not embarrassed by her failures. She wanted a partner that she never had to walk on eggshells with and who gave her unconditional support.

Avery's internal pep talk was just picking up speed when Ivy and Heather walked up to her.

"I need you to put your head through here," Heather instructed as she held up the chest piece.

Shit, had Anton already gone. She looked at the digital clock that was recording the time and saw that it read four minutes fifteen seconds, putting him currently in second place. Avery had zoned out and missed his turn completely.

Heather lifted the chest piece up and Avery put her head through. When she straightened her head again, Keaton was gone and so was Iris. Had he left the set? Was he upset at her?

Her heart was pounding as Heather and Ivy finished getting her into the suit. She was waiting for Iris to walk over to her and tell her that she needed to choose another lord. But that never happened.

Heather had just finished putting the final strap on her side when her walkie talkie beeped and someone said something Avery couldn't make out. She grabbed it, nodding as she replied, "Copy, we're heading to her mark now."

She clipped the walkie talkie back on her belt. "Okay, are you ready to go?"

"We're doing it?" she asked.

"*You're* doing it!" Heather enthused as she lifted her hand for a high five.

Avery gave her five but didn't quite share her enthusiasm as she stepped on the black X that literally marked her spot. This plan had sounded so good a few minutes ago, but now that she stared at the course, she was worried that she wouldn't have the upper body strength to make it up the wall. Although, she'd taken a pole fitness class the year before and the instructor told her, "*Your upper body is made for the pole.*" Avery assumed she'd been talking about her arms and core strength and not her boobs, but either way, she'd been flattered.

She took a deep breath as she waited for the air horn to go off. She tried to look up in the tower, to see if Keaton was upset about being there, but every time she lifted her head, the helmet, which was about three times too big for her, slid down covering her eyes.

I made a terrible mistake, she thought to herself a second before the air horn sounded.

After she heard the loud noise, signaling her start, something snapped in her. She wasn't nervous, or scared, or self-conscious. She just wanted to get up to that tower as fast as she possibly could. Her plan had been to take the path Keaton had and cross the moat on the rocks, but in a split-second game-time decision she changed her mind.

She'd always been light on her feet, and she weighed considerably less than the lords did, which she hoped meant she wouldn't sink as fast in the murky quicksand substance. She'd been right. She was across the mud in no time flat, not getting stuck or slowing down once.

Her hands were shaking as she reached up and grabbed the rope, not from nerves but from adrenaline. She used that energy to fuel her ascent. Halfway up, her arms were on fire, and she was hurting. But then her toe caught the edge of one of the stones in the wall and gave her just enough leverage to ascend. She managed to find three more footholds and reached the top.

Once she got to the dragon, she used her considerable height difference from the lords who all had over six inches on her, and ducked at the dragon's first swipe at her then rose up under its arms and hit the buzzer. After that, it was an easy climb up the steps and she reached Keaton.

Any worry that she had that he might be upset with her evaporated when she saw the pure joy and pride in his eyes as he lifted his hand in victory and cheered loudly. It was die-hard football fans whose underdog team won the Super Bowl level enthusiasm.

She smiled as he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her feet off the ground. Her arms wrapped around his arms as he hopped up and down shouting, "You did it! You did it! You did it!"

Tears pricked her eyes, but she sniffed back the emotion. She was overcome by his happiness for her. After about the tenth, "You did it!" she acted purely on instinct, leaned forward, and kissed him.

The kiss started out chaste, but when her lips parted slightly, his tongue slid inside her mouth and the kiss turned passionate. Her helmet slipped off and she heard it crash on the pavement below them. When it hit the floor,

Keaton lowered her to the ground without breaking their kiss. As soon as her feet were on solid ground, his fingers cupped her face, tilting it to the side and the kiss intensified even more.

She completely forgot that there were cameras, or they were shooting a show, or that he was matched with someone else. In that moment she was transported into a world where only they existed. Where she needed this kiss more than oxygen. Where nothing else mattered.

It wasn't until she heard a loud "CUT! I said, CUT!" come over the airhorn that she came back to her senses. Keaton must have had the same experience because his lips moved from her mouth to her nose to her forehead where he pressed soft kisses before his hands dropped to his side.

She looked up at him and they exchanged a look that silently communicated they both knew that kiss had just outed them to the rest of the cast, the crew, oh and about a million viewers. She had no clue what the repercussions of them getting carried away were going to be. Would Zara be upset? Would Sabrina? Keaton was supposed to be her meal ticket, her golden goose, her breakout star.

"Sorry," she quietly whispered.

"I'm not," he grinned and kissed her forehead once again.

And just like that, all the worry she had was gone. Keaton Savage was a tonic to her anxiety. A balm to her nervousness. And a really, really, *really* good kisser.

“WHAT IS GOING ON WITH YOU AND THE NEW CHICK?” HARLAN ASKED Keaton as the men all waited in the holding room for the ball. “You like her, don’t you?”

No. He loved her. Instead of announcing his feelings for her to Harlan, which he thought might be bad form considering he hadn’t even told her, he just answered with a simple nod.

Keaton hadn’t had a second alone with Avery since their kiss in the tower three days ago. He’d considered going down the not-giving-a-fuck route and talking to her in front of Zara, the cameras, the crew, whoever and telling her that he wanted to be with her, but until he knew exactly why she was on the show, he didn’t want to do that.

She’d been engaged up until a few weeks ago, and he wasn’t sure where her head was at. Also, he knew how much she hated attention being on her, and he was pretty sure she’d hate him making a public display of announcing his feelings for her.

All he needed was five minutes alone with her so he could find out what in the actual fuck was going on. Did she still want to keep what was going on between them and their past secret? Did production know that they’d had a relationship years ago that had recently rekindled? If he outed them, would that jeopardize her reasons for being on the show?

He’d overheard Ivy and Iris talking in their ‘twin talk,’ which was a language they’d made up but was pretty close to Pig Latin, about contestants getting food poisoning or who were actually poisoned or something. He didn’t understand all of what they said, because it was a made-up language,

but he definitely heard the word poison more than once.

That made him wonder if Avery was a last-minute sub. It was the only scenario that made any sense to him as to why she was on the show. He knew how close she and Sabrina were. He remembered her telling him when he first met her that Sabrina was her college roommate and that she was how the Fairytale Love thing had happened in the first place.

If Sabrina asked her to go on the show as a favor, Avery would do it even if she hated every second. Intuitively he knew that was the sort of person she was. She'd do anything for the people she cared about.

But that hypothesis was basically just a guess. Keaton *never* based decisions on guesses. Especially life-altering decisions like declaring his undying love to someone. He wanted facts. And those were something he was only going to have once he spoke to her, which Zara was not letting happen.

She'd been less than thrilled at Avery's I'll-slay-my-own-dragon "stunt" as she called it. He'd had the opposite reaction. He'd thought it was a ballsy move and one that he really admired. Avery was a badass, he'd known that from the first second he'd seen her when she'd been facing down that coyote.

When Iris told him what she'd asked, that she wanted him to be in the tower, Harlan had covered his mouth and said, "*Oh shit, dude,*" like it was a bad thing. Like he should feel emasculated by it. But Keaton had been more than happy to be rescued by her, even though he knew he'd get shit about it, like he had from his castmates. And he was sure that some neanderthal, backward-thinking, misogynistic assholes in the sport he loved would have a lot more than two cents to say about it. But he didn't care. He thought it was badass. And the fact that she had the fastest time, beating him by four seconds had just been icing on her badass cake.

"There's definitely going to be another exile tonight," Vic predicted.

The last time the subject of being exiled had been brought up, Keaton had offered himself up as tribute. He'd been itching to get the hell off the show. That was before Avery joined the cast.

Now he wanted to stay as long as she was there. Unless there was a chance they could both get exiled, then he'd want that to happen. But the thought of her being on the show, being matched up with someone else, and him watching from home sat in his stomach like three-week-old sushi.

“Sit down, lovely,” Jessa patted her chair. She was going to do Avery’s hair makeup for the ball.

It was so good to see a familiar, friendly face. Avery wanted to hug her. The past four days she’d barely gotten a chance to speak to Keaton. The only time the men and women were together was when cameras were rolling. And after the kiss in the tower, Zara had been keeping a tight rein on him.

When she agreed to do this, Avery thought she would see more of Sabrina, but she hadn’t seen her at all. She was thinking about why she hadn’t last night in bed, which she shared with Sienna because they were the two unmatched ladies, and she realized her bestie was probably keeping her distance so it didn’t appear that there was favoritism.

She’d been allowed to speak to Jacob each night. He seemed to be having fun with his dad and Celeste, but he did start crying last night because he missed her and her mom. It had broken her heart, but she was actually glad she had the show to distract her. If she was left to her own devices, she probably would have spiraled into a bottle of wine, pint of Ben & Jerry’s Half-Baked, entire bag of Pirate’s Booty a day habit. Which would have made the fifteen-pound weight gain she’d had over the past five years, double by the time her son came home.

This was better. Being on the show was better. Plus, having Keaton brush his hand against her thigh, or arm, or whisper how good she looked in stolen moments was really working for her. She hadn’t thought she could be more attracted to him, but after spending the past few days covertly flirting, she was so turned on she was scared the second they were alone, she was going to attack him.

“How are things going?” Jess asked as she pulled a paddle brush through her hair.

“I have no idea. The past week has been sort of a blur.” Seven days. That’s how long she’d been on the show. She couldn’t believe it; it had flown by.

“But you’re doing *good*, right? You *like* being here, right? I bet your *favorite* was the Knight in Shining armor challenge.” Jessa winked at her as she emphasized the words good, like, and favorite.

For a second, Avery was confused by her series of nonsensical statements, but then she realized that Jess was probably trying to send her a message. The cast was in “the bubble.” They were forbidden to have any access to the outside world and find out how they were being perceived by

the public. She realized this was Jess's way of telling her that she must be doing *good* with the public, people *liked* her, and that the Knight in Shining Armor challenge was a viewer *favorite*.

Avery smiled and nodded her head. "Yeah, that challenge was fun."

She hadn't even thought about the public perception of her. Probably because popularity was not her motive for being on the show. Or, for anything in her life, really. But being cut off from the world, especially social media, bothered some people here more than others.

Zara, who was clearly there to play the game and play it well, did not handle the isolation well. It drove her crazy. She hated not knowing how she was being portrayed or what the public thought of her. Piper was equally obsessed with the public vote but for a totally different reason. She was worried about being liked so she didn't get exiled and could stay in the castle because she wanted to keep getting to know Vic. Freya hoped she'd reached a million Instagram followers because she wanted to start a nonprofit for foster kids. As a police officer, she'd seen how hard their lives were in care and then when they aged out. And all Sienna had talked about regarding the public was that she hoped they matched her with Luca.

"Okay, doll so what color dress are we wearing tonight?" Jessa asked.

"Blue."

"Love that! I'll do a smokey eye and natural lip and I think we're just gonna let your waves go wild."

Freya and Sienna lowered into chairs on either side of Avery and were getting glammed by two other stylists from Jessa's shop. The conversation turned to music, books and basically anything other than the show or the current state of the outside world, which was strictly forbidden to talk about and there were cameras in the women's glam area.

Before Avery knew it, she had slid into her dress, put on six-inch heels and Maura had walked into the women's holding area and announced it was time to head downstairs.

Nerves ricocheted through Avery's body like a tiny silver ball in a pinball machine. Tonight was her first ball. Word around the set was there was going to be a rematch, which meant she would no longer be sleeping in a bed with Sienna. She'd have to sleep with a man.

As much as she wanted it to be Keaton, she didn't see how that was going to happen since the viewers had all the power this season. Before she'd joined the cast, Keaton and Zara were clearly the favorite couple. And since

she'd barely had any interactions, aside from their kiss in the tower, she doubted that she'd get voted to be with him.

Since it wasn't going to be Keaton, Avery hoped it would be Luca, which she felt a little bad about because Sienna wanted to couple so badly with him. But he was the only guy with whom Avery'd had any real conversations. He was from a small town called Destiny Springs, which sounded adorable. His family owned a brewery. He had an older brother, and a younger brother and sister. He also found out a year ago that he had a brother who he didn't know about who was a retired baseball player that had a World Series ring.

Avery had talked to him a little bit about her childhood and how she'd moved around a lot, and she told him that she had a son. She wasn't attracted to him at all, but she definitely thought of him as a friend. Which she knew was not the point of the show, but still.

"Alright, ladies, showtime." Avery took a deep breath as she did one more check in the mirror.

The women were ushered down the back stairs and through the kitchen. Being allocated to stay in certain parts of the castle was strange for Avery. It reminded her of Gammy's house where kids weren't allowed in the front room, which her grandma called the fancy room. In it, all the furniture was covered in plastic. It was reserved for 'special company.' In the decade Avery lived there, the only person she ever saw in it was Gammy when she vacuumed and dusted it once a week.

As Avery stood, waiting her turn to go inside the ballroom, she wondered what Gammy would think of her doing the show. Since Gammy had loved *The Dating Game* and *Singled Out*, in the '90s, which were precursors to the modern dating shows, she thought she'd would probably be tickled pink, as Gammy liked to say, about Avery being on *Fairytale Love*.

Maura motioned for her to walk down the hall toward the ballroom. This time, instead of entering alone, she was escorted by Anton. She couldn't get a read on him, but he did seem to really like Zara. Zara, however, did not seem interested in him.

Once they were in the room, Lance came in and did his opening spiel. Avery couldn't believe how different she felt from the first time she'd entered the ballroom on the show. Yes, she was nervous now. But it was a normal level of nerves. She wasn't about to pass out and she wasn't having an out-of-body experience.

"Okay, viewers, now is the time you've been waiting for. You, the public,

had a lot of power this week. I can't say if you used it for good or evil, but I can say that it is going to shake up things in the castle. I can also tell you now that only one match standing here tonight will still be matched at the end of this ball."

There was a collective gasp from the other cast mates. Avery was sure that it would be Keaton and Zara. The public loved them.

"I can also tell you that no one will be exiled tonight."

There was another rumbling from the couples standing beside her.

Lance first announced that Anton would be breaking up one of the matches, then paused before announcing that he would be with Lady Freya, which actually surprised and disappointed Avery. Her only hope for Zara and Keaton being unmatched was that the public might have seen that he was going after Zara, but she should have known that wasn't going to happen. Anton was not anywhere near as likable as Keaton.

Next, Harlan got matched with Sienna, which from the look on Sienna's face, she was *not* happy about. That pairing meant the fates of two single people, herself and Luca, and two couples, Vic and Piper, and Keaton and Zara remained to be seen.

"And now, lords and ladies, I can announce that Lord Luca, you will now be matched with..." He left a dramatic pause. "Lady Zara!"

Avery's heart started pounding wildly as she clapped for the new couple. That match meant Keaton was single. She glanced over at Zara who—she had to give credit to—quickly masked her disappointment and anger at the public's decision. Avery only saw a flash of her true feelings pass over her face before she smiled gracefully, kissed Keaton on the cheek, then joined Luca and kissed him on the cheek as well.

When she looked back at Lance it dawned on her that Zara being with Luca meant *she* was going to be paired with Keaton. She'd realized he was single but forgotten Lance had said there would be only *one* match that stayed the same tonight. Vic and Piper were that couple.

Her heart lodged in her throat, and she wasn't sure she really believed it was happening until Lance announced, "Which means, Lady Avery, you will now be matched with Lord Keaton!"

All of the sound in the room grew distant in her ears as she walked toward Keaton to join him. His eyes reminded her of a predator waiting for his prey as he stood perfectly still waiting for her to reach him. There was an animalistic fire behind his eyes that grew hotter with each step she took.

She felt like time was going in slow motion but when she finally made it to him, he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet the same way he had in the tower. This time it was Keaton who kissed her first. The kiss was soft and firm at the same time. Sweet and sensual. Lazy and diligent. It was a kiss of contradictions, and it was perfect.

TONIGHT COULD NOT HAVE GONE BETTER IF I'D WRITTEN THE SCRIPT MYSELF, Keaton thought as he stood in the private luxury suite listening to Maura give them a rundown of the features of the room, which included a hot tub. He was pretty sure she must have forgotten Avery owns the castle and was aware of each room's amenities.

Immediately after he and Avery were matched up, Lance announced that there was one more surprise in store. The person who had won the most Couple of the Day crowns was entitled to one night in the luxury suite with their partner. Keaton had won the crown nine days with Zara and once for the Knight in Shining Armor challenge with Avery, which meant he won the night in the private suite. And since Avery was now his partner, they were staying in it together. Alone. All night. No mics. No Cameras. Just them, a king-sized bed, champagne, and apparently a hot tub.

He was trying to be polite and listen to Maura, but he really just wanted to ask her to kindly get the fuck out.

Once the announcements at the ball ended, he and Avery were immediately separated to do individual talking heads about how they felt about being matched up. Then they'd had to do three different takes of them walking up the steps to the suite, because of camera issues. When they got inside the suite, Keaton was instructed to open the champagne and give a toast, which he had.

He couldn't even remember what he'd said. Something like, "*Here's to finding real love in a totally unreal setting.*" Once they'd taken a drink, the cameras cut, and Maura asked them both if they felt comfortable staying in

the suite together. If not, they could stay in separate rooms, and then tomorrow, they'd reconvene at the suite to get a shot of them leaving the room together in the morning.

"The viewers will be none the wiser," she'd said.

Keaton remained quiet because he didn't want Avery to feel pressure to stay with him, but she quickly responded that she'd like to stay in the suite. He couldn't have been more relieved and more excited.

All week, all he'd wanted, was to get Avery alone so he could talk to her. One might think that would be easy considering they were working on the same show and there was a ton of downtime. But it wasn't. Now was his chance and Maura would not shut up.

After what felt like four hours, but was probably closer to four minutes, she finally said, "Okay, you two. Have fun. And if either of you changes your mind, the keys to the separate rooms are on the dresser."

"Got it," Keaton nodded, trying not to seem too impatient.

He walked her to the door and the second he shut it, he turned and stalked over to Avery, and pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against him. She melted against him, her arms tightly holding him as her head rested against his chest.

"I missed you," he whispered against the top of her head. She shifted, holding him even tighter and his cock stirred in his pants. "All week I've been waiting to get you alone to talk, and now that I have you alone, talking is the last thing I want to do."

Avery lifted her head to look at him and her cheeks flushed as she licked her lips. Keaton wasn't sure if it was a nervous thing or if she was as turned on as him. He hoped it was the latter.

"I just...before we do...that...we do need to talk about one thing. I just wanted to explain why I came on the show—"

"You did it as a favor for Sabrina."

Her jaw dropped. "How did you know? Did Ivy or Iris tell you? Do *they* know?"

"No." He brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "No one told me. But I know you and the only reason you'd agree to do the show is to help someone."

"Oh." Avery inhaled a short, shaky breath as her beautiful bright blue eyes stared up at him beneath thick, dark lashes. There was something so innocent yet so seductive in her gaze. It held him hostage, he was completely

powerless against it. “Well, yeah, that’s exactly why I did it. I just didn’t want you to think that I was like, stalking you or something,” she chuckled.

Keaton couldn’t help but grin at the adorable absurdity of her statement. “That would be impossible.”

Her brow furrowed. “What?”

“You could never stalk me because there isn’t a time or place that I don’t want to be with you. You are all I think about. I’ve spent the past five years trying to tell myself that what we had, the time we shared together wasn’t what I was remembering. That I’d somehow built it up in my head—”

“Romanticized it,” Avery interjected.

“Yes, that I’d romanticized it. But I was wrong. What we had was everything I thought it was and more. My feelings for you were real, *are* real. The way you feel in my arms is real. The way your kiss makes me feel is real.”

Avery nodded in agreement.

“Is that enough talking?” he asked.

She nodded again and he leaned down and covered her mouth with his. Claiming her in an all-consuming kiss. She returned his passion, biting his bottom lip. The sting caused his dick to throb painfully, demanding attention. But he ignored it. Tonight, he refused to be rushed. He was going to take his time with her.

He broke their kiss and took a step back from her. Her arms dropped to her side, and she looked up at him with confusion.

“Turn around,” he commanded.

When she did as he asked, he unzipped her dress and pulled it up and over her head leaving her standing with her back to him wearing only a bra and thong. He noticed the clasp of her bra was in the front, so he took a step closer to her, pressing his erection, still caged behind his trousers, against her backside as he snaked his arms around her waist. He looked over her shoulder as his hands flattened on her belly before traveling north and tracing the scalloped edges of her lace bra, keeping his touch light as a feather.

Goosebumps lifted on her skin as he rubbed his flattened palms in circles over her puckered, lace-covered nipples. She was panting as his fingers dipped between her breasts and he unclicked the clasp, freeing her beautiful breasts. He slid her straps down her arms, and it fell to the ground.

She started to turn around and face him, but his hand clamped onto her hip, holding her in place.

“I’m not done with this view yet,” he whispered as his lips grazed her ear. He felt a shiver run through her. “Are you cold?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Good,” he said as he took a step back and his thumbs trailed along her thong before pulling it down her legs.

Once she was completely naked, he gathered her hair at the nape of her neck. His knuckles grazed her skin as he moved her hair so it fell over her shoulder, revealing her bare upper back. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to her right, then left shoulder blade as his fingertips trailed down her arms.

She sucked in a shaky breath as he continued to kiss the base of her neck, then down her spine before covering the entirety of her back and ass cheeks. He took his time, making sure his lips touched every inch of her bare skin. When he moved even lower, to the back of her thighs, he felt her legs begin to tremble beneath her. He stood, picked her up, and carried her to the bed.

Once he laid her down on her back, he straightened back up and removed his tie. Then unbuttoned his shirt and took it off before unzipping his slacks and stepping out of his pants and boxer briefs.

He could feel her heated stare devouring his naked body. Her gaze left a trail of warm tingles on his skin everywhere she looked. That was how connected he was to her. She didn’t even have to touch him, and he felt her.

Lowering onto the bed he shifted so he was on his side next to Avery who was flat on her back. He propped himself up on his forearm, leaving the other free to roam at will. Keaton ran his fingers over her bare chest. He traced her areolas, then her nipples, then the side of her breast, then the bottom before starting the entire process again. Her nipples hardened with each pass of his fingertip.

She watched as he lazily explored her body, her breathing growing more and more shallow. When he moved his hand lower over her belly, it trembled. When the tips of his fingers brushed over the tiny patch of hair on the top of her sex, she parted her legs for him just enough so that he could dip his hand between her thighs.

As his fingers slid up and down the slickness of her sex, his cock throbbed heavily against the side of her hip. Her eyes lifted to his as she reached down and began to stroke him with her hand. They stared into each other’s eyes, as their hands pleased one another. His fingers circled her clit, as she tightened her grip around him as she massaged his manhood.

When he felt a surge of pre-release shoot through his cock, he knew that

if she didn't stop touching him, he was going to lose it. Since he didn't want that to happen, he shifted his body and positioned his face between her legs.

His shoulders pressed her thighs farther apart as his breath fanned her glistening sex. As much as he wanted to taste her, he wanted to watch her come more. So instead of placing his mouth over her pussy, he used his fingers to tease her. With one hand he spread her open and the other traced her seam which was wet and pulsing.

He felt the bed dip and he lifted his gaze to see that she'd propped herself up on her forearms so she could watch him. He could see in her eyes and feel in her body just how turned on she was. He continued intimately massaging her slit, paying extra attention to the base until he saw her opening clenching, signaling she was close to the edge. Only then did he touch her most needy spot. He brushed his forefinger over her swollen clit, once, twice, and on the third swipe, her head fell back, and she cried out in release.

Arousal coated his fingers and as she rode out her climax, he continued to touch her. He kept touching her until she collapsed onto her back spent and satisfied.

Tonight was all about her pleasure. He didn't want to rush with her, not with her body and not with her emotions. It might be too soon to tell her he was in love with her, but he was going to show her that he loved her. With every touch, every kiss, every orgasm, she would feel his love.

A very lay on her back and felt tears prick the back of her eyes as one slid down her cheek. She wasn't sure why she was crying. Maybe because she was so overwhelmed that this was actually happening. She and Keaton Savage were a couple—even if it was just a reality TV show couple. The man who she'd never been able to forget. The man who had stolen her heart five years ago and had never given it back. And not only were they matched up together, they were spending the entire night in the honeymoon suite. That's not what the show was calling it, they referred to this room as the luxury suite, but that's what it was.

It was all too much in the best possible way.

Keaton pushed up to a seated position and sat back on his heels as his hands ran up and down Avery's thighs, stopping at the apex of her legs. Each

time his fingers would reach her hips, his thumbs would brush along the crease between the top of her inner thighs and her delicate folds. He was careful not to touch her clit which was very sensitive thanks to the climax he'd just given her.

“Do you know how many nights I've thought about this? I've dreamed about what it would be like to have you all to myself, all night, in a bed, no interruptions?” he asked as he bent over and placed kisses on her belly.

Her hands threaded through his hair. “How many nights?”

He lifted up so that he was hovering above her. His face was just inches from hers as his body settled between her legs. Her inner walls were pulsating with need as his rock-hard shaft rubbed along her feminine folds.

She looked down as he reached between their bodies and took himself in his hand then pushed inside of her with excruciating slowness as he said, “All of them. Every night.”

“Me too,” she breathed out.

When he filled her completely his forearms framed her face as his forehead rested against hers. The sweet heat of his breath fanned over her as she waited, anxiously for him to move. Her body was growing restless beneath him. As amazing as the pressure of him being inside of her, even perfectly still, felt, she knew the ecstasy waiting for her when he moved.

She stared up into his eyes and became overwhelmed at the realization that they weren't just going to have this. Tonight wasn't going to be just sex and then she wouldn't know when or if she would see him again. She was going to spend the entire night with him. She was going to fall asleep and wake up in his arms. The tears that had threatened to fall before, made another appearance.

“What's wrong? Do you want to stop?” he asked tenderly.

She sniffed away her emotion and shook her head. “No, I don't want to stop. I'm happy. Just so *happy* we have tonight.”

“Tonight is never going to be enough,” he gritted out as he pulled out and drove into her with just enough force to sting.

Her back arched as she wrapped her arms around his neck, holding onto him as he began to thrust in and out of her body. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders. She loved the sensation of his muscles straining beneath her touch. His hips moved with a smooth, steady motion that set her body on fire. He quickly found a rhythm that felt like he was created, he was put on this earth, solely for her pleasure.

She loved the weight of his body above her. She loved the pressure of his outer thighs against her inner thighs. She loved the sting of pain that morphed into pleasure as he drove into her, over and over again, stretching her body to its limit. She loved the sensation of his breath as it fanned over her face. She loved the possessiveness in his touch as he gripped her hips so hard she was sure he would leave a mark.

The tears that had filled her eyes returned as she did her best to fight the inevitable fall that she was already experiencing. She loved Keaton Savage. Perhaps naïvely, but that didn't change the fact that she did. She was pretty sure she'd loved him since the first time she'd seen him after she'd scared off the coyote.

Each time he entered her, his cock swelled until it felt so big, she wasn't sure she could accommodate him. Her hands roamed his back as her hips rocked beneath his weight and her body grew more and more restless beneath him.

Sensing her shift in comfort, he lowered down, wrapped his arm around her, and effortlessly flipped them over so that she was on top of him. Her legs straddled him and he was still embedded deep inside of her.

The control he had as he maneuvered her body made her feel, safe and protected. On the other side of that coin, the knowledge that at any second, he could easily have her pinned beneath him and she'd be totally powerless added a spice of danger that was a much bigger turn-on than it probably should be.

As she sat atop him, his fingers gripped her hips. She leaned forward and her hands flattened on his chest as she began to move. At first, she just rolled her hips, grinding against him while he was buried to the hilt. His hands glided up her body, then cupped her mounds. The weight of her breasts filled his large palms as he pinched her nipples sending a zap of pleasure shooting straight between her legs.

With each roll of her hips, she felt her arousal grow but soon her thighs began to burn with exhaustion. She was about to say that she needed to switch positions when Keaton read her mind like he always did. He sat up and wrapped her legs around his waist. His arms snaked around her back, and he pulled her into a tight embrace. Her breasts pressed against his bare chest, her belly against his stomach as their bodies intimately intertwined.

He moved his hips, and she moved with him in perfect sync. Her arms tightened around his neck as she felt her own release building inside of her.

She tried to hold it at bay. She wished she knew how to practice tantric sex. If she did, she would employ those skills now. Because as good as she knew her climax would be, *this* was better. Being connected, like this, with him, was better. Not knowing where she started and he stopped was better.

But without warning, her second climax of the night crashed into her with the power of a tsunami. Pleasure whipped through her body, leaving nothing in its wake. She held on to him as tiny hurricanes of bliss swirled through her.

He groaned against her neck as he pushed into her in one final thrust. She felt his body tense with gratification as he rode out his own release. They stayed just like that as they both soaked in their sated, satisfied, exhausted state.

Being with Keaton, like this, was the first time in her life she was *not* looking forward to the sunrise. If it was up to her, this night would last forever.

KEATON WAS ON CLOUD NINE. HE COULDN'T REMEMBER A TIME IN HIS LIFE that he'd been happier. He'd definitely never been so excited for cameras to be up. He'd been matched with Avery for two weeks now and they'd been the best two weeks of his life. He had lost his title of undefeated Couple of the Day champion, but it was his own fault. He was overprotective of her in challenges and was more focused on if she was okay than he was on winning.

Each day they spent together, they got closer and closer. The only downside over the past two weeks was when they were separated. Like yesterday, which was a day off, he hadn't seen her. Technically, it had been thirty-six hours since he'd seen her.

But, in just a few minutes, they would be reunited at the ball, which was a masquerade theme to celebrate the halfway point of filming. He'd been on the show for four weeks now, and there were still four weeks left. He could care less if he stayed. He and Avery had talked about it and if one of them were voted to be exiled, the other one was going to leave as well.

They hadn't talked about the future yet. They would do that once they were off the show. He felt like that was something that should be done in private. The only private time they'd had was in the suite the night they got matched and they hadn't used that time for talking. They'd used it to make love all night long.

Keaton bounced on his heels, giddy with excitement that he would be reunited with Avery in just a few minutes, as he glanced around the holding room. All the men were in tuxes but that didn't stop Vic from doing pushups on the floor, which was his pre-tape ritual. Himself, Vic, Harlan, and Luca

were the only remaining original cast. Anton was exiled last week with Freya and four more contestants arrived, Robby, Kai, Christina, and Monica.

Kai was chill. He was a professional surfer from Hawaii. He and Zara were matched up and they seemed to be getting along.

Robby was a little more intense. He was a stockbroker from Manhattan and was very opinionated. He and Monica were still unmatched, but they were both hoping that was going to change tonight.

Luca was matched with Sienna now, and *she* was definitely happy about it. He wasn't sure if Luca was happy or if he was just going along with it so he didn't hurt her feelings.

Harlan was paired up with a new girl Christina and he seemed to be really into her. She grew up in Florida and ran the local 4-H club for the youth in her community. They'd bonded over their love of the outdoors and farming and quickly became a power couple in the castle.

Vic and Piper were still together. From the outside, it looked like they were going from strength to strength. Keaton had told him last week that he wanted to be invited to the wedding. He'd been half joking, but Vic got very serious as he told him that he wasn't going to be invited, he was going to be a groomsman.

Keaton was still bouncing on his heels and Vic was still doing pushups when George appeared in the doorway. "Okay, guys let's go."

Out of all the segment producers, George was definitely the one who was only interested in doing his job. He never made small talk. Never smiled. Never tried to engage in any activity that wasn't work-related.

Whenever George was producing a segment, it started on time, it finished on time, and there was never any whining or unscheduled breaks. Keaton admired him because it was clear he was not thrilled to be working on the reality show, but he still did a kick-ass job.

The men followed George down to the ballroom. On the way, he saw Lance speaking to Gavin. The two were huddled together in an office and from the looks on their faces, Keaton got a sneaking suspicion that something was up.

Keaton didn't care what was coming as long as he got to face it with Avery. He just wanted to be near her. As much as he'd appreciated the private time they'd spent together in the suite, it wasn't nearly enough. He couldn't wait to get out of there, put all his cards on the table, and start a real relationship.

The guys lined up and Heather appeared with their masks. There was definitely a different energy in the air. He wasn't sure if it had something to do with whatever Gavin and Lance were discussing. If it was because they'd all made it to the halfway point, or if it was because they were wearing masks at this make-believe ball.

Keaton was the last to enter the ballroom. By the time Vic, who was in line in front of him, entered with Piper, he was losing his patience. Whenever he and Avery were separated, he counted the minutes until they were together again. Since yesterday was their off day of filming, it had been 2,160 minutes since he'd seen her.

But damn, when he did, it was worth the wait.

Tonight she wore a white floor-length gown that molded to her generous curves with a low scoop neck and no back. Her hair fell down in waves of shimmering copper, like liquid sunshine. She had on a delicate, black lace mask that made her blue eyes pop. She smiled as she took her place next to him. He wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her toward his body until she was flush against him.

"You look beautiful," he whispered as his lips brushed the cusp of her ear.

She kept looking forward, but he knew that she'd heard him because a tremor rolled through her body as he squeezed his hand on her hip. He was so happy that tonight, he'd be sharing a bed with her. Even though they would be filmed, so obviously nothing would happen, he just wanted to be as close to her as possible. He loved falling asleep with her in his arms and knowing that he was going to wake up with her there.

Once all the couples were in their places, Lance Sparrow walked in sporting a tux and mask of his own. He started to do his spiel, but there was an issue with one of the cameras, so filming had to pause while they switched some parts out on it so they could reshoot his entrance. Thankfully, they shut off the bright overhead lights while they did, which made it more comfortable.

Keaton waited patiently, something he'd gotten used to doing over the past four weeks. It was a lot easier to do when he had Avery at his side. He'd happily, blissfully do nothing with her every day, all day for the rest of his life. He'd never felt that way about anyone before, not even Camilla. He always needed to stay busy, to keep moving, to be planning, to keep himself occupied.

But not with Avery. All he needed to do was be near her and he was calm, he was centered, he was at peace.

Beside them, Vic whispered something to Piper who giggled.

“No talking guys,” a voice came over the PA system. It sounded like Heather, but he couldn’t be sure.

It was so strange to him that it was actually someone’s job to make sure the contestants, grown adult people, didn’t talk because it was a rule. A rule that he himself was finding very hard not to break.

He wanted to ask Avery how her off day had been. Zara had been pretty cold to her. He knew Avery could handle herself. He knew that she was more than capable, but he just wanted, no *needed* to make sure that nothing had upset her. And if something had, he was prepared to kiss her and make it all better.

The lights flicked back on, and Keaton watched as Lance entered the ballroom again. “Welcome back to Fairytale Love: Kings and Queens. At the last ball, we saw two members of the court leave the castle, four new members arrive, and three new matches were made. Today, some of our matches will be with some new members of the court that might be familiar to them. That’s right. It is Rekindled Romance week on *Fairytale Love*. We want to give our matches the best chance at making it to happily-ever-after, but how can they think about a future, when they still might have some unfinished business in the past.”

Beside him, he felt Avery tense up. He wasn’t feeling too thrilled about the news either, but he was much more worried about her. His only ex was Camilla, and she was engaged. So whoever walked through that door for him would just be someone he’d dated a few times.

“For the next twenty-four hours, our matches will be reunited with an ex-lover and then we will all reconvene for a special mid-week ball where you, the public, will decide which lords and ladies of our court will stay matched with their current partners and which lords and ladies will have a relationship rematch with their blast from the past.”

Keaton looked down at Avery, who was looking over at the cameras. If he had to guess, he would say that she was looking for Sabrina to make sure that Jude wasn’t going to walk in.

“First up, this lady was with her lord for nearly *twenty* years.”

Twenty years. That was how long he was with Camilla, but he knew it couldn’t be her.

“That’s right folks, this lord and lady met at the tender age of *twelve* at a roller-skating rink.”

Oh fuck. It was Camilla. Why would she be there? She was supposed to be getting married.

“Lords and ladies, please join me in welcoming, Lady Camilla.”

The doors opened and even though he knew who was going to be walking through them, Keaton couldn’t believe his eyes. Camilla walked into the ballroom.

He looked down at Avery, but she was staring straight ahead. And if he wasn’t mistaken, there were tears in her eyes.

“Lord Keaton, please join your Lady Camilla.”

Camilla wasn’t his lady, Avery was. He was about to tell Lance and the whole crew to go fuck themselves when Avery patted his chest and smiled up at him. “Go. I’m okay. *Go.*”

Knowing that she would hate it if he made a scene, Keaton did what she asked. He walked away from her. But he promised himself, that would be the last time he would ever walk away from her.

Avery was mad, confused, angry, in shock and disbelief as she stood next to Jude. As soon as Lance had announced that exes were coming, she’d known that he was going to walk through those doors. He *loved* the spotlight. Being on a reality TV show was something he’d always talked about wanting to do.

Why had she thought that things were actually going to work out for her? How naïve could she possibly be?

Of course, Camilla, Keaton’s long-time love, would show up right after she and Keaton had reconnected. Of course, she’d be even more stunning in person than she was in her social media posts which Avery had looked at/cyberstalked. Of course, they were going to *rekindle* their romance.

Keaton had made it clear five years ago that he’d moved to Whisper Lake to prove to Camilla that he could settle down. That he could give up competing in the sport that had dominated his life.

Maybe a better person would be happy that he was getting the chance to be with the love of his life, but Avery was *not* that good of a person. She was

pissed. She was confused. She was angry and in shock. She couldn't believe what was happening.

Jude placed his arm on her lower back, but she moved away from his touch.

How could Sabrina do this to her? She knew what he had done to her. She didn't want to think her friend would sell her out for ratings. In fact, she *couldn't* believe that she would do that. But the proof was standing next to her with a smug smile on his face.

As soon as Lance wrapped, George appeared. "Okay, exes, we need you to follow Julie." Julie waved her hand in the air. "Lords follow me, and ladies follow Heather."

Avery had so much she wanted to say to Keaton, but the rules were no fraternizing unless cameras were rolling. She almost glanced over her shoulder at him, but she was scared if she did, she'd find him staring adoringly at his ex, so she didn't. She'd felt his body tense behind her when Camilla had walked in. She'd seen the look on his face when Lance told him to go join her. He was speechless.

It was best not to torture herself. She started to follow Heather when she felt a familiar arm snake around her waist. She knew it was Keaton without looking. When she did turn her head, she saw that she wasn't the only one who was upset, he did *not* look happy about the plot twist in the show either. "Are *you* okay?"

George stepped between them. "Keaton no talking."

Avery smiled and gave him a quick nod. As relieved as she was to see that he wasn't jumping for joy at Camilla showing up, she equally didn't want him to be worried about her. His jaw tensed, but he turned and left with the other lords.

When the ladies got out into the hallway, she turned to Heather. "I need to speak to Sabrina now."

Avery had not made any demands since being on the show. She had not played the producer-is-my-best-friend card once. Not once. But she was doing it now.

Heather nodded and grabbed her walkie talkie off her belt loop. "Okay, let me see if I can—"

"Avery!" Avery turned and she saw Sabrina rushing down the hall. It was the first time she'd spoken to her since she'd come on the show three weeks ago. "I had no idea! When Gavin brought it up last week, I told him

absolutely not! I swear!”

“I am not going to film with him, Sabrina,” Avery said firmly, not caring if it made her look like a diva to the other contestants. “I have Jacob. I will not make his parents' relationship a TV soap opera.”

“I know. I know. Come on.” Sabrina hooked her arm through Avery’s and pulled her into her office. When the door shut, she turned around. “I’m so sorry. We’ll figure this out. It’ll be fine.”

“No. This is not going to get figured out. You can’t call Yahtzee. I will not film with him.” Avery had *always* given in to her friend, but this time, she wasn’t.

“No, I know!” Sabrina shook her head. “I wasn’t asking you to film with him. I’m just asking you not to leave the show.”

There was a knock at the door and Avery heard a familiar voice. “Avery.”
It was Jude.

Sabrina opened the door. “Go away, asshole.”

“I need to talk to Avery.”

He tried to walk into the room, but Sabrina put her hand on his chest and stopped him. “No!”

As much as she appreciated her friend trying to protect her, Avery actually wanted to speak to Jude. She *had* to speak to Jude. Since he was the father of her child, he was going to be in her life for a very long time. She just didn’t want to film with Jude, she couldn’t simply ignore him, no matter how much she wanted to.

She touched Sabrina’s arm. “It’s okay. He can come in.”

Her friend turned toward her. “Are you *sure*?”

Avery nodded.

Jude walked in and Sabrina closed the door.

“Alone. Please.” Jude wasn’t asking, it was a demand.

“Kiss my ass, *Jude Law*. This is my office and I’m not leaving.”

Jude looked at her. “*Jude Law*?”

“Sorry, I got confused. It was an honest mistake. You’re both named *Jude* and you both *fucked* your nannies.”

Avery couldn’t help but grin at that one. “Jude. Why are you here?”

“Can’t we speak in private?” he asked Avery in his irritating “sweet” voice.

“No.” Avery was done doing things the way he wanted. Being on this show for the past three weeks had really shown her who she was. Maybe for

the first time in her life. “If you have something to say, say it.”

He sighed, which she knew was a stalling tactic. It used to work. She would ask him what was wrong, and it gave him time to try and figure out ways to get what he wanted.

She decided that she didn’t care what he had to say, and just cut to the chase. “We are *not* getting back together.”

He smirked. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Sabrina lunged toward him, but Avery stepped between them. Sabrina had a lot of...spunk. Her nickname had been Scrappy Doo growing up because she would pick a fight with anyone, no matter what their size, if she was sticking up for someone.

Avery turned back to her ex. “Jude, you are the one who came on the dating show I am on.”

“Yes, I did.” He paused and Avery thought he might just feed her more bullshit, but then his shoulders dropped and he sighed. “My parents found out about Celeste, and they said I had to do whatever it takes to get you back or I’m cut off. Forever. So, I have a proposal for you.” He took papers out from his back pocket and handed them to Avery. “If you let me ‘try’ to win you back, on television, so my parents can see I did everything I could, then I will sign over full physical custody of Jacob to you while retaining fifty/fifty legal custody. The only stipulation is that he can come to London to visit me every summer for two weeks. And when he gets older, if he wants to stay longer, you allow him to.”

“Deal,” Avery instantly agreed as she read the document that said exactly what he’d just laid out. Not only was her ex moving back to London, she was going to have full physical custody of Jacob. She knew Jude was retaining fifty percent legal custody so that Jacob couldn't be adopted by someone else, but she didn’t care.

Her baby was going to live with her full-time and only had to be away from her two weeks in the summer. No matter what happened with Keaton, she’d come on *Fairytale Love* and gotten her happily ever after. She’d won.

EVEN THOUGH KEATON DOUBTED THAT AVERY WAS GOING TO GET BACK together with Jude, he had to admit, he was still shitting bricks a little. She deserved better but he would understand if she did decide to give him another chance.

They had a son together. An amazing son. A son who deserved to have his mother and father together. If that's what Avery thought was best, he wouldn't blame her. Still, the selfish part of him really didn't want her to go back to that prick.

He hadn't seen her for twenty-four hours. Last night all the men and women were separated and today all the 'rekindled' couples had gone on a date. He and Camilla had taken a small boat out on the lake.

Now the men were in holding waiting for the midweek ball and the results of the public's vote. Production had suggested that current partners not speak to the exes, but that wouldn't have stopped him from telling Jude what a piece of shit he was. He'd kept his distance from the man out of respect for Avery. For better or worse, Jude was Jacob's father. If Keaton had a shot in hell of being in both Jacob and Avery's life, he wanted to honor the role that Jude had.

Time felt like it was standing still waiting for the damn ball to start. His mind kept wandering to where it always went, Avery. What had she and Jude done today? What had they talked about? Had she kept her distance from Camilla like he had from Jude? Or had the two women spoken? If they had, what had Camilla said? He hoped not anything too bad. He and his ex had ended things amicably.

Camilla recently ended her engagement. It hadn't been anything dramatic, she said they both decided they weren't right for each other. She mentioned that Lewis was more interested in sitting on the couch playing video games than anything else. Keaton knew that with her personality that would be a deal breaker. Part of why she and Keaton had worked for as long as they did was because she was so driven and never wanted to settle. She hated complacency and laziness. So even though Keaton was always traveling, training, and generally busy with his career which was what ultimately ended them, it was also what had kept her attracted to him.

As upset as he'd been when the exes had shown up, he was equally grateful that he'd gotten the chance to see Camilla. They finally had closure. They'd talked about the past, the mistakes they both made. She regretted not giving him another chance after he moved to Whisper Lake. He regretted that he'd always put his career before her. They both apologized and also thanked each other for what they'd taught one another.

They truly had grown up together. He knew now that the feelings he had for her were still there, the love was still there, it always would be, but it wasn't romantic. He loved her in a familial way. He wanted her to be happy and to be with someone who lit up inside the way he did when he saw Avery. Camilla made him feel warm and comfortable but not excited.

She was his past. He knew that now. He also knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Avery was his present, and he wanted her to be his future.

He was thinking about all the things he wanted to say to her if he got the chance when Jude approached him. Apparently, the keeping the distance thing was over. From the look in the man's eyes, Keaton could see that Jude wanted this to be a pissing contest. He was doing his best to stand tall and even puff out his chest a little.

All Keaton could think was that this guy was a fucking joke. Did he actually think that he could intimidate him? Didn't he know that men who were truly intimidating didn't have to peacock out, they just were. It wasn't how tall they stood or even how jacked they were, it was in their eyes. It was the unspoken conversation that said they would not back down, no matter what.

His granddad had shown him that truth by example. He'd grown up witnessing firsthand what a real man was. And Jude might be a lot of things, but he was no fucking man. He was a little boy pretending to be a grown-up.

"I assume you know who I am," Jude said.

Keaton wanted to laugh at his opening line. Instead, he just nodded.

Jude rolled his shoulders back. “I don’t know you. I don’t know what your intentions are with Avery. But I do know her. I know the woman she is, and I know the mother she is. I also know I didn’t deserve her. If you’re not the man who does, stay away from her.”

Keaton stared in shock at what he’d just heard. Owning up to his faults and defending Avery was the last thing he’d expected Jude to do. Maybe he was more of a man than Keaton had given him credit for. He didn’t know what to say to him, so he didn’t say anything. He just held out his hand. Jude took it and the two men shook.

“Alright, let’s go boys,” George called out as he passed the hallway.

As Keaton walked down to the ballroom, he felt like a weight had been lifted. Not only did he know now that Avery and Jude weren’t getting back together, he also had hope that, in the future, there wouldn’t be any drama between the two of them. They had come to an understanding—an unspoken mutual respect.

Keaton’s granddad would be proud.

Beside Avery, Zara was beaming as the women waited in holding to go into the ballroom. Out of all the women, Zara was *definitely* the happiest to see her ex. Apparently, during their one-on-one date today, the two of them hadn’t been able to keep their hands off of each other. She’d overheard Iris say that things had turned into NC-17 territory.

Zara hadn’t stopped smiling since Mario walked into that ballroom. Last night, before they’d gone to bed, Zara hugged Avery. *Hugged* her. The woman had not said a kind word to her in two weeks. Sienna had started calling her “Ice, Ice, Baby” because she was so cold to Avery. If looks could kill, Avery would be lying on a slab in the morgue.

Even though she hadn’t been kind, Avery was still really happy for Zara. And she understood why she’d been upset. She’d had a plan to win the show and she thought, like Sabrina had, Keaton was her golden ticket. Avery had ruined her plans. She was happy to see that things were going even better than Zara had planned now that Mario had shown up.

Piper’s ex Alan seemed nice, but Piper was so in love with Vic she didn’t

think the poor guy had a chance at winning her back.

Sienna seemed like she was happy to see her ex, Brad, but she'd also been smitten with Luca, so Avery had no clue if they were going to get back together.

Not that it was up to any of them, the public was going to vote. That was really the wild card in this show. Avery never knew what the public was going to do.

No matter what the public vote said, Avery obviously wasn't getting back together with Jude, but they'd actually had a fun day today. It reminded her of when they were in college. They'd laughed and talked a lot about those first few years. It was like she was meeting the man she first fell in love with all over again. She hadn't seen that guy in a long time. It made her feel like less of an idiot for being with him in the first place.

"I don't think it's fair that we didn't have exes show up," Monica told Christina.

"I know, it's like why are we even here?" Christina commiserated.

None of the newest cast, Monica, Christina, Kai, or Robby had exes come for Rekindled Romance week, which was really only one day, thank god. All four had the day off from filming, which they didn't seem happy about.

"I think the show is rigged. They obviously want one of the OGs to win. Why have new people come in if you're just going to shoot the old ones?" Monica complained.

Avery was sitting on the couch, doing her best to ignore the two newcomers, when Camilla walked in from glam. The woman was truly stunning. Her long, light brown hair was shiny and lustrous. Her skin glowed. She had large, green eyes, full lips and high cheekbones. And that was just above the neck, below it was even more impressive. Her body seemed to defy nature. She was five foot ten and had a slender frame but with serious curves in all the right places. Her waist was tiny, but she had full hips and a backside that women paid tens of thousands of dollars for.

Tonight, she was wearing a red dress with a low V-neck and a slit that went up to her hip, and she looked like she should be on the cover of Maxim or on a fashion runway in Milan—not in Whisper Lake, Illinois, on a dating reality show.

"Wow," Avery said out loud. "Sorry, you just...you look amazing."

"Thank you, so do you," she said warmly.

Production had encouraged current partners not to speak to exes. They

wanted to “save it for air.” Avery hadn’t meant to break the rule, but it had just slipped out.

“Alright ladies, it’s showtime!’ Heather enthused as she stood at the doorway wearing a wide smile.

As they all followed behind Heather in a row like ducklings behind their mama duck, Avery saw Sabrina wave at her from her office. When Avery waved back, she mouthed, “Don’t worry.”

The thing was, Avery wasn’t worried. If the public voted for her to be matched with Jude, she would leave the show. It was the most responsible thing to do. She understood it was entertainment, but she had a son, and she wasn’t about to give Jacob false hope that his parents were going to get back together.

Not that he’d been upset that they’d broken up. The only thing he’d cared about was the wedding itself was canceled. He’d been excited about walking Avery down the aisle and was sad that he wasn’t going to be able to do that.

As far as his parents not being married or together, his big takeaway from the talk she’d had with him was to ask if he was going to get to go to the beach on the weekends now. His best friend Connor’s parents recently got a divorce and Connor’s dad moved to a bungalow in Malibu.

The other possibility was the one she really didn’t want to think about. It was that the public would vote for Keaton and Camilla to rekindle their relationship. If that happened, she would leave the show. There was no way she was going to stay and be matched with someone else. It wouldn’t be fair to the other person or to herself.

She and Jude were the first couple to walk into the ballroom. She had to admit, it was nice to stand beside the father of her child and not feel any resentment about the past, anger about the present, or of fear about the future. Jude had surprised her in the best way coming on the show and offering what he had. She would be forever grateful to him, not just for giving her Jacob, but also for bowing out of her life gracefully. Even if he was only doing it because he didn’t want to lose his inheritance, he still could have made her life a lot more miserable.

Avery was sort of zoned out as the couples came in one by one. But when she heard Keaton and Camilla’s names announced, she found herself holding her breath. Camilla was holding Keaton’s arm as they walked in, and Avery had to admit they did make a gorgeous couple. Like, ridiculously beautiful. Camilla leaned over and whispered something in Keaton’s ear as they took

their places. He laughed and covered her hand with his.

She knew, in that moment, that her love for Keaton was as pure and unconditional as her love for Jacob. Seeing the two of them together had shown her that. Because even if it broke her heart into a million pieces, she just wanted him to be happy. She wanted him to be with the woman who would make him happy. If that wasn't her, then she was glad he had Camilla. He deserved happy.

Avery blinked back tears as Lance walked in and did his opening speech. When he got out the envelopes to reveal the public votes, Avery thought she was going to throw up. Apparently, she wasn't as zen as she'd thought she was when she passed Sabrina's office.

"I can now reveal that the viewers voted for *two* matches to rekindle their romance." Lance smiled at the camera. "The first, with ninety-five percent of the public voting for rekindle is..." He paused for dramatic effect. "Lady Zara and Lord Mario!"

Avery clapped and the smile on her face was genuine. She really was happy to see Zara so happy.

Lance went through the rest of the matches, including herself and Jude, who he read that the public voted for their romance to stay in the past. The only two couples left standing were Luca and his ex-girlfriend Veronica and Keaton and Camilla.

Sienna, who was standing beside her, grabbed her hand in solidarity. Avery knew that she wanted Luca's rekindled romance to stay in the past just as much as Avery wanted Keaton's to.

"And now, lords and ladies, I can tell you the final couple who the public voted to rekindle their romance is..."

Avery took a deep breath as Sienna squeezed her hand and Jude placed his hand on her back. This time she didn't move away from his touch. She appreciated the support.

"Lord Luca and Lady Veronica! Which means Lady Sienna you are now unmatched."

At the announcement, Sienna dropped Avery's hand and covered her face as she started crying. Avery hugged her, but she knew that it probably wasn't actually consoling her. Sienna's ex Brad took over for Avery and wrapped his arms around her. She turned into his embrace.

Avery stepped back in her place right as Lance announced, "And our final couple, Lord Keaton and Lady Camilla, the public has voted for your

rekindled romance to stay in the past which means Lord Keaton and Lady Avery are rematched!”

Avery could barely breathe as Keaton walked over to her. He wasn't supposed to, they were told not to leave their spots. But no one stopped him before he got to her. When he did, he cupped her face and kissed her. His kiss warmed her from the inside out like she'd just taken a double shot of whiskey.

When he broke his kiss, he leaned his forehead against hers, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” she managed to say before George stepped in between them, instructing Keaton to go back to his mark.

Keaton did as he was asked, and as she watched him walk back to Camilla, she saw his ex was smiling at him. Avery could see she still loved him, but more than anything she wanted him to be happy. Avery really hoped she was the person to do just that.

KEATON'S HEART WAS POUNDING AS HE SNUCK UP A NORTHEAST STAIRWELL. He knew what he was doing was wrong but there was no way in hell he could wait another thirty-six hours before he saw Avery. He'd already had to spend too much time away from her.

After the mid-week ball, it had been announced that they were having another day off of filming. Keaton wasn't exactly sure what was happening, but he overheard Gavin calling an emergency producer meeting. He seemed upset that more of the exes hadn't stayed. If Keaton had to guess, he'd say that they'd planned for the rest of the week to be ex-related, which is probably why they'd called it *Rekindled Romance week*.

All Keaton cared about was seeing Avery. Now. He just needed to see her. To talk to her. To touch her. To make sure she was okay. That they were okay.

The women's holding area was in the front of the castle. He knew the layout well, and he thought there was a better than not chance that she'd have to walk past the maintenance closet in the back hall from the women's changing area to the women's bunk room, so that's where he was headed.

When he reached the second floor, he looked both ways to make sure the coast was clear. It was. He could hear voices coming from the women's dressing rooms. He hoped that she was in there, and she hadn't already gone to bed. If that was the case, he'd have to wait until everyone was asleep and sneak in to try and wake her up without waking everyone else.

With ninja-like skills, he crossed the hall and slipped into the closet undetected. Keaton knew he was being ridiculous sneaking around like this.

They were both adults. He should be able to say that he wanted to talk to her. But he didn't want to embarrass Avery or do anything that would blow back on Ivy or Iris. So, there he was, hiding in a closet.

He heard Piper and Zara talking as they passed the closet in the hall. When their voices trailed off and he opened the door just a crack. There was a mirror at the end of the hall, and he could see who came out of the dressing room next. He was in luck because Avery walked out on her own.

Keaton didn't want to scare the shit out of her and make her scream so when she passed the door, he quietly said, "Hey."

She turned around, and as soon as she saw that it was him, he grabbed her wrist and yanked her into the small, dark room shutting the door quietly behind him.

The only light in the confined space was coming from under the door, but he could see her eyes widen as she smiled up at him. "What are you doing?"

He grinned. "You, hopefully."

Her head fell back, and she laughed. The sound washed over him like a cool breeze on a hot day, just like it always did. As much as he loved that sound, he didn't want them to get caught so he lowered his mouth and kissed her, swallowing the sounds of her laughter. After a few seconds, he broke their kiss and whispered against her mouth, "I just needed to see you, to make sure you were okay."

"Yeah, I'm good. Are you? Are you upset about..." Her eyes glanced down at the ground, and her nose twitched the way it did when she was nervous.

Keaton tilted her chin up. When her eyes met his, he asked, "Upset about what?"

"Upset about Camilla, about the public vote."

"No." He shook his head in confusion. How could she think that? As soon as he thought about the question, he realized that she might think he still had feelings for Camilla like he had when they first met. "I don't want to be with her. I want to be with you. Only you."

She smiled, and his chest filled with warmth.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me? I would never get back together with Jude. Ever. Did you actually think there was a chance I would?"

"You guys have history, and Jacob, and I thought if he promised you that he wouldn't—"

“Keaton, no.” Avery lifted her hand and cupped his face, he closed his eyes and tilted into her touch. “I never told you why I went to his room the morning of my wedding.”

Keaton’s eyes opened. “What?”

“I told you that I walked in on him and he was with someone else, but I never told you *why* I went to his room.”

The look in Avery’s eyes had Keaton’s already racing pulse pick up speed like it was going downhill. It was a look of love, of commitment, of promises he hoped they would make to each other.

“I didn’t call off the wedding because Jude cheated on me. I was already going to his room to tell him that I couldn’t marry him.” She licked her lips and took a deep breath. “I knew I didn’t want to marry him. I tried to tell myself it was just cold feet, but I knew it was more than that.” Avery reached down and grasped the locket hanging around her neck. “I asked my gammy for a sign, any sign to tell me what to do. Then my phone dinged with a Google alert saying that you’d joined the cast of *Fairytale Love*. As soon as I saw your picture, I knew I couldn’t marry another man. Not when I still loved you. It was you, that’s why I went to the room. It was because of you.”

“Me?” Keaton heard what Avery was telling him, but he couldn’t quite believe it.

“Yes, you. I knew I couldn’t walk down the aisle and marry someone when I had the feelings I have for you. I love you.”

“You love me?” he repeated, needing to hear her say it again.

She smiled. “Yes, I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

He exhaled a breath he might have been holding his whole life. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers. The kiss started slow, tender, gentle. It smoldered until the fire lit and consumed them both.

Avery pulled at his shirt but wasn’t making much headway until Keaton reached behind his back and tugged it off with a single yank. She mirrored his actions and removed her shirt, revealing her perfect bare breasts.

Continuing their game of Monkey See, Monkey Do, Keaton shoved his sweatpants and boxer briefs down his legs. Avery grinned as she hooked her thumbs in the waistline of her pajama shorts and underwear and slowly slid them down her legs before stepping out of them.

Once they were both completely naked, he reached out and cupped her breasts. She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his erection which was jutting proudly from his body. He massaged her full mounds, teasing her

nipples with his thumb and forefingers as she stroked his cock.

Her hand moved up and down on him as he squeezed and teased her puckered peaks. Keeping one hand on his shaft, she lifted the other to her mouth and licked her palm and fingers, then did the same with the other and began stroking him again. The moisture allowed her hand to slide easily up and down. The pressure and friction of her touch had him pulsing with a carnal ache.

He felt himself swell in her hand as she dropped down to her knees and took him into her mouth. Her fingers gripped the base of his dick as her lips sealed around his tip. Then she started moving her hand up and down quickly. She sucked his head as she jerked him off. The two sensations combined pushed him over his pleasure threshold. He came with a violent force. It all happened so fast he couldn't stop the release as it slammed into him. His knees buckled beneath him as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over him.

She continued going down on him until she'd drawn every last drop out of him. He'd never had an orgasm that intense before. It had left him feeling weak and sated.

When she stood up, the satisfied grin on her face told him she knew exactly what she'd done to him. Her expression only served as a challenge to him. If she could bring him to new heights, to feel things he'd never felt before, then that's exactly what he planned on doing to her.

A very had just stood up from finally being able to finish what she'd wanted to do for years, to bring him to completion with her mouth, when Keaton dropped to his knees in front of her. He lifted one of her legs up and placed it on his shoulder. Then his mouth covered her sex in an open-mouthed kiss.

His tongue licked up and down the slit of her opening as his finger slid inside of her. Avery looked down at the top of his head as she raked her fingers through his hair and closed them in a fist. Pleasure coiled low in her belly as his tongue flicked over her swollen clit as he added another finger inside of her.

"Yes, yes, yes," she whispered in desperation as his mouth and touch brought her close to the edge.

She began rolling her hips as her fingers tightened in his hair holding him in place, keeping him exactly where she needed him to be to take her pleasure.

“That’s it, baby, come for me. Come on my mouth,” he demanded roughly before his lips covered her sex again and the tip of his tongue flicked her pleasure nub at the exact pace and pressure she needed to drive her into oblivion.

Her body convulsed as he laved his tongue against her core. Pleasure lashed through her, causing her to shudder before tapering off with flutters of trembles.

Before the last shiver of her climax had subsided, Keaton stood and turned her around so her back was to him and she was facing a box that was table height.

“Bend over,” he rasped in her ear.

She lowered down so her body was draped over the cardboard. The position caused her ass to lift in the air like she was offering it to him. Which she was. His hands caressed her backside, squeezing her firm flesh. She loved how he treated her body with reverence.

He groaned as she felt his engorged tip trail down the crease of her butt. She gasped when he pressed his head between her cheeks. Her heart beat erratically the closer he got to her forbidden territory.

“Spread your legs,” he instructed her.

She loved when he took control, telling her what to do. Her fingers gripped the edges of the box as she moved her feet farther apart. When she did, the tip of his cock dipped a tiny bit further into her crevice. She didn’t know what he planned to do to her, but she trusted him implicitly.

That knowledge that she knew he would never hurt her, that anything he did to her was for her pleasure not his, caused arousal to surge in her as she felt his cock move lower and slide between her legs. The pressure of his swollen head pressed against her sex before he thrust into the slippery canal. Her body was wet and ready to accept all of him as her inner muscles began to milk his shaft. Slowly, he pulled out and then sank into her again.

“Harder,” she whispered.

His hands gripped her hips, holding her in place as he thrust into her with a little more force.

“Harder,” she whimpered.

She felt his cock throb inside of her at her request. He began to move in

and out of her in measured, firm strokes stopping right before their skin slapped. She loved that, even in this moment, in the throes of passion, he protected her. He was making sure that no one passing by would hear them. The only sounds of their coupling were their heavy pants.

Avery could feel her body priming for release as her canal began to spasm around him. Keeping one hand on her hip, he reached around with the other, his fingers grazing her belly before dipping between her legs. He circled the swollen button that sat on the top of her sex as he continued driving into her.

He'd barely brushed her sweet spot when her body began to shake. Her back arched with pleasure as he surged into her once more and his body stiffened behind her.

They were both still recovering when voices sounded on the other side of the door. She recognized one as Heather. "They weren't on the roof."

Avery turned and looked at Keaton, whose lips curled in a smile that, like Demi Lovato, said he was "Sorry, Not Sorry".

"I'll check the kitchen you take the spa," Marcus said.

They both stayed perfectly still until they heard the footsteps fade in the distance. Once there was no more movement in the hallway Avery sighed and lifted her head. She and Keaton shared a look acknowledging that they both knew this rendezvous was over.

He leaned down and kissed her mouth. "You leave first and then I'll go."

She nodded as she got dressed, feeling both satisfied and a little sad. She wished it was Keaton's bed she was crawling into not the bunk above Zara.

Her hand reached for the doorknob, and she twisted it as quietly as she could. When she saw the coast was clear, she took a step to slip out, but Keaton's hand wrapped around her waist. "I love you," he whispered into the back of her head.

She realized then that when she'd told him that she loved him, he hadn't said it back. But now he had. A smile spread on her lips as he released his hold on her wrist and she snuck into the hallway.

It didn't matter what bed she was in tonight. Keaton Savage loved her.

EIGHT WEEKS. KEATON'S LIFE HAD CHANGED SO MUCH IN THE PAST EIGHT weeks. The finale of the show was in two days. Looking back, it all felt so surreal, which he supposed was fitting considering the title was *Fairytale Love*. He owed so much to this show. It was the reason he'd met Avery in the first place because she'd only been able to get the loan to renovate Stone Castle because production had signed a letter of intent. If she hadn't had that, she would have just sold the property.

The show was also what had given Keaton his second chance at love. Avery had decided not to marry Jude because she'd seen that he was going on the show. He still couldn't believe that. He felt humbled, honored, and really fucking happy that he was the man she loved.

Whatever happened at the finale, Keaton knew he'd already won. He had Avery, and if it was up to him, he'd never let her go. It was funny, he hadn't wanted to come on this show at all, but now he was sort of sad it was over.

"Come on," George instructed gruffly from the doorway he was holding open.

Keaton got up from the couch where he'd been sitting and followed behind the man who was *not* going to be sad the show was over.

Today was Family Day. He would be meeting with Avery's family, and she would be meeting with his. Keaton wondered who had shown up for Family Day for him. Iris and Ivy were already on set, so he was sure they'd make an appearance. His Aunt Laney would be there, but he had no clue if his cousins and their wives and kids would also come. If they all showed up, he hoped it wouldn't be overwhelming for Avery. Thankfully, she already

knew Ivy and Iris. He wished that he could be there, with her, as a buffer for the big brood.

He was so preoccupied thinking about what her family meeting was like, he had spaced out when he walked out into the courtyard and heard his name being yelled.

“Keaton!” Jacob shouted when he saw him.

Keaton saw that Jacob wasn’t alone. Blanche was there and so was Mojo, who was busy chewing on a rawhide bone. He wasn’t sure why his dog wasn’t with his family, but he wasn’t complaining.

Jacob ran toward him and flew into his arms. He was used to kids being excited to see him. It happened a lot in classes. But there was something special about Avery’s son’s enthusiasm. If it was up to Keaton, he’d be in this kid’s life for the foreseeable future. He knew he’d never be his father, but Aunt Laney wasn’t his mom and she stepped up to the plate. That is what Keaton wanted to do for Jacob.

“Hey little man.” Keaton hugged him back tightly before setting him down.

“I seen you and my mom on TV,” Jacob said as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

Shit. He wondered what they’d shown.

“You guys kiss *a lot.*”

Apparently, they’d shown kissing.

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

His head tilted to the side. “Are you gonna marry my mom?”

Keaton hadn’t been expecting that question, and he wasn’t sure what the appropriate way to answer was. He and Avery hadn’t talked about getting married, but he absolutely wanted to marry her. He just wasn’t sure if he should tell her son that before they’d even discussed the topic.

“Do you want me to marry your mom?” Keaton asked because he was dodging the question, but also because he wanted to know. If he didn’t have Jacob’s blessing, then that would be a big problem for him. He knew that this was happening fast, or at least that might be how it looked to the outside world. But for him, this was years in the making. He and Avery might not have been in contact over the past years, but they’d been connected.

Jacob tilted his head to the side. “If you marry my mom, does that mean Mojo is my dog, too?”

“Yeah, Mojo would be your dog, too.”

“Then yes, I want you to marry my mom.”

As much as Keaton would have liked Jacob’s reasoning to have more to do with him than the dog, he wasn’t complaining. He’d take all the help he could get.

“Come on, Mojo!” Jacob ran off and Mojo chased after him barking.

“He really loves that dog,” Blanche said as she approached Keaton.

“It looks like that dog loves him back.” Keaton said as Jacob bent down and Mojo covered his face with kisses.

“Look, I’m just gonna cut to the chase, darlin, what are your intentions with my daughter?”

Keaton knew that cameras were rolling even though they were more low-key than normal, probably because they didn’t want to spook the families. He wasn’t sure if this was the right time to tell Avery’s mom how he felt. He never wanted her to doubt that what he felt was real and had nothing to do with the show.

When he hesitated to respond, Blanche asked. “Mr. Savage, do you love my daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good.” Blanche nodded. “Now, since ya didn’t want to answer my grandson’s question, I’m askin’ again, do you wanna *marry* her?”

This time he didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

Blanche clapped her hands together. “Thank the lord in heaven.”

Keaton smiled.

“If that’s the case, then I reckon I better give you this.” Blanche pulled out a beautiful solitaire diamond ring and handed it to him.

“What’s this?” Keaton asked as he took it from her. He knew that Blanche had never been married, so he wasn’t sure where the ring had come from.

“That is Avery’s gammy, my mama’s, ring. I’ve had it for her since she was ten. My mama made me promise that I would only give this ring to a man who was worthy of her sweet pea, so I’ve kept it in my panty drawer until now.” Blanche’s eyes twinkled. He knew that was her way of telling him that she hadn’t offered it to Jude.

“Thank you.” Keaton looked down at the ring and felt honored, humbled, and happy that she’d entrusted it to him, just like he did that Avery loved him.

Avery took deep breaths to try and calm her nerves as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Today was Family Day. Each one of the cast was going to meet the family of their matches. She and Keaton hadn't talked much about his family on the show, but five years ago, they had.

She knew that his aunt had taken him in when his mom remarried a man who basically didn't want a stepson. He came home from school one day and she was gone. She'd packed up the apartment and just left. Avery felt horrible judging his mom since she'd lost her husband and the father of her son tragically, but she just couldn't help wondering how someone could choose a partner over their child.

Julie came in to get Zara and she headed off to see Mario's family, which of course she already knew.

Avery looked around. The dressing room seemed so empty now that only three girls were using it. Vic and Piper, Zara and Mario, and Keaton and Avery were the last matches standing and were all going to the finale.

The past six weeks that she'd been on the show had flown by. Keaton and Avery had been in a bubble of love. It was like five years ago but so much better.

Most of the time, Avery totally forgot that there were cameras around at all. She and Keaton had just been having the best time talking, laughing, dancing, and doing the challenges. They hadn't had any more secret rendezvous since he'd pulled her into the janitor's closet. They both decided it would be best if they behaved themselves while they were on the show.

As much as she'd missed being physical with him, it was actually sort of nice that that part of their relationship had been taken off the table. It had allowed them to get to know each other on an even deeper level than they already had.

But, make no mistake, the second they were done filming and had privacy, she was jumping his bones.

"Hey, girlie! You ready to go meet the fam bam?" Iris asked as she poked her head in the doorway.

"Yeah." Avery nodded nervously.

As she and Iris made their way to the sunroom, where her family day would take place, she could feel her anxiety growing and her palms getting wet.

Iris made small talk on the short walk, but she wasn't really following along with what she was saying. Questions were playing on a worry loop in her head.

What if his aunt didn't like her?

What if his cousins didn't like her?

What if they thought her going on the show so soon after she was supposed to get married was trashy?

What if they thought Keaton was just a rebound?

What if they knew about Keaton's rule not to date single moms and thought he shouldn't break it for her?

There were so many reasons that anyone who loved him might think that him being with her was a bad idea. She knew that family was everything to Keaton. She knew that it was all that mattered to him. If they disapproved of her relationship, then it would be over for them.

"Ready?" Iris asked as they stepped in front of the French doors that led out to the sunroom.

Avery didn't trust herself to speak because she thought her voice might crack from nerves, so she nodded her head.

Iris opened the doors and Avery saw the room was filled with what looked like twenty people who all looked in her direction. She wanted to die. Iris walked in front of her and said, "Everybody, this is Avery. Avery this is everybody."

"Hi, everybody." Avery smiled feeling a little, no a lot overwhelmed. She hated attention and this was definitely a Tupac *All Eyes on Me* situation.

Also adding to her anxiousness, was that she'd never had a large family and the Savage family was large in numbers and size. Keaton's cousins were all well over six foot. It was slightly intimidating.

Each person took turns introducing themselves, except Kennedy, who she knew, and Chrissy, and Laura who she sort of knew. They'd all encouraged her to do the show when they overheard her conversation at the Needlepoint Mafia knitting club. And it looked like Keaton's family was going to be getting even bigger because, unless Avery was mistaken, both Kennedy and Laura were pregnant.

The woman who Avery assumed must be Keaton's aunt stayed in the background until Avery had met everyone, including Chrissy's four children and Laura's twins. Once Avery handed Jackson back to Laura, his aunt made her approach. Her brown hair was cut in a cute bob that accentuated her large

green eyes and sweetheart-shaped face. Avery knew that she must be in her sixties since Keaton said she'd worked as a nurse for thirty years before retiring to Florida a couple of years back and her oldest son was in his early forties, but she looked decades younger than that.

"Hi, I'm Elaine, but you can call me Laney." Her warm smile instantly calmed Avery's nerves.

"Hi, it's so nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you. About all of you."

"Let's go for a walk." Laney scrunched her nose. "Outside."

Avery could feel her heart lodging in her throat. She wasn't sure what Keaton's aunt had seen on television. She wanted to tell her everything that had happened with Jude, and that even though it might seem like she was just doing the show as a rebound, she wasn't. But she couldn't say that while she was being filmed. She just hoped that his aunt would have an open mind once the show was over, even if she did have preconceptions of her situation now.

When they got outside, Laney patted Avery's arm as they walked away from the crowd into the gardens. "So, you and my boy seem to be getting along."

"We are, yes."

"I don't know how much he's told you about his childhood, but it wasn't easy."

Avery nodded. She didn't want to say what she did know about his early years because she doubted he'd want it on TV.

"He came to live with me when he was eight. I was a single mom, with three sons who you just met. I love my sons more than life itself, but Keaton, my boy, has always had a special place in my heart."

Avery smiled. She loved knowing that Keaton's aunt felt the same bond with him that he felt with her.

"I have always been a little more protective of my boy than my other sons. He didn't have the easiest start. The person who was supposed to be there for him, who was supposed to love and protect him wasn't. I know that he was happy when he came to live with me. He loved growing up with his cousins, and I think I was able to make a happy home for him, but I never saw him settle. He loved my home, but it wasn't *his* home. I could see it in his eyes. To be honest, I was scared I'd never see him truly feel at home."

Avery wasn't sure where this was going, but she nodded.

"But then, the moment you walked into that ballroom, I saw it. I saw my

boy's eyes and I knew he was home. You, my sweet girl, *you* are his home.”

Avery felt tears begin to fall down her face. Laney pulled her into a hug, and she cried against her shoulder. She was crying because she was happy that Laney approved of her. She was crying because she was sad that Keaton had had a mom who didn't love and protect him, who didn't love him the way she should have, who didn't give him a home. She was crying because her childhood hadn't been easy and after her Gammy died, she felt the same way. And she was crying because they'd found each other.

He was her home.

“FINAL THREE! HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” JESS ASKED AS AVERY SAT IN HER chair with her eyes closed as Jess brushed on her eyeshadow.

“Good. I’m a little nervous, just because it’s live.” Avery didn’t care if they won or not. Truth be told, she was hoping they wouldn’t. She knew that when she went back to real life there was going to be some level of increased attention on her just because she was *on* the show. She also knew it would be even more attention if she *won* the show.

Thankfully, she doubted very much that would happen. Making it to the final three was exciting, but she was sure that she and Keaton were going to be in third place.

Zara and Mario had fireworks. Their chemistry was undeniable, and they were explosive together. They fought and made up a lot. Which, she was sure made for good TV.

And Avery knew from before she came on the show that the public loved Vic and Piper. Over the past eight weeks they’d been on the show, the public had watched them meet and fall in love. Real love.

So yeah, she and Keaton would be third. And she was great with that.

As much as she’d appreciated the time that she’d gotten to spend with Keaton, with basically none of the pressures of real life, spending all of their energy just getting to know each other better, she missed Jacob and was so happy to get back to mom-life.

Even though the show aka Sabrina had made special concessions for her and she got to see Jacob during her downtime on filming days and be with him all of her off days, she missed tucking him in at night and getting him up

in the morning. She missed the routine of making sure he brushed his teeth and ate a good breakfast. She felt like even though she'd literally seen him every day since Jude brought him back, and Sabrina was right, her schedule while filming the show allowed her to spend more time with him than she had in California, it just wasn't enough.

She was ready to go back to her life. Her *new* life. After talking to her mom and Jacob, the three of them decided to make Whisper Lake their home. Jacob loved his classes at Legacy with Coach Kade, and he'd also started taking a children's acting workshop at the community center that was run by Coach Kade's nephew Ricky, who Jacob now idolized.

Her son also *loved* Keaton. Her mom said that all the kids at Legacy were jealous of Jacob because Coach Keaton was going to be his stepdad. Avery told her to make sure that she told Jacob they didn't have any plans to get married. But she told Avery not to worry about it because she'd "handled" it. When Avery pushed her on exactly how she'd handled it she told her she'd asked him, on Family Day, if he was going to marry her and he'd said yes.

Avery thought she was lying at first, but then Jacob told her that he'd asked him, too, and he'd told him that when he married her Mojo would be his dog. She knew that neither of them would lie to her, but she didn't want to get her hopes up. Keaton hadn't mentioned anything to her about marriage. They'd talked about the future, but never about getting married.

"Okay, beautiful, you are all set!" Jess exclaimed. "Good luck! I'm rooting for you!"

"Thanks." Avery smiled and headed into the changing room to put on her dress. It was a black Dior haute couture dress that apparently Charlize Theron had worn at the 2014 Oscars. The satin organza gown with an exaggerated sweetheart neckline was a showstopper. Sabrina had called in a few favors to get Avery this dress because she knew how nervous she'd be since the show was live and Avery appreciated it.

When Avery put it on, it felt like a costume and like she was playing a character. That's how Avery was psyching herself up for being on live TV. She'd told herself to pretend that it wasn't her. She was playing the role of Avery Stone tonight. So far, the mental fake-out was working, in that she hadn't thrown up, passed out, or broken out in hives—but the night was young.

Once she was dressed, Avery made her way to holding. When she walked in she, Piper, and Zara exchanged a chorus of, "You look amazing."

“You’re so beautiful.”

“I love your dress.”

And Avery had to admit, they did all look amazing, they were beautiful, and they all had incredible dresses.

Zara was wearing a strapless champagne gown with a structured bodice and high slit. It perfectly complemented her skin tone and figure. Piper was in a silver ball gown with a floral illusion plunge that made her look like a fairy princess.

Out of the three of them, Zara seemed the most nervous. She kept checking her lipstick and hair and asking if she looked okay. Over the six weeks they’d been on the show together, Avery had never heard Zara ask anyone about her appearance. She’d been the poster child of confidence. But tonight, her nerves were showing.

Avery didn’t think that she was really concerned about her makeup or how she looked. She was pretty sure she was worried about winning the prize money for her sisters. Avery really liked Piper, but she hoped Zara won tonight.

“It’s time!” Iris walked into the room, clapping her hands excitedly.

They made their way down to the ballroom for the last time and lined up. Zara was first, Piper was second, and Avery was last.

As she waited her turn, she was doing her best to mentally prepare for what she was about to experience. Not only was the show live, but there was also a studio audience of nearly two hundred people, which was four hundred eyes.

Luckily, two of those eyes were going to be Jacob’s. Her plan was if she got too nervous or overwhelmed, she would just look at him and he would ground her. That was the plan, anyway, whether or not she’d be able to execute it was another story. She wasn’t even sure she’d be able to see him from the stage with the lights in her eyes.

What if she couldn’t see him?

What if she passed out?

What if she passed out and it scared Jacob scarring him for life?

What if she threw up?

What if she threw up on Keaton?

Her mental preparation backfired as questions started populating in her head like a computer virus. Before she could close one, another one popped up.

She started breathing quickly. So quickly that she got lightheaded. But then, she saw Keaton in his tux, looking sexier than any man had any right to look, and instantly, she calmed down.

The room stopped spinning. She was able to take a deep breath. She was back in her body. All she had to do was look in his eyes and she was home.

“Welcome back!” Lance greeted the at-home viewers as he stared into the camera. “If you’re just joining us, shame on you. But seriously, here’s a recap of where we are. Lord Vic and Lady Piper were just crowned the third runner’s up, leaving Lord Keaton and Lady Avery, and Lord Mario and Lady Zara in the running to be crowned the king and queen of Fairytale Love. Let’s look back at both couples’ journey to happily ever after.”

A montage began playing on a big screen behind them and Keaton turned and watched their love story, or part of their love story. It started with the first day she arrived. Keaton couldn’t help but smile at his expression when she walked through the ballroom doors. He thought he’d hidden how he felt about her so well, but from day one it was being broadcast on his face.

The next clip was of Avery competing in the Knight in Shining Armor challenge. Keaton was so proud watching again as she kicked its ass. When their kiss came on the screen, Avery hid her face in Keaton’s chest as the crowd erupted in cheers and whistles, which he figured were mostly from his cousins. He wasn’t normally one to get embarrassed about PDA, but damn, he really went for it. He knew what their chemistry *felt* like but seeing it on a big screen was a totally different ball game. It was explosive. And really hot.

There were more clips of the times they shared. The challenges they did. Of them talking in bed while all the other couples slept around them. He loved seeing all of them, but his favorites were the ones from Family Day. He was happy that they didn’t show Blanche giving him the ring, he wanted it to be a surprise to Avery. He loved the clip of Jacob running into his arms. But his favorite was the scene that showed his aunt and Avery walking alone in the garden. There was no audio, but from the look on her face, Keaton could tell that his aunt loved Avery.

When the clip finished playing, Lance announced Zara and Mario’s montage.

Keaton looked up at the screen, but he wasn't paying attention. All he could think about was the ring in his pocket. He knew he wasn't going to propose to Avery on camera, she would be mortified. But the first second he got alone with her, he was going to get down on one knee.

The montage ended and Lance looked back at the camera. He reminded the audience of the prizes that the king and queen would receive and then pulled out an envelope. He opened it and read, "Congratulations! Lady Zara and Lord Mario, you are Fairytale Love's King and Queen!"

The crowd exploded with cheers as Avery and Keaton both clapped with genuine enthusiasm and happiness. He was thrilled, not only for Zara so she could send her sisters to school without debt, but also because the show was over. He could go back to his life. One that he hoped, now, would include Avery and Jacob together.

Avery hugged Mario as Zara hugged Keaton. "Congratulations, Z, you did it," he whispered beneath his breath. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you." She hugged him extra tight. "I'm so happy for you, too. Avery was made for you."

He might not have had a romantic connection with Zara, but his time on the show would not have been the same without Zara. He was grateful for her candid and straightforward approach the first two weeks before Avery came. And he was grateful for the friend she'd become over the last four weeks. There were two weeks in there that she hadn't spoken to him, but they'd gotten past that now.

Lance separated the couples and stepped between them. He turned toward Keaton and Avery. "Lord Keaton, Lady Avery, how does it feel to be runners-up? To come so close to walking away with the crowns?" Lance put the mic in front of Keaton's face first. "Especially you, Lord Keaton, since you started your journey with Lady Zara."

"Honestly, I believe the right couple won. I couldn't be happier for them."

Lance shifted the mic to Avery and she replied, "I feel the same way. Mario and Zara truly have a fairytale love, anyone can see that. I'm so happy for them."

Lance turned and began to interview Zara and Mario and Keaton saw an opportunity. He knew that once that interview was over, there would be more mics in their faces. They would have to do talking heads and all the other wrap-ups for the show. But after seeing Avery with his family, after watching

the footage of him with Jacob and Blanche, he just couldn't wait a second longer.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her off the stage. Then he ducked behind the screen and went out the back of the ballroom. He speed-walked, dragging her beside him, through the kitchen and into the butler's pantry where he shut the door behind them.

Avery's eyes twinkled as she shook her head. "Keaton, we can't, people will be—"

Keaton dropped down to one knee causing Avery's words to trail off.

"What are you doing?" she breathed.

He pulled out the ring from his pocket and took her hand in his. "I would have done this on the stage, but I know that you'd rather get a root canal than be subjected to that kind of attention."

Her lips turned up in a smile and he saw tears glistening in her aqua gaze as she examined the ring, head tilting to the side. "Is this..."

"It's your Gammy's ring. Your mom gave it to me on Family Day."

Avery shook her head. "But...she said she lost it."

"She told me that she's had it in her panty drawer since you were ten. Your Gammy told her to give it to a man worthy of you."

Tears were pouring down Avery's eyes as she stared at the ring and smiled from ear to ear.

Keaton took a deep breath. "Growing up, my life wasn't easy. I lost my dad when I was Jacob's age. Before that, I had the perfect family. A mom and dad who loved me. I believed in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy and that everything would always work out. That I'd always be safe and surrounded by people who loved me and who I loved. That all changed the day my dad died. My whole world came crashing down on me and I had to grow up really quickly.

"I stopped believing in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy when Christmas came and went and there were no presents under the tree and when I lost a tooth, left it under my pillow, and woke up with it still there. My mom started dating men who were not thrilled that she was a package deal. Then one day I came home, and she was gone. I was alone. If it hadn't been for my aunt, I don't know what would have happened to me.

"Since the day my dad went out to get me cough syrup and ended up dying, there's been a deep ache in me that never went away. I blamed myself for my dad's death even though I knew it was because of his brain aneurysm

and had nothing to do with him going out to the store for my medication. I blamed myself for my mom's boyfriends not wanting to stick around. I thought it was because of me.

"I didn't think that ache would ever go away. But then, I saw you. The moment you looked up at me, holding Mojo in your arms, and I looked into your eyes, that ache started to lessen. During the two weeks we spent together, it grew duller and duller. Then one day I came back and you were gone and it returned."

"I'm so sorry," Avery apologized as she covered her mouth.

"No. You have nothing to be sorry about. I believe timing is everything, and five years ago, it wasn't our time. I think, no I know, that *now* is. It might seem to the rest of the world like this is moving too fast, but it's not. This relationship, this connection, this love is years in the making. It might have been on the back burner, but it never went away.

"And I don't want to waste another year, another month, another week, another day, another hour, another minute, another second before asking you to be mine. Forever. When you told me that it was because of me that you didn't get married, it was the first time in my life I knew that I belonged. I belong with you. I belong with Jacob. And if you say yes, I will spend the rest of my life taking care of you both, supporting you both, loving you both, protecting you both, and doing everything in my power to make you both as happy as you make me.

"Avery Elizabeth Stone, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" she cried out before he even finished the question.

Keaton slid the ring on her finger and picked her up in his arms and he knew that his happily ever after started right now.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

“THANK YOU, GAMMY,” AVERY WHISPERED AS SHE HELD THE LOCKET around her neck and placed her hand over her belly. “Thank you for giving me the sign.”

Today was her wedding day and unlike the first time, her feet weren't cold. They were hot and ready to get out to the bluff overlooking the lake and officially become Mrs. Keaton Savage.

Avery still couldn't believe this was actually her life. She would have thought going on *Fairytale Love* would be the most surreal thing to happen to her, but the truth was this past year, her life had been a fairytale that was culminating today.

She and Keaton were exchanging vows at the castle. The place where they fell in love six years ago, and then fell in love all over again a year ago.

All her life she'd dreamed of having a family. A real family. It was strange but as soon as she gave up trying to force the picture that she had in her head of what that should be, all the pieces fell into place for her to get the real thing. That's what she had with Keaton. She had a family. And it wasn't just Keaton, it was his entire extended family. Jacob had cousins, and soon he was going to have a sibling.

Avery found out a week ago that she was pregnant. She'd wanted to tell Keaton right away, but she was scared if she did, he would have sidelined her and put her on bedrest the week before the wedding. He was overprotective like that. And she loved it.

She loved that he took out the trash, and never let her carry heavy things. She loved that he always walked on the side of the road where the traffic was

and never let her fill up her own tank of gas. She loved that he was so protective of her and Jacob. He was an incredible stepfather, and she knew he was going to be an amazing dad.

There was a soft knock on the door and her mom walked in. “Hey darlin’ you ready to get hitched?”

“Yes!” Avery enthused. “Is it time?”

“We have about ten minutes. Do ya mind if I sit, I want to tell ya somethin’.”

“Sure.” Avery got an uneasy feeling in her stomach that had nothing to do with the baby she was growing. Blanche Bardot wasn’t someone who asked if she could tell someone something. She just told them. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh nothin’ I just wanted to get somethin’ off my chest and I thought that today would be the right time.”

“My wedding day?”

“Well, yeah, because it all worked out!” Her mom smiled but Avery could see the sheepishness behind her grin.

“What did you do?” Avery asked.

“Well see now, do ya remember when those gals got poison ivy?”

“Mom, no.” Avery shook her head. “You didn’t.”

“No.” Her mom lifted her hands in the air. “No, no, no. I didn’t. But now well, I might have encouraged Doris, Pearl, and Betsy to go ahead and send those gals bouquets of poison ivy. But they came up with the plan, I swear.”

Doris Weathersby, Pearl Chen, and Betsy Dobrinski aka The Needlepoint Mafia were famous, or should she say infamous for playing cupid to single adults in Whisper Lake. They had appointed themselves the town matchmakers, but sometimes, like this time, they went too far. No one had ever had actual evidence of their shenanigans, and Avery worried they might put a hit on her mom for snitching. Not really, but she would definitely not accept any flower deliveries if she was her.

“Anyhoo, it’s been weighin’ on my conscience, ya know because they didn’t get to go on the show and all.”

Before Avery could respond, the door flew open, and Jacob ran inside.

“You ready mom?!” Jacob asked excitedly.

“Yes.” She stood and hugged her mom.

At first, Blanche froze. They didn’t really do hugs. But after a few seconds, she relaxed and wrapped her arms around Avery. “I love you, baby girl.”

“I love you, too, Mama.” Avery pulled back and wiped the tears that had sprung up in her eyes away.

She took her son’s arm, but he stopped. “Why are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, I’m crying because I’m happy.” That and she might be a little hormonal thanks to the pregnancy.

Jacob didn’t look totally convinced, so he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly and told her how beautiful she was and how much he loved her. That didn’t help with the tear situation.

Avery needed to face facts, today was the happiest day of her life, and she was probably going to spend most of it crying. And she was okay with that.

“Hello everyone, my name is Blanche Bardot. I’m the mother of the beautiful bride.” Blanche smiled and waved to the two hundred plus people seated at the reception as she spoke into the microphone. Keaton had tried to keep the guest list short, but that was impossible in Whisper Lake. “Now, I have a story to tell that same beautiful bride might not be too pleased about, but I’m gonna tell it anyway. Most of you know that Avery and Keaton filmed a little show called *Fairytale Love* last summer, but I don’t know how many of you know that Keaton and Avery met long before that.

“Six years ago they spent a beautiful two weeks together fallin’ in love. Then, life happened, literally, and they went their separate ways. Now, before last summer I didn’t know anything about this love affair, mind you, not a thing, But I had heard Keaton’s name before. Ya see about, mmm, four years ago, Avery had to get her wisdom teeth pulled.”

“Mom, no! Don’t!” Avery shouted beside him. Keaton looked at her and saw her face turn bright red. He had no clue what Blanche was about to say but from Avery’s reaction, he was all ears.

Blanche did not heed her daughter’s warning as she continued, “Now I volunteered to drive my baby girl home after the dentist, and let’s just say she was feeling good. They gave her the *good* stuff.”

Avery buried her face in her hands as she shook her head back and forth and muttered no over and over.

“Color me confused when we were drivin’ back from the dentist, and she

kept giggling and repeating a name over and over. Do y'all wanna guess what name that was?"

Keaton looked at Avery as several people in the crowd shouted his name. Her hands were still covering her face.

"That's right, it was one Mr. Keaton Savage. And the thing is, my baby girl wasn't just sayin' his name y'all, she was sayin' that she loved him, that she was going to *marry* him. She even made me sing "Going to the Chapel" over and over again, until she fell asleep."

There was a mixture of clapping and laughing in the crowd.

"Now, in case you don't believe me, I have proof. Please enjoy this never-before-seen footage."

That got Avery to stop hiding.

"What?!" she asked as she looked up in time to see herself on the large white screen that had been playing a photo montage of them on loop go black. Then a video started of Avery laying on a couch with cotton in her mouth with her eyes shut. In the background of the recording, Blanche was singing "Going to the Chapel."

"Keaton Savage, I love him!" Avery declared loudly, her mouth stuffed with cotton. "I'm going to marry him. Keaton Savage. Keaton Savage. I'm going to marry Keaton Savage." Blanche finished the song and Avery's eyes opened. "Sing, Mama! Sing!" Blanche started the song over and Avery smiled and closed her eyes. "Keaton Savage. Keaton Savage. Keaton Savage. I love him. I'm gonna marry him."

The screen went black, and the crowd went wild with applause. Keaton turned his head toward Avery who looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole and die. He'd never loved her more than he did in that moment.

"Ave—" he started to say but Avery lifted her hand.

"Don't. I *don't* want to talk about it. Not today."

Keaton leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I love you, Mrs. Savage."

That got a smile out of her.

"Now, that's not the only surprise I have for my baby girl today," Blanche continued emceeding the surprises.

Avery groaned and Keaton was starting to second-guess what was coming next.

"If any of you know Avery, which I'm assumin' some of you do, then you know she does not like being the center of attention. The apple definitely fell far from the tree on that one." There was a smattering of laughter. "So to

avoid anyone lookin' at her Avery decided not to have a first dance, but her husband—”

“Keaton Savage!” A voice that sounded a lot like Knox called out.

Blanche smiled. “That’s right, her husband, Keaton Savage, had ideas on the subject of his own. “So please, join me in celebrating the newlyweds as they take the floor for their first dance as husband and wife.”

Keaton stood and held out his hand which, thankfully, Avery took.

“I thought we agreed we weren’t having a first dance?” she whispered under her breath as he led them to the dance floor.

“You agreed we weren’t having a first dance.” He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly as Blanche began to sing *Make You Feel My Love*. It was the song that they’d danced to the first night they met up on the roof of the keep.

Avery looked up at him and gasped. “You remembered?”

“Of course I remembered. I remember everything.” She smiled up as he rubbed his hand up and down her back. “This past year has been the best year of my life. You have made all my dreams come true. All I ever wanted was a family. And now I have one. You and Jacob are my family.”

Avery’s eyes filled with tears.

“Are those happy tears?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, and also, I have something to tell you.”

His heart thudded in his chest. “You’re pregnant,” he stated firmly.

Her eyes widened. “You knew?”

“No.” He shook his head, not truly believing that he could actually be this lucky. “When did you find out?”

“A week ago.” Her face scrunched in a cringe. “Are you mad?”

“How can I be mad when you just made even more of my dreams come true?”

“I didn’t tell you because—”

“Because I would have made you go to bed and stay there?” Keaton knew that he was overprotective of Avery. His aunt loved to tease him and his cousins about how they were with their wives. But he knew that she was actually really proud of them. Proud of the men they’d become. “If it’s a girl, do you think we—”

“Can name her Laney?” Avery finished his sentence. “Yeah, I was already thinking that.”

“What did I do to deserve you?” he asked in awe and wonder.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

The song ended and Blanche announced, “At this time, I’d like to invite Jacob out to the dance floor to dance with his mama and Keaton’s Aunt Laney out on the dance floor to dance with her boy for a very special mother-son dance.”

Avery’s eyes widened. “Did you...?”

“I knew that you couldn’t have a father-daughter dance, so I thought this would be the next best thing.”

“I love you,” Avery whispered before holding out her arms to her son.

Jacob ran to his mom and Aunt Laney smiled as she joined Keaton on the dance floor. The band started playing another song, this time it was one Avery had requested. Four years ago, apparently. When Blanche suggested she sing “Going to the Chapel” for the mother-son dance Keaton had agreed without having any idea about the backstory.

“I’m so happy for you, my boy.” Aunt Laney beamed up at him.

“Thanks, Aunt Laney. For everything. Everything I have, everything I am I owe to you.”

She swatted his chest. “Stop it. You would have been just fine without me.”

He felt tears prick the back of his eyes. “I don’t think I would have. You took me in when you had your plate full. You never treated me any different than Ford, Knox, or Seb.”

“You are all my boys.”

“Except that.” Keaton grinned. “You always called me your boy.”

“Well, I just wanted to remind you that you were.”

“I love you, Aunt Laney.”

“I know,” she smiled.

“If we have a girl, we’re going to name her Laney.”

She stopped dancing. “Are you? Is Avery...?”

Keaton nodded. “She just told me.”

“So, I’m the first person who knows?”

“Yep. But don’t tell anyone. Not yet.”

She nodded as she started to tear up, then rested her head on his shoulders as she hugged him while they danced. The song ended and Blanche spoke into the mic once more. “And now we’d like to invite everyone to join us on the dance floor.”

Michael, Aunt Laney’s boyfriend cut into their dance and Blanche

started dancing with Jacob. Seeing his bride standing on the dance floor alone, Keaton seized the opportunity to scoop Avery up in his arms and pulled her close to him as they swayed on the dance floor.

Avery looked up at him and asked. “Did you tell her?”

“I told her not to say anything.”

“We’ll tell everyone when we get back from the honeymoon,” she suggested.

“Sounds good,” Keaton agreed.

Avery melted into his arms, and he kissed her on the top of her head as he looked around the dance floor. His cousins were all dancing with their wives and surrounded by their kids.

He knew that his granddad was looking down on them and smiling. Granddad spent every summer taking Keaton and his cousins to Whisper Lake and teaching them how to be men. And now they all were. Men who, he knew, Granddad would be proud of.

Family. Love. Legacy. He was right, they were all that mattered.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NYT and USA Today Bestselling author Melanie Shawn lives in Southern California and is a mama to two adult people (she doesn't know how that happened...they were babies like two seconds ago!). She loves all things romance from books (of course!), movies, songs, and even reality TV...please don't judge.

She writes small-town romances that are filled with sweet and sassy heroines, cinnamon roll alphas, casts of supportive *cough: meddling* family and friends who put the fun in funny, toe-curling combustible heat, and sugary sweet "aww" moments that will have your hearts and e-readers melting.

When she's not writing or reading, listening to love songs on Spotify, or binge-watching TV she loves spending time with her dog Romeo, teaching Zumba classes, and drinking lotsa Dr. Pepper. Oh, and she also has a girl crush on Julia Roberts and is a die-hard Dawson's Creek fan. #Pacey4Ever

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