

Working with the Enemy

FROM THE MIND OF MAXWELL BLOOM

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One

ANDI WAS ALREADY on edge before I told her Rachel wanted to meet with us. I could see it in her tense shoulders when I knocked on her cubicle wall. She always gets like this at the beginning of new seasons. When she first started here, I figured she would eventually chill out a bit, but nope. Evidently, it's her nature to be uptight, especially when it comes to choosing shadows.

So, when she takes a seat across from Rachel and the little sticky note she tucked in her bra flutters to the ground without her notice, I have to bite back my smirk at the opportunity to tease her. I lean down to snatch it.

"What are you doing?" Andi snaps at me. Which is pretty warranted, considering how close my face is to her lap as I reach for the note.

"Nothing. Sorry." I sit up, slipping the note into my pocket.

She gives me a look, then focuses her attention on our boss.

Rachel settles into her chair and addresses us.

"As you two know, I've been planning to take my maternity leave as soon as we've wrapped on this season," she says. "But plans have changed in that regard. I won't be taking maternity leave."

My foot halts its tapping pattern. That's odd. She seemed pretty

excited about taking a break from work. Why would she want to be back at the office right after popping out a baby? Especially when our company gives new parents several months of paid time off.

I readjust in my seat, shoving my hands in my pockets. Rachel continues.

"My husband and I have discussed it, and we've decided that it's time I move on from *Marriage Material* and focus on our family," she says.

My fidgeting thumbs go still, and I sit up straighter.

If Rachel's leaving, that means the showrunner position will be open for the first time since I started here eleven years ago.

Is that why she asked me here? To offer me the position?

I glance at Andi. No. Not an offer. An opportunity. An opportunity I'm going to win.

"Once I'm gone, we'll be needing a new showrunner, and I've submitted both of your names as potential candidates for the job," Rachel says, confirming my assumption. "Now, before you two pull out your gloves and start throwing punches, I must inform you that some of the members of the committee that will be deciding on my replacement have some concerns about both of you."

I sigh. Of course, they do. Andi and I have made it our personal mission to treat every season of this show like a one-on-one battle to the death.

"Concerns?" Andi asks. "Like what?"

Does she really have to ask?

Rachel leans forward and looks at us. "The committee is concerned that if one of you were to get this job, the other would be . . . difficult about it."

"I can assure you that won't be a problem on my part," I say. And just to get under Andi's skin I tack on, "I think we both know I'm mature enough to handle this with class."

"Hey! I have class, too!" Andi snaps, and I have to suppress my smirk. She makes it too easy.

Rachel puts up a hand to stop the oncoming storm. She tells us

she has a plan to prove to the hiring committee that we can work well together, and then she says the magic words I've been waiting for.

"Have you each chosen the shadows you want?"

"Yes," Andi and I say at the same time.

Rachel nods. "Let me see."

I hand her my index card with three names printed neatly in numbered order of importance. Then I peek at Andi, watching as she slips her fingers beneath her bra. A panicked look crosses her face when she shoves them deeper and still doesn't find what she's looking for.

"Sorry. One second."

Andi stands up and turns around. Rachel gives her a look of confused concern. I watch with a smirk as Andi shimmies and fidgets, searching for the little paper.

"Is there a problem, Andi?" Rachel asks.

She turns around, face flushed. "No, ma'am," she says. "I think I misplaced my list. But I remember who I chose."

"Oh, is that what that was?" I ask, feigning innocence as I pull the sticky note from my pocket. I hand it to her with a grin. "It was on the ground by your chair. You must have dropped it."

She looks like she wants to strangle me, but instead, she puts on a polite smile and says, "Thank you, Maxwell."

I smirk. "You're welcome, Andrea."

Andi passes her list to Rachel.

"Well, I know Tyler's name has been thrown around by just about everyone, so you'll have to roll for that one in the group meeting," Rachel says. "But I'll give you Antony and Sebastian."

I look at Andi, and she's already glancing at me.

"You'll give them to . . . whom?" I ask Rachel.

"To both of you," she says, looking up from the lists. "I want you two to work together this season. You'll have the same shadows, and you'll manage them together, as a team."

Well, that's a gut-punch if there ever was one.

I clench my jaw tight, suppressing the urge to argue. Rachel tells

us she has high expectations for us and she trusts we won't let her down. Then she excuses herself and reminds us of the meeting we have with the rest of the crew in two minutes.

She hoists herself up from her desk and leaves the room. I stand and look down at Andi.

She looks as disappointed as I feel to have to work together as a team this season, shadowing the same contestants. As a show of solidarity, I set aside my urge to do something to irk her and offer her a hand instead.

She stares at it with narrowed eyes, and I laugh.

"Relax, Anderson. You heard the lady. You've got to play nice with me, or I won't get my promotion."

I expect a typically witty Andi Starr retort, but she just rolls her eyes at me, stands, and heads for the conference room.



As soon as I'm through the front door, Bowser is on me, sniffing my pants and shoes like mad.

"Hey, bud," I say, kneeling on the ground to greet him.

He gives me a few licks.

"Guess what," I tell him as I scratch behind his ears. "Your old man might be the next new showrunner."

He stares at me. I stand up and he walks over to his empty food bowl, looking between it and me.

"I know you're excited for me, but please try to contain yourself," I say.

He looks at the bowl again and lets out a whine.

I sigh, walking to the kitchen pantry to grab a scoop of kibble.

Two

FIRST DAY WORKING WITH ANDI, and already she's not here. How am I supposed to prove that I can work well with her if she's off having breakfast with her sisters?

I get word from another producer that the last plane just landed. We've got a crew at the airport, ready to transport any late arrivals, and a few drivers and producers at the hotel, ushering over the men who arrived last night. They should be here any minute.

I can't believe Rachel agrees to letting Andi miss these mornings. I mean, I get that family's important, but Saturday mornings are always the day we get to meet the guys for the first time. All of them, not just our own shadows. Getting that first glimpse into their characters is vital to knowing how all of the men are going to interact with each other.

When I'm in charge, I'll have to make some changes. Andi can't keep missing these mornings. I'm sure her sisters can handle one Saturday morning breakfast without her.

A few SUVs pull into the mansion lot, and I halt my pacing by the producers' tent.

It's ridiculous how anxious I feel about today. I'm never this

nervous on the first day. When I analyze what's different about this time, I realize that I'm anxious on Andi's behalf. She's missing so much, and I don't want to be held responsible for that. I feel like we're watching a movie at the theater, and she left to go to the bathroom right when some major plot point is about to go down. And *I'm* the one who's going to have to fill her in on it all later.

I pull out my phone and locate her number.

Last plane just landed. All contestants accounted for.

I guess keeping her updated virtually is the best I can do if she's not going to be here in person. That should earn me some points with Rachel—going above and beyond to make sure my partner is informed and included.

We keep the contestants sequestered until filming begins, so they're not allowed to meet each other. But the group from the hotel has now been ushered, one by one, into their private trailers, so I decide to start making the rounds.

I knock on the first trailer door, and Michael, our youngest producer, opens it.

"Hey, Michael. Just making the rounds, seeing if anyone needs anything." I look to the man in the corner of the room, flexing in front of a full-length mirror. "You must be Tyler."

He gives me a nod, his eyes not leaving his reflection for a second.

"So, Mike, this girl," Tyler says over his shoulder. "What are we talking, like eight, nine?"

Michael's mouth opens, but no sound comes out. Finally, he pulls himself together and says, "She's a ten. You'll love her."

My hand immediately goes to my phone, and I fire off another update to Andi.

Think we dodged a bullet with Tyler. Kind of a tool.

Michael turns back to me. "Um, I think I'm okay," he says, shuf-

fling through his disorganized notes. He pushes up his glasses and glances back at Tyler. “Maybe I’ll go see how my other shadows are doing.”

I look at Tyler—who’s still admiring his own killer physique—and back to Michael. The intimidation is pouring off of him like sweat. Along with a fair amount of actual sweat.

I lower my voice, so Tyler won’t overhear.

“You know, Michael, you’ve got a big front-runner here,” I remind him. “You should probably focus most of your energy here.”

He swallows hard and straightens up. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll check on the others later.”

I give him a firm pat on the shoulder and head for the next trailer, pulling up my text chain with Andi as I walk.

There’s no way Michael’s going to be able to handle this guy’s ego.

I make my way through a few more trailers, skipping my own shadows as I go. Tonight, my focus will be entirely on our three men, but until then, I’d like to see what kind of competition they’re working with.

After two more trailers, Andi still hasn’t responded to any of my messages.

Are you getting my messages?

She doesn’t say anything to that either.

When I pass over Ravi’s trailer, I send another text.

I hope you read up on Ravi. Probably won’t last long, but still, it’s your job.

After a brief conversation with Morgan—the widower—I check my phone again and still nothing. I huff a sigh, shaking my head as I type out another message.

I don't know why Rachel agrees to giving you Saturdays off. It's extremely frustrating to not get a response for hours when we're supposed to be working together.

I mean, seriously, how is it even a question of who will be getting the showrunner position? I live and breathe this show. It's not like I have anything to go home to, except a lazy old boxer who probably wouldn't even notice if I never came back, so long as someone else was there to feed him. I would give everything into running this show. It's all I have.

My phone vibrates in my hand. *Finally*. But it's not a text, it's a call. I answer, but before I can even say a word, she's laying into me.

"Okay, first of all, I don't need you to tell me what my job is. I've been doing it for eight years without your guidance, and I've done just fine, thank you very much," she snaps. "And secondly, I don't have Saturdays off. I have *two* hours on Saturday mornings to have breakfast with my sisters, and then I'm right back to the office. I'll see you in an hour and fifteen."

Before I can respond, she's already hung up.

An initial burst of irritation flares in my chest. I've been working hard all morning to make sure she's informed, and that's how she thanks me?

But I take a breath and consider it from her view. I guess my frustration might have seeped through a bit too much in my last few texts. Still, the fact that Rachel is unsure which of the two of us should be running this show when one of us hasn't even bothered to show up makes no sense to me. But for the sake of proving that I can keep the peace—which is the entire point of Andi and me working as a team this season—I open my texts again to let her know that I've heard her loud and clear. No more updates.

Everything I try to type out ends up sounding like I'm still annoyed, because I am. So, I venture into the emoji folder and settle on one that offers nothing more than a simple acknowledgment of words heard.

Thumbs-up.

Three

“ALL RIGHT, gentlemen, let’s take five,” Morgan says, rising from his seat at the dining room table.

Antony sits beside me, gathering the playing cards to deal our next hand of Texas Hold ‘Em. A few of the men get up for snacks or a bathroom break, and others stay seated, chatting while they stretch their stiff muscles.

Every season, when the first episode airs, Rachel gives the whole crew the night off to watch. She likes to foster the fandom mentality surrounding premiere night, encouraging us all to attend watch parties or live tweet the episode.

But given that everyone—including the camera crew—is off watching tonight’s episode, I’ve decided it would be best if someone were to stick around the mansion, keep an eye on the men in case something important goes down. My TV is set to record tonight’s premiere. I’ll have to get up early tomorrow to watch it before work. But for tonight, I’m here, playing poker with the boys until they retreat to their bunks.

Most of the guys opted to participate in the game, but a few have chosen to go their own way for the night. Sebastian said he can’t

handle the negative energy that gambling elicits, even though none of us are betting with real money.

But my other two shadows are here, and I'm sandwiched between them. In this position, it's impossible not to take note of how completely opposite they are in demeanor.

Antony is loud, outspoken, and confident to the point of arrogance. Ravi is quiet, keeps to himself, and has a sort of calm presence that balances out some of the more boisterous personalities at the table.

Once Antony has the cards shuffled and ready for our next round, he gets up and retreats to the kitchen for a midnight snack. I'm about to strike up a conversation with Ravi, since I still haven't quite figured him out yet, but he gets up too, headed toward the upstairs bathroom.

Tyler's giving fitness advice to Riley, our youngest contestant, and I have to bite my tongue to stop from chiming in and correcting him. For a personal trainer, he seems to have some outdated views on best practices. But Riley doesn't even seem particularly interested in the conversation, so I'm not too concerned about him taking the potentially harmful advice.

I pull out my phone to distract myself from their conversation. Most of my social media accounts are primarily used for business purposes—browsing the pages of potential contestants, keeping up on the latest buzz for the show, checking in on what fans want to see more of in future seasons. But I have a handful of personal friends on my follow list, and the algorithm is constantly trying to get me to follow more.

An old friend from high school pops up on my recommended list, and I'm momentarily stunned to see a photo of him holding a baby. I flip through a few more recommended people and see Stacey Summers, one of Beth's friends from college and maid-of-honor at our wedding.

Out of morbid curiosity, I click on her page and scroll through a few photos, hoping to catch a glimpse of Beth. When I finally find

what I'm looking for, a heavy rock settles in my stomach as I stare at the picture.

It was posted two hours ago. Beth is sitting on some couch at a crowded club—since when does Beth go clubbing?—surrounded by a group of her friends. I recognize a few faces, but one in particular has my rapt attention.

The life-sized man-bun beside her has his hand just above her knee, his other arm draped over her shoulder, and his lips pressed to her cheek.

He has a beard—a short one, scratchy and unkempt. Beth always complained about my stubble when I missed a day shaving. She hated the way it felt against her sensitive skin. Guess she doesn't mind that feeling anymore.

It's not like I didn't know they were still together. What blindsides me about this photo is the fact that it's public. As far as my friends and family know, Beth and I are still trying to make things work. That's what we agreed on. That we would keep our private business private until things were officially over.

Is that what this picture means? It's over?

My unblinking stare at the man kissing my wife is interrupted by a text. It's from a friend I haven't talked to in months, and if I was unsure, before, whether or not people have seen the post, I have my answer now.

Hey, man. Been a while! Just checking in.
You doing okay?

The contestants have returned to the dining room table, and Antony deals out another round. With great effort, I tear my eyes away from my screen and shove my phone back in my pocket.



FOR THE REST of the night, all throughout the remainder of our card game and my drive home, that picture burns in my mind.

When I get home, I go through the motions of letting Bowser outside, bringing him back in, giving him a few pats until he tires of the attention and goes to plop down on his bed in the corner of the room.

I stare at him. I can't do this. I can't sit in this silent house, relax on the couch where Beth and I used to curl up with some good food and a cheesy horror flick on the rare nights I didn't have work to do. But I have nowhere else to go.

With a second thought, I realize that's not entirely true. I ignore the irony of returning to work to lament my broken marriage, when spending too much time at the office was what caused this whole mess in the first place. But this season is too important for me to show up to work with a hangover tomorrow, so a bar is not an option. It's either this or staying here, and I can't stay here.

I go upstairs, change into my swimsuit and a tank top, and head back out the front door.

Four

THE HOT WATER of the jacuzzi succeeds in relaxing my muscles, but not my mind. I've been sitting in this tub for ten minutes, and my thoughts still keep going back to that picture.

So, Beth's friends are all aware of the situation, then. Clearly, everyone in that club was well aware that she and man-bun are more than just friends. But that didn't mean she had to blast it on public social media for all of *my* friends and family to see.

I dodged two more texts and a phone call on my drive back to the mansion, all from friends who really need to work on their lying skills if they want me to believe they just so happened to choose tonight to "check in on me," for no particular reason at all.

I finally decided to just shut my phone off altogether before I sank into the steamy water of the hot tub.

With my eyes closed, head back, and mind desperately trying to think of anything other than some other man's lips on Beth's cheek, I'm snapped out of my anxious thoughts by footsteps approaching. They aren't coming from the house, though, so that's good. They're coming from the gate.

I look up and see a bright red bun of hair atop a surprisingly bangin' bikini bod. She must have already spotted me, because she's

frozen, cringing down like I might not be able to see her underneath the glaring spotlight beaming from the side of the mansion.

“Andi?” I quietly call to her, and her shoulders sink.

“Max? What the heck are you doing here?”



AFTER A THOROUGH TONGUE-LASHING for my inability to pay attention to the employee hot tub sign-up sheet, Andi finally accepts the fact that I'm not going to leave just so she can have the whole space to herself. There's plenty of room for both of us, and the fact that she, too, has had a “freaking terrible night” doesn't give her some kind of special claim on the entire twelve-person hot tub.

And if I'm honest, I find myself eager for her to stay, so I have someone to help take my mind off of the things I'm trying to avoid thinking about.

Once she's settled into the water, I ask, “So, terrible night, huh?”

“We shouldn't talk,” she says. “Someone could hear us.”

“Don't worry, they crashed a long time ago, after a spirited game of Texas Hold 'Em.”

Her eyes snap open and she glares at me. “You were with the guys tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you missed the premiere?”

She looks so indignant, I can't help but laugh.

“Relax, Andrew. I recorded it. I'll watch it before work in the morning.”

Her face falls. “Oh.”

She settles back in, laying her head back against the pavement, looking up at the sky.

“Did you watch with your sisters?” I ask.

She doesn't answer. The dark water has stilled around us, neither of us moving much, and it covers her from the collarbones down.

My question might have seemed rhetorical, but I was hoping for an actual response. Some kind of conversation to keep my mind busy. I decide to try for something with a less obvious answer.

"How's the wedding stuff going?" I ask. She's mentioned a few times that her baby sister is getting married. If I'm remembering correctly, that date should be coming up soon.

A flash of irritation crosses her face, but it fades to something else. Something darker.

After a long minute of silence, she finally answers.

"I'm ruining everything," she mutters, her voice low and thick with emotion.

Yikes. I figured this would be an easy, happy topic of conversation. I didn't mean to bring her to the verge of tears.

I try to think of something to say that might lighten the mood.

"Why would you do that?" I ask.

She shakes her head, huffing a sigh. "I'm not doing it on *purpose*."

Okay, that one didn't land.

"Your perpetual cynicism putting a damper on the big event, eh?" I ask, trying again to bring some levity to the conversation. "And don't give me that 'I'm not a cynic, I'm a realist' line."

Andi scoffs. "No, I'm definitely a cynic."

I chuckle. "Where do you think that comes from?" With a spark of inspiration, I interrupt her. "Oh! Let me guess. I'm good at this."

I have no idea if I'm actually "good at this," but psychoanalyzing someone else's life sounds a lot more appealing than examining my own, so let's give it a shot.

She sighs, sinking deeper into the water. "Go for it."

I think about what little I know of Andi's family life.

"You talk about your dad a lot, but never your mom," I note. "I'm guessing nasty divorce. She's a real piece of work, took him for a ride, abandoned him and the kids, and shattered your perception of love forever."

It's a total stab-in-the-dark, so it doesn't surprise me when she

laughs. But hey, at least she doesn't look like she's about to cry anymore.

She opens her eyes and looks at me. I raise an eyebrow.

"Wrong," she says. "My parents were madly, head-over-heels in love."

Were? Oh. So... her mom's dead. That's why she doesn't ever talk about her. And I've just made a joke about her dead mom being a terrible wife who abandoned her family and made her daughter stop believing in the entire concept of love. Nice one, Max.

"Were," I note with a nod. "I see."

I'm mentally stumbling over how to apologize for my insensitive insinuation, but Andi just laughs again.

"It was a good guess," she says. "You tried."

"So, what's the problem, then?" I ask.

She hesitates, biting her lip as she considers whether or not to answer.

Finally, she takes a deep breath and looks up at the sky again.

"My mom gave up all of her dreams for my dad. For me and my sisters. She said she was just putting them on hold, that she would pick them back up again once we were grown and she had the empty nest all to herself." She pauses, swallowing back her emotion. "And then she died. She never got to have her chance. And it's completely wrecked my dad."

A tear slides down her cheek. I'm surprised she doesn't reach up to wipe it away, but she probably thinks it's too dark out here for me to see it.

She continues, telling me how her father always made his girls promise to never give up their dreams for a man. But then her sisters seem to have done exactly that, trading in careers and ambitions for husbands and children. She's worried about her little sister going down the same path, becoming someone she's not for the sake of getting married.

I think about my own single days, how little interest I had in the

idea of marriage before I met Beth. Would I have chosen a different path if I had known, then, how it was all going to work out?

I remember the days pre-Beth when I was beholden to nobody but myself. There were some benefits to that kind of life, sure, but I wouldn't trade it for the alternative. As difficult as relationships are, I would give anything to be married again. *Really* married, not this perpetual limbo of "separation."

"Well, relationships require sacrifice," I tell Andi. "You can't get everything you want."

She huffs a scoff, looking at me with irritation. "What are you saying? That it's impossible to have a happy relationship *and* a job you love?"

This question is nearing dangerously close to the topic I'm trying to avoid, so I just shrug.

"I'm saying that it takes a lot of time and energy to make a marriage work," I explain. "If you're always busy with your job, you're putting your partner in second place. People don't tolerate that for long."

And when they decide they're done being second place, you can darn well bet it won't take them long to find someone else who will put them first.

I try to force a laugh as I attempt to move the topic along. "Of course, what do I know? I'm not exactly the best person to ask for marriage advice."

She looks at me, studies me, sees me, and I want to sink into the near-black water and disappear before she asks what I know she's about to ask.

"How are things going with Beth?"

And there it is.

Our eyes meet, and I look away, running a hand through my hair. That's the *last* thing I want to get into tonight.

"Right now, I'm more worried about this mess of a season," I say, not even bothering to try to hide the sudden and very obvious change

in subject. "If we don't figure out a better way to work together, we're both going to be screwed in the end. You know that, right?"

She sighs. "I know."

I tell her about the ridiculous song Sebastian wrote about "toxic jealousy," and how if Andi had listened to me about staying back at the house that day, she would have been there to capture that moment and make the most of it. I expect her to fight me on that, again, but to my surprise, she bites her lip and says the two little words I never expected to hear come out of her mouth.

"You're right."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Say that again?"

She rolls her eyes. "You heard me."

I chuckle and suggest she comes by after work tomorrow, so we can figure out a better gameplan for the rest of the season. We get a meeting on the books, and I glance at my watch.

I'm not ready to leave. I'm not ready for a half-hour drive back to an empty house full of memories that are becoming more and more distant by the day.

But Andi seems to have come here for the same reason I did tonight, and it's only fair that I let her have some time to wallow on her own, without an audience.

"Guess I should be heading home. Got to let Bowser out before bed." I stand slowly, trying not to make too much noise as the water drips off my swim trunks. "Enjoy your alone time, your highness."

She rolls her eyes, but I catch a hint of a smirk as she lays her head back again.

I dry off, quickly, and head back to the car.

Five

I STARE at the name illuminated on my cell phone screen.

Beth calling...

It's been months without a single word, and she had to choose right *now* to call? I just walked in the door, already later than I meant to be home. Andi's supposed to be here soon for our meeting, and I haven't eaten anything yet.

But... it's Beth. I have to answer.

I sigh, pacing around the kitchen as I accept the call and press the phone to my ear.

"Hey," I say.

There's a long pause on the other end of the line. I stop pacing, leaning over the kitchen counter instead, picking at the speck of hot glue that's been fused to the marble ever since Beth's crafting phase.

"I'm sorry about the picture," Beth finally says.

Guess we're skipping the small talk.

I sigh. "We agreed we would—"

"I know what we agreed," she says, cutting me off. "Look, I had no idea Stacey was going to post that, okay? As soon as I saw it, I told her about what we agreed, and I asked her to take it down."

Oh, great. So now I look like the insecure ex-husband who

demanding the picture be removed to hide the ugly truth about what's really going on with this separation.

"But you went out with him and all your friends," I point out, feeling pathetic to be whining about this to her. "So, clearly, they all know you two are . . ."

"It wasn't *all* my friends," Beth counters. "It was Stace and Brian and a couple of girls from Stace's work. They don't even know you."

My face goes hot when I realize how much I misread the situation. But then I remember that this phone call was supposed to be an apology, and it's turned into nothing but excuses.

"Why are you even calling me, Beth?" I ask.

"To tell you I'm sorry about the picture and that I didn't know she was going to post it," she says.

I nod. "Okay. Got it. Anything else?"

She pauses. "No."

A rumble in my gut reminds me that I still need to eat before Andi arrives in—I look at the clock—fifteen minutes.

"Okay, well, message received," I say to Beth, standing up and moving to the fridge. "If there's nothing else you need, I have a meeting to get to."

She huffs something between a scoff and a laugh, and it makes my blood boil.

"Nope, that's it. Have a good meeting."

I don't bother to say goodbye. I just hang up, shoving my phone in my pocket as I gather the necessary ingredients to whip up a quick dinner before Andi arrives.

I've just managed to calm my racing heart and finish cooking when I hear a knock. I finish straining the water from the spaghetti noodles, set the pot back on the stove, and go to answer the door.

"Come on in," I say to Andi.

She pauses in the doorway for a moment, then heads inside. When she rounds the corner to the kitchen, she stops again.

"Uh . . . did you do this for me?"

I suppress a laugh at the horror in her voice.

"No, I did it for me," I say, serving myself a plate. "Sorry, I haven't gotten a chance to eat yet. If you're hungry, there's plenty to go around. I haven't really gotten used to cooking for one yet."

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I cringe at myself. Can I not have a single conversation with Andi without mentioning what a pathetic failure my marriage has been?

"Do you go all out like this every night?" she asks.

I laugh. "I wouldn't call spaghetti 'going all out.' Why, what do you usually eat for dinner?"

She shrugs. "Lean Cuisines, mostly."

Seriously? "What, are you on a diet or something?"

She takes a seat at one of the barstools on the other side of the kitchen counter. "Or something," she says.

"Really?"

I take a bite of my food, and I can't help but give her a once over. My mind shifts back to last night at the mansion, when I caught her sneaking into the hot tub. Never thought I'd see that much of Andi Starr, but I can't say I had any complaints about it. She's got some curves, and that's certainly not a bad thing.

My eyes move back to hers, and she's watching me appraise her. I look down at my food, hoping my lingering stare wasn't quite as long as it felt.

"You look fine to me," I say with a shrug.

That's not too heavy-handed, right?

"Wow," she says. "What a glowing compliment."

I laugh. Good.

"You have no idea what it's like to be surrounded by Katies all the time," she says.

I snort a laugh. Is she serious?

The only negative about my job—well, you know, aside from the whole part where it destroyed my marriage and pushed my wife into the arms of another man—is what hell it's been on my self-esteem. Does she think men are invincible to that kind of thing?

"I have no idea what it's like?" I ask. "I'm sorry, how many Katies are there, again?"

She doesn't answer.

"And how many Tylers? Antonys? Sebastians?"

At least she only has one person to compare herself to. It starts to get difficult to convince yourself that having a killer physique is just about luck and genetics when you're surrounded by twenty men every year who all have the exact same action-hero body that you're trying to convince yourself you could never attain, even if you tried. At a certain point, you have to accept that it is, in fact, possible. You're just too lazy to make it happen.

I expect her to understand, now that I've pointed out the difference in our positions, but she just rolls her eyes. "That's different."

I raise a brow at her. "Why, because I'm a man? That's a little sexist, Andrew."

"No, because you're . . ." She pauses, gesturing to me. "You know."

I look down at myself, shirt slightly unbuttoned, a drop of spaghetti sauce on the black fabric.

"What?" I ask, prodding her to explain.

She sighs, and her cheeks flush. Tucking her fire-engine hair behind one ear, she shrugs. "You look just like them," she says. "Why would being surrounded by those guys get to you?"

Oh. So . . . it's not because I'm a man. It's because she thinks of me as being in the same category of men as the contestants on our show.

I can feel the warmth spreading from my chest to my face. I put on a smirk, playing it cool.

"That's enough to make a man blush, Andrea," I say, giving her a saucy look as I take another bite of my food.

My exaggerated cockiness must do its job of masking my surprise at her comment, because she doesn't tease me. She just rolls her eyes, annoyed as usual.

"It's just an objective observation, Maxwell," she says.

I chuckle. "Well, I haven't always been this unbelievably sexy, you know."

"Oh, really?"

"When I first started here, this job was hell for the ego," I explain. "So, I started hitting the gym and, well, let's just say it's a little easier now to spend every season surrounded by Chris Hemsworth look-alikes."

Her eyes immediately flit to my chest again, but she forces them back up. Her face flushes, and man, I want to tease her for that so bad. But I hold back, cutting her some slack. After all, she's already been forced to admit that she thinks I'm equally as sexy as all of the male-models on our show. I should give the girl a break.

"But Lean Cuisines are never the way to go," I tell her, bringing things back to my original point.

"They're not too bad," she says. "Although, I do miss Chinese takeout."

I laugh. "Well, if you hit the gym enough, you can eat like this every night and still feel great."

Looking her over again and remembering her last night in that bikini, I don't understand why she's trying so hard to get rid of something so many women pay good money to replicate with silicone.

"In fact, you're welcome to join me sometime, if you want," I offer. I could show her how to make the most of those curves. "I go at lunch, and I've got free guests."

Her eyes go wide. "You go to the gym at lunch? Everyday? When do you eat?"

"On the drive back to the office."

"Wow. That sounds terrible."

I chuckle. It is, some days. But back when I first started to get in shape, I still had a marriage to preserve. I couldn't afford to spend even more time out of the house when Beth already hated how much time I spent at work. Squeezing my workouts in during my lunch hour was my only option.

But still, it's better than Andi's current plan of action.

“Beats eating low-cal TV dinners every night,” I tell her.

I take another bite of my pasta and watch as her eyes fix longingly on my food. Her gaze flits to the stairs, and I hear Bowser’s thick nails clicking against the wood as he makes his way down from his nap. I’ve got to remember to clip those, soon.

He looks lazily up at me, then his gaze moves to Andi. His ears perk and lets out a small bark. He looks ready to pounce as he scurries over to her, so I tell him “off” before he has a chance to scratch up her fancy leather skirt. He gives me a whine of protest and starts sniffing her, instead.

“You missed the doorbell, bud,” I say with a chuckle. To Andi, I add, “His hearing’s not what it used to be.”

She giggles, scratching his favorite spot behind his ears, but he’s too distracted by his sniffing to appreciate it.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Bowser,” she says.

I take my empty plate to the sink, rinsing it off as she tells me about her childhood dog, Pepper, and how her dad still sends her pictures of her whenever she’s having a bad day.

“That’s sweet,” I say with a smile.

I watch as Andi gives Bowser more head scratches, making cute faces at him when he looks up at her. It’s a strange sight. Beth was never much of a dog person. She always complained about the hair on her clothes or drops of slobber on the floors, but Andi doesn’t seem to mind.

She looks around the living room.

“You’re lucky you got the house in the divorce, though. It’s tough to find a place to rent that accepts large dogs.”

My face falls. The D-word stings, although I know I need to get used to it. It’s coming soon enough.

But still, it’s not here yet. Might as well hang on to my dignity a little longer.

I come around the kitchen counter and give Bowser a few pats on the back.

“We’re not divorced,” I correct her. “We’re separated.”

I can feel her looking at me, but I keep my eyes on the dog.

“Right,” she says. “Sorry. That’s what I meant.”

Of course, it is. I don’t know why I bothered to correct her. It’s not a distinction that seems to matter to anyone but me. The lack of official paperwork certainly hasn’t stopped Beth from living life like an unmarried, divorced woman.

I clear my throat, giving Bowser one more pat. “All right, bud, go lay down.”

Looking up at Andi, iPad in front of her on the counter, I’m reminded of our purpose here tonight. Better get to it.

“Should we get started?”

Six

NOW THAT ANDI and I have gotten our gameplan figured out, everything's been smooth sailing for the past few weeks. That is, until one of our contestants crushed his finger with a basketball and got rushed to the hospital.

Andi looked royally pissed when I sent her off to the hospital with Ravi, but I really figured our remaining two guys would lose the basketball game and just be headed back to the mansion for the rest of the night. Much to everyone's surprise, however, Antony and Sebastian rallied hard and ended up beating the opposing team with seconds left on the clock.

In a way, it's good news for me. My guys get more time with the Lead. But on the other hand, I'm not looking forward to the wrath of Andrea Starr when she finds out that she missed an impromptu two-on-one date between Katie, Antony, and Sebastian. I've been trying to keep her updated with texts, but still, she's bound to be disappointed to have missed this.

If Ravi had been here tonight, this would have been slightly less awkward. But with just two men, both polar opposites but equally confident in their relationships with Katie, this episode is sure to be ripe with drama.

The three of them are sitting at a small table by the pool, cocktails in hand. The secondhand discomfort is almost too much for me to handle as I watch them from behind the cameras, waiting for someone to break the ice and say something.

My phone starts vibrating in my pocket. At first, I assume it's Andi texting me again. But it keeps buzzing, so I pull it out and look at the screen.

Rachel Calling...

Doesn't she know I'm on a date right now? Whatever she has to say must be important if she's willing to pull me away from this. I accept the call, pressing the phone to my ear as I make my way back inside the building, out of earshot of the cameras.

"What's up?" I ask her.

"We have a problem," she says, and the intensity in her voice is enough to make my stomach drop. "I need you at the office. Now."

"But . . . I'm on the date with Katie and—"

"Never mind that," she says. "The other producers can handle the date. I need you and Andi back here."

"Andi's at the hospital with Ravi," I remind her.

"Well, get her on the phone and tell her we need her here urgently."

The line goes dead, and my adrenaline spikes. Whatever this is, it must be bad.



THREE TEXTS and two phone calls later, and I still haven't gotten a hold of Andi. When I step into Rachel's office, I'm met with grave faces from her and Tasha, one of our other producers.

"Where's Andi?" Rachel asks immediately.

I huff a sigh, shaking my head as I scroll through my texts again.

"She isn't returning my texts or answering my calls," I say. "Maybe she's talking with the doctors or something."

Rachel picks up her phone and dials, but she gets Andi's voice-mail. She leaves a message, making it very clear that she wants Andi back at the office as soon as possible.

"What's going on?" I ask, my eyes shifting to Tasha as Rachel hangs up her phone.

Rachel lets out a long sigh. "Tasha received a message tonight on social media from a young woman who claims to be the long-term girlfriend of one of our contestants."

My stomach clenches. If Rachel called Andi and me here, it must be one of our guys.

"Who?" I ask.

Rachel's lips clench tight, and she looks at Tasha.

"Sebastian," Tasha whispers.

Unbelievable. I knew his whole peace-loving hippie schtick was a load of crap.

"Has anyone confirmed this?" I have to ask, but I know the answer already. Rachel wouldn't be making such a huge deal of this unless they had done their due diligence already.

She nods.

"We've confirmed it. She's telling the truth. Tasha will fill you in on the details. I need to speak to a few people, figure out how we're going to get ahead of this in the media." She shakes her head, exasperated. "I'm putting you and Andi in charge of deciding how to break this news to Katie and the rest of the men."

With a deep breath, I stand up straight and give her a nod. "Of course. You've got enough on your plate. We'll take care of it."

Rachel instructs Tasha to fill me in on everything she knows, and she sends us out of her office so she can get started on whatever calls she needs to make.

By the time Andi finally shows up to the office, I'm sitting in my cubicle, mind reeling with the bombshell that's just been dropped on all of us.

Andi rushes past me, headed for Rachel's office, but she stops when she sees me swiveling in my desk chair.

Her eyes are wide with panic. “What the heck is going on?”
With a sigh, I stand up, gesturing to my empty chair.
“You might wanna sit down for this.”

Seven

I FILL Andi in on everything I've just learned about Sebastian, and to my great relief, she offers to be the one to break the news to Katie. We all figured it would be best to keep the crew as small as possible when they head over to Katie's cottage to break the news. The more eyes surrounding her, the more humiliating it'll be.

I decide to stay back at the office and see if Rachel needs help with anything on her end. She's a frazzled mess of pregnant exhaustion when I pop my head into her office, and I spend the next two hours aiding her in her efforts to fix this nightmare.

By the time we decide to call it a night, I head to my car, wondering if Andi and the crew are still at the mansion or Katie's cottage. Should I meet them there now, or would I just get in the way?

It's late already, so I decide to head home first, at least for a few minutes. I'll let Bowser outside for a while, make sure he's fed and happy, and then head back to the mansion. The rest of the crew will probably be gone by then, but I'll talk to some of the other guys, get their take on the whole situation, and make sure Antony and Ravi aren't too shaken up.

The drive home is exhausting, and for the millionth time, I wish I

lived a bit closer to the office. By the time I round the corner onto my street, I'm starting to re-think my plan for the evening. Maybe talking to the guys can wait until morning. Right now, after this whole mess, all I want to do is fall into bed.

But when I pull into the driveway, I see an all-too-familiar white sedan parked on the curb, and my pulse picks up speed.

I don't bother pulling into the garage. I park my car in the driveway and get out. I start to head toward the car parked on the street, but a voice behind me halts my steps.

"I . . . didn't know if you would be home," Beth says, and I turn around.

She's hovering awkwardly near the front door.

"I was . . . just going to leave this," she says, and I look down at the large, manila envelope in her hands.

I stare at the envelope for a long minute. A rock settles in my gut.

She walks toward me slowly, her high heels clicking against the pavement of the driveway. She extends the envelope to me, and it takes a moment for me to make myself reach out and accept it.

"My lawyer finished drawing this up this morning," she says in a small voice. Clearing her throat, she adds, "You might want to have someone take a look at it for you, before you sign."

She probably doesn't mean for that to be a slight, but it stings, nonetheless. I was two-hundred points away from passing the bar when I quit law school. I'm more than capable of reading through a Divorce Decree.

A small part of me wants to open the envelope, to slide out the papers and confirm what I already know I will find there. But it's not necessary. I've been waiting for this day to come for a year, so why does it still feel like I've just had the rug swept out from under me?

I force my eyes up to meet her gaze, and as soon as I do, I regret it.

Those eyes make me want to fight. To argue, to plead, to force her to remember everything that we used to have. But I've already done that. This past year has been nothing but fighting. We've been through it all, time and time again. There's nothing left to fight for.

The battle has already been lost, and I've just been sitting in the sand, surrounded by the wreckage, closing my eyes and thinking that maybe if I don't look at it, I can pretend everything is still fine.

Maybe it's time to open my eyes.

"If you're worried about the house, it's yours," Beth says, drawing my attention. "I'm, um . . . well, there's . . . family in Texas, so . . ."

My jaw clenches. It's painful, listening to her dance around the words, like we don't both know exactly what she's trying to say.

Van has family in Texas. They're moving to Texas together. She has no more use for a house in Los Angeles, so she might as well just leave it to me.

I wonder if she's expecting me to be grateful. To thank her for not trying to take half of all of my assets, along with everything else.

"Is this all you came by for?" I ask her.

She searches my eyes for a moment, her own filling with tears. She nods.

"Okay," I say, stepping around her and heading for the front door.

As I fiddle with my keys, I can feel her frozen behind me, trying to think of anything else to say. But we both know there's nothing more to be said. By the time I get my key in the door and step inside, she's walking back down the driveway to her car.

Bowser hoists himself up from his bed when I get inside, and I walk across the living room, opening the back door for him to go out.

Sinking into the couch, I stare at the envelope again. Finally, I slide the paperwork out, my eyes settling on the large words "Divorce Decree" on the top of the first page.

With a sigh, I toss the stack of papers on the coffee table.

Bowser moseys back inside, walking over to me and staring at my blank face.

Without another thought, I stand up and slide the back door closed again. I make my way to the front door, grab my keys, and head back to the car.

Eight

FOUR SHOTS LATER, and my mind is finally starting to get to that fuzzy place I was aching for. I order a double this time and sit back in my chair, taking another swig. I never cared much for vodka, but it does its job well. And apparently, after four shots of the stuff, it actually starts to taste kind of good.

The front door swings open, and I look over my shoulder. I have to blink twice to be sure I'm seeing who I think I'm seeing, but once I'm certain, I find myself desperate for her to join me, so I don't have to wallow alone.

"Hey! Andrea!" I call, keeping my voice above the music, but not so loud as to draw attention from the other patrons of the bar.

Andi takes a beat, looking around for a moment. With a sigh, she walks forward. I give her a small, casual smile as she takes a seat a few away from me.

"Seriously?" she asks me. "Of all the bars in the world?"

The bartender slides me another shot. Did I order that? Ah, well, if it's here, might as well drink it.

I laugh at Andi's purposeful distance from me. "You can sit closer to me, you know. I promise I don't have cooties."

Looking her over, I briefly wonder if her annoyance with my

presence is because she came here to find someone to spend the evening with.

"Although, if you're here to nab yourself a dude, you might want to keep your distance," I tease. "Other men tend to find all of *this* a little imitating."

Imitating? No, that's not right.

"In-intimating."

That sounds right.

Andi smirks. "Intimidating?"

Ah, yes. There it is. I give her finger guns, which I'm not sure I've ever done in my life. Apparently, I've chosen tonight to whip them out for the first time.

She takes a moment but eventually decides to move to the stool beside mine.

"Looks like you've been here for a while," she says. "What are you drinking?"

"Oh, it's *so* good," I say, taking another drink. Seriously, how have I never realized how amazing vodka is? "You've got to try it," I tell Andi. "Barkeep! She'll have what I'm having."

"Uh, no, she won't," Andi replies, turning to the bartender with a sweet smile. "I'll take a Henry McKenna, neat. Thank you."

"Hm, good order," I say. "I've always wondered what your drink is. But seriously, you should try this."

I offer her my glass, and she eyes it dubiously. She's gonna be so shocked when I reveal that this delicious concoction is just vodka.

She grabs the glass from my hand and takes a small sip.

"Is that just straight vodka?" she asks, coughing.

I nod, surprised she was able to guess so easily.

The bartender brings her drink and she takes a sip, closing her eyes. Bet she regrets not letting me order for her, now.

A familiar song comes on the sound system. I'm trying to pinpoint it, but Andi is breathing obnoxiously loud beside me. I shush her, leaning forward and staring at the ceiling to hear better.

A-ha! T-Swift, "Cruel Summer." I knew it.

"I love this song," I say.

I sing along, under my breath, and Andi laughs at me.

"Really? I wouldn't have pegged you as a Taylor Swift fan."

I look at her, and she's giving me a look that says I'm going to regret serving her such effective mock-material on a silver platter.

"Eh, Beth loves her," I lie. "She was always blasting this stuff in the car, around the house. This new stuff isn't my favorite, though."

"What's your favorite?" she asks.

I don't have to think long about that one. "'Love Story,' hands down," I say, but then I start to think about "Fearless" and "The Way I Loved You," and I have to make an addendum. "Her whole *Fearless* album is great, honestly. I listened to it on repeat for weeks when it came out."

Andi raises a brow at me, and I remember my fib.

"I mean, Beth did."

"Right," she says, believing me easily. "Beth."

We've said that name one too many times, and I can feel the stab in my chest starting to ache again, breaking through the hazy barrier of alcohol I'm trying to hide it behind.

I quickly down the rest of my drink, flagging the bartender for a refill. Time to change the subject.

"So, how'd it go with Katie?"

"Not too bad, actually," Andi says. "She's strong. She handled it like a champ."

"Guess all our money's on Antony now," I say.

"Actually, I kind of have a good feeling about Ravi. He made a really good impression after—"

I chuckle. "Ravi? Really?"

She gives me a glare. "Yeah. Why not?"

I frown at my new drink. Does she really have to ask? "He's boring," I say.

"He is *not* boring," she retorts. "He's just . . . not as controversial as some of the other guys. Which is a good thing. He's a good guy."

Does she not realize that she's proving my point?

“That might be true, but it doesn’t make him any less boring,” I point out. “Even if Katie ends up with him, it’ll only make all the viewers mad.”

She’s silent for a minute, which means she knows I’m right.

“So, what, you’d rather root for Antony?” she asks.

I shrug. Is there any other option?

“But he’s awful,” she says. “You know that’s not going to last.”

I snort a laugh. “Since when does that matter? None of our couples last.” Do any couples even last these days? “Life’s not a Taylor Swift song, Andi. People don’t meet their soul mate and get married and live happily ever after.”

Freaking “Love Story,” man. It’s all just a fantasy. I take another large gulp of my drink and cringe against the burn.

“Maybe Katie and Antony will get married, but that’s just the beginning,” I say, my thoughts shifting back to the place I’m trying to avoid. “Then comes the long nights at the office, the fights about the long nights at the office, and the next thing you know, Katie’ll be running off with some hot guy from her Zumba class.”

It was Pilates, actually, but I don’t want to be too on-the-nose.

I can feel Andi’s eyes on me, but I keep my eyes on the bar, avoiding her gaze.

Talking to Andi was supposed to be a helpful distraction, but somehow we’ve gotten right back to the very subject I’m trying not to think about.

Beth and Van. What kind of name is *Van*, anyway? Does he have a sister named Subaru?

Whatever. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters anymore.

And as much as I’d love to put all the blame on Beth and her wandering eyes, I can’t ignore my part in all of this. She felt neglected, and I suppose, at times, she was. I was trying so hard to prove myself. I failed at law school, and as silly as this job might seem to some, I needed to prove to everyone—to myself—that I could be great at something. Really great. And when you look at it like that, it’s hard not to see how Beth might have felt like second-place in my life.

Was it really me? Was I the problem, the whole time? I mean, sure, once things got bad enough, I got my act together. I made an effort, tried to change, tried to give her what she needed and make things right. But maybe it was just too little, too late. Maybe I'm just not cut out for the whole marriage thing.

I wonder if Andi ever feels that way. She's not much younger than I am, and as far as I know, she's never even come close to getting married. Is that what she wants? Or is she just afraid that she won't be cut out for it? That's she'll make a tangled mess of it all, like I have.

Before I can decide whether I even want to go down this road with Andi, my mouth is moving and the words are falling out, uninhibited.

"Andi, do you ever feel like . . ."

I pause, stopping myself from continuing.

I stare at the bar again, letting my mind go blank and hazy. Which is significantly easier now than it was a few hours ago.

The bar top shines, the lights glaring off of the clear coating that covers the wood. What did Beth call that stuff she used to use? Epoxy? Is that what this is? I wish they would have just left the wood alone. It'd look better that way. But maybe it's not tough enough to hold up under all these drinks spilling all the time.

I can feel Andi's eyes on me, so I look up at her. She's staring at me expectantly.

"What?" I ask.

She raises a brow at me. "What?"

I frown, confused. I try to think about the last words that were said.

Do you ever feel like . . .

I must have missed the end of her question.

"Do I ever feel like what?" I ask.

She gives me a blank stare. "That was *your* question. You asked that."

"Oh." I wrack my brain, but I have no idea what the end of that

sentence was going to be. I don't even remember saying it. "Are you sure?" I ask her.

She laughs, pulling out her cell phone. "Okay, I'm calling you an Uber."

An Uber sounds great right now, but I need my car for work tomorrow.

"My car is—"

"I don't care where your car is. You can come back for it tomorrow," she says. "I'm calling you an Uber."

I look down at the empty shot glasses in front of me. My vision goes fuzzy, and I have to blink a few times to clear it.

Yeah, an Uber sounds fair.

"Are you hot?"

All of a sudden, it's like a sauna in here. A flash of heat comes out of nowhere. This shirt is so stifling, I can't stand it.

"Geez, it's so hot in here," I say, starting to loosen some of my shirt buttons.

"Hey, let's wait for that Uber outside, okay?" Andi suggests.

I groan, forcing myself up from my stool and out the front door. At least it's cooler out here. I finally freed myself from this prison of a shirt, and when I sit down on the curb, the pavement feels cool beneath me. I lie back, stretching out my arms so the ground can cool my overheated skin.

I look up at the stars spinning above us.

Maybe I got Taylor Swift all wrong. Most of her songs are full of heartache and pain. Maybe life is a Taylor Swift song, after all.

Andi takes a seat beside me on the curb.

"I take it back," I grumble. "Life is a Taylor Swift song. But it's not 'Love Story.'" My hazy brain flits through my mental category of T-Swift songs, and I cringe when I realize which one best sums up my current anguish. "It's freaking 'Back to December.'"

After a moment of pause, Andi replies.

"You know, 'Back to December' is my favorite Taylor song."

I snort. Of course, Andrea Starr, perpetual cynic, would choose the depressing breakup song as her favorite.

"You *would* like that song," I mutter.

"Would you like to know *why* I like it?"

I peek at her through one eye. "Why?"

She gives me a sympathetic smile. "Because the girl in the song never gives up. She made some mistakes, but she still loves the guy, so she keeps trying. And we don't get to see the end of the story, either. Who knows? Maybe he forgives her. Maybe they have their love story, after all."

Huh. I never thought about it like that.

I give her the best smirk I can manage. "I thought you were supposed to be a cynic?"

"Oh, I am." She chuckles, then looks at me. "But you aren't."

I give her a questioning look.

"You know how I know?" she asks.

"How?"

She pulls out her cell phone. The light from her screen illuminates her face. I watch her as she types and scrolls.

I wonder what time it is? She should be getting home, resting up for tomorrow, not sitting on the sidewalk outside of a bar with me. I'm her competition, and right now, I'm making it pretty easy for her to get a leg-up. All she would have to do is go home sober and get a good night's sleep, and boom, automatic win for tomorrow goes to Andi Starr, the professional business woman who doesn't let her personal problems send her spiraling toward the bottom of a bottle right in the middle of one of the biggest crises *Marriage Material* has ever seen.

But yet, here she sits, about to inform me of how she knows I'm a closeted hopeless romantic, hiding beneath several layers of muscle and marital strife.

Andi smirks when she finds what she's looking for on her phone.

"Because Taylor Swift's *Fearless* album came out in 2008," she says.

I frown. "So?"

"So, you met Beth at Brad and Christina's wedding. In 2012."

I laugh, pulling myself up from the ground.

"Okay, you caught me," I admit. "I'm a total Swiftie."

She smiles. "You're a believer."

"Ugh, no, he sucks," I say, shaking my head. "I'm with Selena on that whole mess."

She laughs at me. "No, not a Belieber. A *believer*. In love."

Ah. That.

"And when a believer loves someone, they don't give up," she says.

My heart aches as her words sink in, because I know she's right. I am a believer, and I don't give up. Even when I probably should. Even when giving up would hurt less than holding on and fighting harder for someone who's already walked away.

A car pulls up in front of us, the window rolling down.

"Uber for Andi?"

"Yep," she says, standing up.

I try to join her, but it's a struggle in my current state. It feels like my body weighs three times as much as it should. Andi offers me a hand. I take it, using her strength to help lift myself from the curb.

"This is Max," Andi says, opening the back door of the car for me. "He's just going to rest back here for a bit. I sent you the address on the app."

I slide into the car, toppling onto my side when I get seated. With a groan, I pull myself up again, snapping my seat belt into place.

"I'll give you five stars and a big tip if you get him home safe for me," Andi says to the driver.

"Will do," he replies.

I smile up at Andi.

"Thanks for taking care of me," I say with a wink.

"Sleep it off, Maxwell," she says, rolling her eyes. "You've got a big group date tomorrow."

And because it felt so natural earlier, I give her one more finger gun as she shuts the door and the car pulls away.

Nine

AS IF I don't already have enough on my plate with this season, I've now been forced to spend all of my time on set dividing my attention between work and responding to texts from my lawyer.

While I do have the ability to read through my own Divorce Decree, I decided I've got too much going on to give it the time and attention it deserves. So, I've passed the buck onto my new divorce lawyer.

I have a divorce lawyer. Never thought I'd be able to say that, but here we are.

Andi's off on the two-on-one date with Ravi, and I'm back at the mansion, babysitting Antony—a task that's beginning to try my patience.

If that man isn't going off on some offensive rant about women and their delicate sensibilities, he's bragging about his excessive wealth and lavish lifestyle, or trying to fan flames by bringing up his personal time with Katie in front of the other guys to stoke jealousy.

I don't know how all the other guys here have survived being forced to live with him for this long. If I were them, I'd be wishing to be sent home, just to get a break. They must be really crazy about Katie to put up with this.

My phone vibrates for the hundredth time today, just as Antony decides to start telling Tyler the story of the first time he and Katie kissed. Again.

I jump at the opportunity to excuse myself, stepping out of the kitchen where Tyler was trying to fix himself a meal in peace before Antony strolled in. I step around the corner into the entryway of the mansion as I pull up my phone.

My attorney has sent me a string of texts, complete with photos of highlighted portions of the decree that he finds concerning. I'm trying to zoom in on one of the photos when someone skips up to my side.

"Guess what!" Andi says.

The two-on-one must be over. Hopefully, that means I can head home soon and take a look through my copy of the papers myself, instead of trying to read these out-of-focus photos.

"What?" I reply, spurring her on.

She huffs a sigh at me, probably annoyed by my lack of excitement over whatever news she has to share. She says something else, but I'm distracted by my texts. After a moment, the words finally register, and I realize she's informing me that Katie gave the ring to Ravi tonight, which means we still have both of our men in the game.

"Cool," I answer, shooting off a quick text to my lawyer to tell him I'll have to take a look at the pages when I get home and can read them for myself.

"So . . . anyway, if Antony makes it through elimination, we'll still have two guys left for overnights," Andi continues. "I was thinking maybe you could go to Antony's overnight, and I could go to Ravi's, so we don't have to share the room."

I let out a deep sigh, rubbing my hand across my face. I can't even begin to wrap my brain around overnights right now.

"Look, Andi, I've got a lot on my mind. I can't really think about that right now."

She pouts at me. "You need rest," she says. "You're grumpy when you're tired."

I chuckle. That's easy for her to say.

“Well, not everyone has Saturdays off for fancy breakfasts and soccer games,” I point out, pulling up my notes folder to add a few more items to my ever-growing to-do list.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s called having a life and a family, Maxine. You should try it sometime.”

The comment knocks the wind out of me. My fingers go still, halting their typing. I look up at her.

The teasing smirk on her face tells me she has no idea how much that hurt. She wasn’t trying to be hurtful, she was just trying to make a joke. Tease me, like she always does. She couldn’t possibly know that I’m currently exchanging texts with my new divorce lawyer, arguing over the best way to slice my life in half and hand one side over to the woman who provided the knife.

Although, it seems many of our other coworkers have been clued in somehow. My money is on Angelina, one of the women on the camera crew who attends Van’s Pilates class every week. She and Beth have been friends, off and on, for a while. She must have heard something, and the gossip traveled from there.

But Andi doesn’t seem to be aware of that. She’s just being her typically snarky self, and on any other day, I would respond with a smirk and a witty retort of my own. But I’m so not in the mood.

All I can muster up is a murmured “wow,” under my breath, as I make my way out the front door.

Ten

SINCE APPARENTLY SOMEONE has taken out a freaking billboard in giant, neon letters that reads “*Did you hear that Max and Beth are finally getting divorced?*” I decided I might as well tell Rachel what’s going on and request a few days off to get things sorted.

It’s particularly painful timing, with everything that’s riding on this season, but she understood, and she didn’t seem to hold it against me.

But right now, with the overnight dates about to begin, it’s time to get back to work.

The lawyers have battled it out, everything has been agreed upon, and all that’s left is for me to sign the papers. To make it official. To end my marriage.

I sigh, shoving that thought from my mind as Ravi, Katie, Cora, and Andi walk through the front doors of the hotel.

We’ve already booked the rooms and given Katie and Ravi their key, so they head straight for the elevators.

I go to join them, falling in step beside Andi. From the look on her face as she appraises me, I know she’s seen the billboard. She knows why I’ve been MIA the past few days. But I try to ignore the awkwardness and keep things professional.

"I got us checked in," I whisper to her, passing her a keycard for the room I booked for us, beside Ravi and Katie's.

"Thanks," she says, slipping the card into her back pocket.

We all squeeze into the elevator, leaving room for Cora to get a nice shot of the happy couple. Andi steps back, trying to make more room for Cora, and her foot comes down on mine.

It's not that big of a deal, until she tries to move aside, loses her balance, and slams her elbow into my ribs.

I grunt, and she cringes, mouthing "sorry" to me. I place a hand on her back, steadying her as she regains her balance. I return my hand to my pocket after she straightens up, backing against the wall to give her as much space as I can.

We're still mere inches apart, trying to remain silent and invisible as Ravi and Katie chat about their date and Cora captures the moment.

My breath blows Andi's hair with every exhale. I've never been this close to her before, especially not for this length of time. But I suppose I should get used to it, since we're about to be sharing a bed tonight. Not looking forward to breaking that news to Andi, but the receptionist at the front desk made it clear there were no other options.

After a very long elevator ride, we make it to the top floor and show Katie and Ravi to their room. Cora bids us goodnight, leaving Andi and me alone in the hallway.

Andi stares at me for a moment. Her mouth opens, but she doesn't say anything. I raise a brow, and she finally speaks.

"I left my bag in the car," she says. "I should go get it before Cora leaves."

She turns away, rushing to catch the elevator before it shuts.

As I make my way into our room and get myself situated, it occurs to me that Andi and I haven't spoken much since she so flippantly advised me to "try having a life and a family sometime." Maybe that's why she seems so awkward, tonight. She feels guilty.

I let out a sigh as I flop down on the bed. I don't want her pity. I

just want to do my job tonight, show Rachel that Andi and I can work well together, and go home at the end of all of this with a new title and, hopefully, a pay raise.

After a few minutes of listening to silence on the other side of the wall behind the headboard, I finally start to hear some mumbling, coming closer.

Andi walks in, then, and I shush her.

She shuts the door. "I didn't say anything," she says at full volume.

"Shh," I say, again. "We're not supposed to talk."

With a huffy sigh, she tosses her bag on the armchair, kicks off her shoes, and sits beside me on the bed.

I've never done this part of the job with another person in the room. Every breath and movement from Andi pulls my attention away from what I'm supposed to be listening to. I press my ear more firmly to the wall, straining to listen and block out everything else.

The voices on the other side of the wall sound tense and serious. Nothing like the usual giggles and lip-smacking you typically hear on overnights. I close my eyes, tuning out Andi's breathing as I listen closely, trying to make out what Ravi and Katie are talking about.

"You got us a room with one bed?" Andi suddenly whisper-yells at me. "What were you thinking?"

I make a noise that's somewhere between a sigh and a scoff. Does she seriously think I would have gotten a one-bed room if there were any other options?

"We need to go switch rooms," she says, getting up from the bed. "I'm serious, Max. Now."

"You're talking way too loud," I whisper. "And don't say my name. It's bad enough if they can hear your shrill voice piercing through these thin walls."

She rolls her eyes. "They're not going to hear me. They're clearly deep in conversation. I'm sure we won't miss anything important if we go switch rooms right now. It'll only take a few minutes."

"There are no rooms with two beds on this floor," I inform her.

"What? I did *not* agree to sharing a bed with you, Maxine."

Right, like I'm just *dying* to share a bed with her. Like this was my secret agenda, all along, to finally get Andi Starr in bed with me.

"Well, I don't know what you expect me to do about that," I say with a shrug. "Unless you have a spare bed lodged up your—"

"Max—"

"Stop saying my name, Andi!"

My irritation has boiled over, and I realize, too late, that my volume has been steadily increasing. I practically yelled that at her, and we both look at the wall between our room and Ravi and Katie's, waiting for some kind of reaction. But their voices remain unchanged.

Andi takes a deep breath, visibly trying to calm herself.

"What do you propose we do about this?" she asks, folding her arms across her chest.

I'm not sure why the task of fixing this impossible problem has fallen on me, but I look around the room for possible solutions, anyway. There's no couch in here. Just an armchair in the corner of the room. If it reclined at all, or had an ottoman or something, I might be able to make that work, but there's no way I'd be getting any sleep on that tonight.

Honestly, this whole conversation is silly. We're adults. Professionals. This doesn't have to be so weird.

"What's the big deal?" I finally say. "I'll sleep on top of the blankets. It's not like you're going to wake up to me spooning you or something."

Andi bristles at that suggestion. Her face goes red, and she opens her mouth, but no words come out.

I raise a brow at her, but she remains completely tongue-tied.

Should I not have said that? It was just meant to be a snarky quip. I certainly didn't intend for her to be giving that mental image *this* much thought.

She still hasn't said anything, so I decide to take this opportunity to change the subject.

"Now, can I get back to doing my job, please?" I ask.

Her open mouth snaps shut. After a long moment of deliberation, she accepts her fate and returns to her side of the bed.

We listen in silence for a long while.

More muffled conversation. Laughter. More talking. Kissing. Closer kissing, right beyond this wall that our headboards share. The tell-tale sound of a squeaking bed spring.

I chuckle, and Andi gets up, gathering some things from her bag and retreating to the bathroom.

Figuring she'll be in there a while, I decide to quickly change into my pajamas for the night. After a few more minutes, Ravi and Katie go back to talking, but I still can't make out anything they're saying. Maybe this was a waste of time. We should remember to book hotels with thinner walls next season.

It's getting late, and my eyelids are heavy. It's hard to focus on listening without anything to keep my mind awake. I flip on the TV, changing the channel until I find something mindless to watch on mute so I don't fall asleep.

Andi finally comes out of the bathroom, and I inform her that Ravi and Katie are still just talking quietly about who knows what.

She stares at me for a moment.

"Did you change out here?"

I shrug. "I figured you'd be in there for a while."

She's frozen in the doorway of the bathroom, but I keep my eyes on the football game on the TV.

"Okay . . . we need to set some ground rules, here," she says.

"Like what?" I ask.

She scoffs. "Well, I feel like 'no getting naked in the middle of the room' is a pretty reasonable first rule."

I laugh. I wouldn't say I was naked, but it's probably best not to get into the details. Regardless, I suppose that's fair. If she had come out of the bathroom sooner than expected, that could have been a pretty awkward situation.

"Fair enough," I say. "Anything else?"

She's quiet for a minute. "I guess that's it."

I smirk. "No getting naked. Got it. I think I can handle that."

I glance over at her, and my breath catches.

"Whoa," I mutter before I can stop myself.

As soon as the sound is out of my mouth, I'm kicking myself, wishing I could take it back.

Andi blushes, crossing her arms over her chest, uncomfortably.

"What?" she asks.

Shoot. Now I have to explain myself.

Except, I'm not sure how to explain the swarm of thoughts that just went through my mind. I got my first glimpse of Andi Starr, hair mussed and face washed, standing next to our shared bed in a matching set of cotton shorts and a tank top, and my brain short-circuited.

I mean, it's not like I've never noticed that she's an attractive woman. But she's always so professional and put-together. She's been firmly planted in a completely different category of my brain—one that doesn't allow for any of the thoughts that just crossed my mind.

I try to think of something to say that doesn't sound completely made-up.

"Nothing. I've just never seen you without all that makeup," I decide.

Which is true, I haven't. It's a plausible explanation for my reaction to seeing her.

"Oh," she says.

I try not to look at her as she stands there, appraising me.

Finally, she snaps out of her frozen state and gets into bed, sliding under the blankets.

"Well . . . sorry you have to look at my plain face all night," she says.

I bark a laugh so loud it makes her jump.

Of course, Little Miss Cynic would assume my reaction to seeing her "plain face" was negative. Quite the opposite, actually, but I'd rather not admit that aloud.

Still, I don't want her to think I was so shocked by her disgusting,

makeup-less face that I let out an uncontrollable “whoa” at the sight of it.

I chuckle again at the ridiculous thought.

“That’s not what I meant, Andrew,” I say, hoping that’s enough to ease her mind without inviting any more questions.

She doesn’t say anything else. We listen in silence for a few more hours, until we’re both fairly certain Ravi and Katie have gone to sleep. I shut off the TV, then, and settle in as best as I can on top of the blankets.

I shift to my side, trying to get comfortable. But facing Andi feels strange, so I readjust again to the other side.

I try not to think about her lying so close to me, wearing . . .

No. Don’t think about that. Sleep. Think about sleep.

I shift again, onto my back, willing my mind to shut off and my body to succumb to the rest I so desperately need, if I’m going to make it through another overnight date for Antony tomorrow.

Eleven

“MAX?” Andi whispers, snapping me back to consciousness. “Are you awake?”

I was just starting to fall asleep, so it takes me a minute to come to.

“Yeah,” I mutter.

I listen, waiting for her to continue. After a long moment of silence, she still hasn’t said anything else. Is that all she wanted to know? Whether or not I was awake?

“Was there a follow-up question?” I ask.

She takes in a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“I’m sorry. For . . .” She pauses. “For what I said the other day.”

My thoughts drift back to that night.

It’s called having a life and a family, Maxine. You should try it sometime.

The recalled words still hold a faint sting, but I don’t want her to feel bad. Even in the moment, I knew she didn’t mean for it to come out the way it did. Andi would never be that intentionally cruel.

But still, it’s nice to hear it acknowledged.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “I know you didn’t mean it like that.”

There's another long pause, but I can feel that she has more to say.

"How are things going with Beth?"

I can't help but chuckle at the question. The woman I'm in bed with tonight would like to know how things are going with my wife.

"Well, I'm in bed with you on a Friday night, so what does that tell you?"

There's another pause, this one longer than before. I guess we're done with questions. I'm not complaining. My body is aching for rest, and I can feel my mind starting to fade again.

Andi shifts positions beside me.

"Max?" she whispers.

I can't help the small groan that escapes. Could this conversation not wait until morning?

"What?" I ask.

She hesitates for a moment.

"What happened with you and Beth?"

Is she seriously asking me that right now?

"Are you seriously asking me that right now?"

"Sorry. Forget it," she whispers, shifting position again.

I turn my head to look at her. She's on her back, staring up at the ceiling. I turn my eyes that direction, too, stretching my shoulders as I do.

I suppose it couldn't hurt to answer. I mean, I basically already told her the story that night at the bar, which makes me cringe to remember. This would just add a bit of clarification to the sequence of events.

"I spent more time helping our Leading Ladies find their happily ever after than investing in my own marriage," I say. "So, Beth found her own happy ending. With some guy from her Pilates class."

Andi sighs. "She cheated."

It's not a question. She figured that out already from the story I told at the bar, despite how very cleverly I thought I was disguising it at the time.

But it's not exactly the whole story. *She cheated* makes her sound like the bad guy. The only bad guy. I'm not sure that's fair.

"I wasn't giving her what she needed," I clarify. "I was so focused on my career, finding myself, figuring out what I wanted to do with my life after quitting law school." I chuckle at the irony. "Funny thing is, the whole reason I was pouring so much into this job was because . . ." I pause, swallowing hard. "Because I didn't want to fail. Again. But I ended up failing at the one thing I thought was solid."

I can feel her shift beside me, turning her head to look at me.

"Max, you didn't fail," she says firmly. "She cheated. That's not your fault."

I shake my head. It's not that simple.

"Did you sign the papers?" she asks.

"No. But I think . . ." My jaw tightens. If I start crying in front of Andi right now, I swear . . .

I swallow again, taking a breath through my nose.

"I think it might really be over now," I admit.

It's surreal, saying that out loud for the first time. It hurts, but underneath the pain, it feels . . . right. It's the truth, whether I like it or not, and I have to face it.

Andi's silent for a few minutes, but I can still feel her eyes on me. I wonder what's going through her mind.

"Do you think we could ever have what Ravi and Katie have?" she asks.

My head snaps toward her. What is she asking me right now?

"You mean . . . like, you and me . . .?"

Her eyes go wide. "No! No, not you and me."

Oh. Okay. Good . . .

I nod.

"I just mean people like us, you know?" she says. "Is it possible to give everything you need to give to a relationship if half of yourself is always at the office?"

I take in a breath, blowing it out slowly as I turn my eyes back to the ceiling. That's the million-dollar question.

I'd like to say yes, but experience has told me otherwise. I try to imagine a world in which Beth and I could have been happy and fulfilled without me having to sacrifice even more of my career ambitions.

"I don't know," I finally answer. "Maybe not."

All is silent as Andi processes my response. I'm still processing, myself.

When did I become such a pessimist? There used to be a time when I would have given anything to have a second chance with Beth. Or heck, even with someone else. But now, I don't see the point.

Andi's asking the right question. How can I ever expect to give everything that needs to be given in a relationship if I'm not willing to make the necessary sacrifices?

Maybe I'm just not cut out for this. Maybe I'm too selfish to be a good partner for someone, and I'd be better off alone.

Despite my cynicism, that thought still sends a stab of pain through me. Because I know, in spite of everything, I don't actually *want* to be alone. I'm just not sure I have any other choice.

Andi sits up, suddenly, and I flinch.

I sit up, too, taking in her wide, glassy eyes.

"Andi? You okay?" I ask, but she doesn't answer.

She takes in a breath, and I can tell by the hard set of her jaw that she's trying not to cry.

After a moment, she turns her gaze to me, and I give her a concerned look. That only makes her eyes fill with more tears. But before I can ask her what's wrong, she's leaning toward me, pressing her lips to mine.

An electric shock runs through me, and I freeze. Pulling away, I scan her face, trying to understand what the heck just happened.

Suddenly, I am very, very awake.

My mind is running rampant with too many thoughts for me to keep up with.

What does this mean? Does Andi have feelings for me? Is that what all these questions have been about?

As soon as the possibility crosses my mind, my breath catches with the shock of how *right* it feels.

Andi and me. Me and Andi.

Once I allow myself to see it, to see *her*, something deep within me tells me this isn't a new idea. It's been there for a while, lurking beneath the surface, but I've been holding too tightly to the past to allow for any thought of a new future. One without Beth. One with someone else.

I scan her face, again. When our eyes meet, a wave of longing crashes over me. Desire, but not lust. Need, but not just for some kind of physical gratification. For her.

My hands move to either side of her face, and I pull her to me again.

Our lips glide with urgency and zeal. I weave my fingers deeper into her hair. She clutches my shirt, and I let out a stuttered breath.

The more I drink her in, the more right this feels. I don't know how I never saw it before. Andi and I are perfect for each other. We could be unstoppable. We could be a freaking Taylor Swift song.

But the way my lips are devouring hers right now feels more like a wild night than a love story. I'm getting carried away, wrapped up in the moment and reveling in the heat of a passion I haven't felt in years.

Slow down, Max. Remember this.

I loosen my grip in her hair, settling instead on running the tips of my fingers gently down her cheeks, her neck. I guide her lips into a slower, smoother rhythm.

But she's not having that. She takes my bottom lip between her teeth. Her hands slide down to the hem of my shirt, cool fingers slipping beneath the fabric and resting on my overheated skin.

The touch makes me gasp, and I pull back.

No. This is wrong. This isn't how it's supposed to be.

"I . . ." I pause, my mind spinning with all of the reasons I need to

pump the brakes. One screams louder than the rest. "I . . . I'm married," I say.

What the hell am I doing?

"I can't." I shake my head, rubbing a hand across my face. "I can't do this."

Turning away from Andi, I plant my feet on the ground and let my head fall to my hands.

What am I doing? I've spent the past who knows how many years trying to make things work with Beth, and now, the second another woman offers herself to me, I'm ready to throw in the towel? One moment of fleeting passion, and I lose all self-control?

But it wasn't fleeting passion. This wasn't just a product of being alone, deprived of all human affection for the past year. More, if I consider the months before the separation that Beth and I spent on opposite sides of the bed.

No, this was more than that. At least, it was for me. And that's what scares me the most.

"I'm sorry," Andi murmurs behind me.

Everything in me wants to get up and run away from this. But I can't. I'm stuck here until morning. In this bed . . . with Andi.

I stand up before I can talk myself out of it.

"I have to go," I say, heading for the door.

"What?" she asks. "Go where?"

I shake my head. I have no idea. The lobby? The 24-hour gym on the first floor? Home?

I don't know where I'm going, but I can't stay here. If I do, I won't be able to stop myself from . . .

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say. Glancing at the clock on her bedside table, I add, "Or, later today, I guess."

With that, I walk out the door, shutting it firmly behind me.

Twelve

I'M GOING HOME. It'll look bad to Rachel when I'm not there at the hotel when she and the rest of the crew show up to film Ravi and Katie's post-date interviews. But I can't go back to that room. I can't lie next to Andi right now and pretend everything is normal.

My entire drive home is spent in chaotic reflection, trying to sort through what just happened. As I go over the events of tonight again and again in my mind, one thing becomes abundantly obvious. Whatever just happened between Andi and me didn't mean anything to her.

Clearly, she was having some kind of existential crisis. She wanted something to make her feel better, and I was just the nearest warm body available.

That realization should make me feel relieved. If that's all this was, we can move past it. Pretend it never happened. No harm done.

But I don't feel relieved. I feel . . . I don't know what I feel. But whatever this feeling is, it . . . changes things.

When I get home, I pull into the driveway and head inside. Bowser gives me a deep bark, settling once I'm through the door and he sees it's me. He shuffles back to his bed in the living room.

I follow him, sitting on the couch and staring at the papers on the coffee table, awaiting my signature.

When my eyes settle on Beth's name at the bottom of the page, I'm finally able to pinpoint one of the dozens of feelings that have been swirling in me since I walked out of that hotel room. Guilt.

Without the presence of my signature on this paper, I'm still a married man. And I just made out with a woman who is not my wife.

Leaning forward on the couch, I hang my head in my hands.

Should I tell Beth what happened?

As soon as the thought pops into my head, I laugh out loud. Tell her what? That I just did the thing she's been doing with Van for over a year?

Actually, what Andi and I just did is probably far less than whatever Beth has been doing with Van, but that's a train of thought I don't need to go down.

The memory of Andi's lips on mine—that first initial spark that sent me spiraling—rises in my mind again. Followed by the euphoria, the much deeper sensation that maybe, just maybe, I am capable of moving on from Beth. Maybe I haven't been as closed off to the idea as I thought.

It's obvious that, whether I intended it or not, feelings for Andi have been growing for a while. That spark wasn't the beginning, it was the key that unlocked the door I've been hiding all of those feelings behind. Hiding them from myself, too, apparently. And now, they're all spilled out on the floor, demanding my attention.

My thoughts shift back to Beth. Is this . . . how she feels about Van?

That thought makes my stomach clench.

If this is how Beth feels about Van . . . how she's been feeling ever since they first . . .

For a moment, I imagine myself in her shoes. I picture going back to that hotel, finishing what Andi and I started, and continuing on from there, for the next year or more. Meeting in secret. Sharing

knowing glances at the office. Holding her hand beneath the conference room table. Falling in love.

That's what Beth did. That's where she is, with him. They didn't just share one passionate mistake. They've built a life together.

I stare at the divorce papers. The stack of pages that once felt like a massive weight now seems rather insignificant. It's all just a formality. To sign or not to sign has never been the question. The question is whether I will choose to keep trying to hold on to the sand that's slipping through my fingers, or if I will choose to let it go. To loosen my grip and let each grain fall away, carried off by the wind.

My heart agonizes over every grain of sand that falls from my fingers. But letting go would mean freeing my grasp to hold on to something new.

My thoughts immediately shift to Andi again, but I stop them in their tracks. It's not Andi. She's not my something new. But at the very least, she's shown me that new could be good. In fact, it could be even better than whatever it is I'm afraid to release.

Taking in a deep, calming breath, feeling more at peace than I have in years, I look down at the papers in front of me. I pick up the pen, click it open, and sign my name at the bottom of the page.

Thirteen

I'VE AVOIDED Andi for as long as possible. I can't put off the inevitable any longer.

Katie is about to make her choice for the final two. Which means if Andi and I are lucky, Tyler will be sent home tonight, and Antony and Ravi will battle it out for Katie's hand in marriage.

Andi hasn't shown up to the mansion yet, but I know she'll be here soon. Nobody misses the final ring ceremony.

There's a part of me that can't wait for her to get here, to see if whatever spark I felt that night at the hotel was just a fluke or something more. But then I remind myself that I should be hoping for the former. I know that kiss didn't mean anything to her, so it doesn't matter how I feel. I'd rather feel nothing at all if it's not reciprocal. And knowing Andi, it's most certainly not.

Most of the producers are talking in a hushed cluster, waiting for the ring ceremony to begin. But I'm not in the mood for chit chat.

I glance around the room, wondering when the ceremony will start, when my eyes land on her.

Andi is standing in the doorway, and when her gaze meets mine, I look down, rubbing the back of my neck.

My stomach clenches, already a ball of tangled nerves as she

walks toward me. She falls in place beside me, clutching her iPad to her chest.

“Hello,” she says, voice cordial, professional.

I clear my throat. “Hey.”

There’s a long silence as we both look ahead at the three men awaiting Katie and her final two rings. I glance down at Andi. She’s back to her usual self—hair smoothed to straight perfection, made-up and wearing her typical tight skirt and blazer over a silk blouse.

But all I can see now is what I know lurks beneath the calculated perfection. Bare face, messy hair, cotton pajamas that don’t do nearly as much to hide her figure as her conservative work clothes do.

My pulse races, and I look away, back at the men lined up on the ceremony platform.

Okay. Not a fluke, then. Good to know.

I shift on my feet, chewing on my nails and trying to stop my brain from replaying that kiss over and over again like a broken record.

Andi seems anxious too, although for a different reason, I’m sure. Her foot taps and she fidgets with her iPad.

She’s going to say something. I know it. She’s not the type to just leave things be. But the thought of having to listen to her explain how little that kiss meant to her feels like a stab in the gut.

“Um . . . so, about—”

“Don’t,” I say, interrupting her. “Don’t do that. It’s fine. We don’t need to talk about it.”

She looks at me, but I keep my eyes ahead.

“Are you sure?” she asks. “Because you can barely even look at me.”

She’s right, of course. But I scoff, anyway.

“How much did I ever really look at you before?”

Once the question is out of my mouth, I ponder it myself and realize that the answer is quite a lot, actually. Let’s hope she doesn’t think about it that deeply.

"We're supposed to be proving we can work together," she says. "How are we going to do that if we can't even talk to each other?"

"We're talking right now," I point out.

"That's not what I mean."

I sigh, forcing myself to look at her. "We don't need to talk about it, Andi, because I already know what you're going to say," I tell her. "It was a mistake. It didn't mean anything to you. You regret it. Right?"

I keep my face smooth, but inside, I'm still holding out hope that maybe she'll correct me.

But she doesn't. She says, "Basically, yeah."

I nod, looking away and trying not to let my face show my disappointment. "Great. Then let's just leave it at that."

Katie and Jon enter the room, and the men straighten, preparing themselves. Katie moves into place and the cameras start to roll.

I'm grateful for the excuse to not speak, but apparently Andi isn't satisfied.

"You look mad," she whispers.

My jaw clenches. "I'm not mad. I'm fine."

It's mostly true. I have no reason to be mad. But emotions don't always make sense, do they?

I'm not sure what, or who, I'm even upset at. Andi, for planting her lips on me and shaking up my whole world? Myself, for allowing these feelings to develop so extensively beneath the surface, without my knowledge?

I wish she would just let this go. I can't explain to her the reason for my sudden, irrational frustration, but I can tell she's not done. She confirms that when she starts again.

"How did—"

I huff a sigh, rubbing my tired eyes. "Andi, I said I'm fine. Can you just let it go, please?"

There's a small pause, then she replies, a hint of humor in her voice.

"I was just going to ask how Antony's overnight went."

My eyes shift to her face and she gives me a smirk.

"Oh," I mutter, and I can feel the heat of embarrassment on my face. "It was great. No way he's going home tonight."

"Ravi's good, too," she says.

I raise a brow at her. Over Tyler? Really?

"You think?" I ask.

"I know," she says with confidence. "There was only one thing holding them back, and that's gone now. He's staying."

Hm. I'll believe it when I see it, but I admire her confidence.

Jon explains to the men that there are only two rings and three of them, which means one man is about to get the boot. I glance down at Andi, trying to remember how our whole banter thing used to go, before I became such a bumbling mess of feelings every time I look at her.

I bend toward her a bit, speaking low enough for the mics not to pick up my voice.

"You think Michael knows his guy is going home tonight?"

Andi rewards me with a grin. She looks back at the rest of the producers.

"Maybe," she says, turning her cocky smirk back to me. "If not, he's underestimating us."

Us.

Man, that simple word really shouldn't elicit such a visceral reaction in me. But I can't help the smile that overtakes my face.

My eyes flit, automatically, down to her mouth, and the memory of her soft lips gliding against mine springs up so suddenly, it knocks the wind out of me.

Andi looks away, shifting uncomfortably on her feet.

Shoot. She totally caught that.

Her eyes are fixed on the men as Katie calls out Antony's name, and I'm grateful there are more pressing matters at hand than Andi analyzing what the heck was up with the way I just unabashedly checked her out.

I need to get it together. This season is almost over. I can't ruin

things now by being an awkward creep, leering lustfully at my co-worker's lips.

Katie calls Ravi's name, making the choice of her final two official. Andi's grin is so wide, beaming with pride for her guy being chosen. Dang, she's cute when she's proud of herself.

Ugh. Seriously, man. Enough.

I force my gaze back onto Jon Love as he congratulates the final two men. Katie walks Tyler out the back door to bid him farewell.

I try to think of something witty to say about Andi and me, yet again, shadowing the final two men of the season.

"Look at that. It's my guy against yours," I say, peeking down at her with a smirk. "Get ready, Andrea. Gloves are about to come off."

A strange mix of emotions crosses her face, too fast for me to process. She settles into a wistful smile as she looks up at me.

"Bring it on, Maxwell."

Fourteen

WITH THE FINAL two dates of the season complete, Katie is ready to make her decision. Will it be Antony or Ravi getting down on one knee on finale night?

The crew is all huddled in the living room of Katie's cottage, ready to hear her choice. Rachel prompts her to walk us—and the audience—through her decision-making process.

"I've spent every waking moment these past few days wrestling with this choice," Katie says. "It's the most important decision I'll ever make in my life. I only want to be engaged once, so this is it."

Yikes. You picked the wrong show, honey.

I give Andi a look, expecting her to return my sentiment. She knows as well as I do, these relationships never last. If Katie only wants to be engaged once, then I guess she's just going to spend the rest of her life alone after things with Antony go south. Or Ravi . . . but let's be honest, it'll be Antony.

But Andi isn't playing along. She nudges me in the side with her elbow, shushing me as she focuses hard on Katie's story.

"But the more I thought about it, the more clarity I had," Katie continues. "There's no choice to make. There's only one man I can see myself with."

Antony.

“Only one man I want to spend a lifetime with, grow old with.”

Mhmm. Antony, we get it.

“What we have is special, once-in-a-lifetime.”

I bite back a chuckle. I don’t know about that.

“I’m crazy about him, and I can’t wait to tell him how I feel and accept the final ring from him. I don’t believe in soulmates, but I don’t know . . . he might have me changing my mind.”

Katie giggles and I sigh. Can we just get to the part where my guy wins, please?

Rachel cuts the cameras and explains the process of finale night to Katie. Then, finally, we get to what we’ve all been waiting for.

“So, if you’re ready, we’ll need to know which gentleman you’ll be sending home tomorrow,” Rachel says.

Katie looks down at her lap with a frown. “I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I’ve decided to say goodbye to Ravi.”

And there it is.

Andi’s hand snaps to my arm, clutching tightly.

I look at her, and her face is blank and pale.

“Andi? You good?” I whisper to her.

She doesn’t answer. She’s frozen for a moment before she manages to compose herself enough to release her grip on my arm. We all wait politely as Rachel wraps up Katie’s interview. I peek at Andi every few seconds, half-expecting her to pass out with how frazzled she looks.

Was Katie’s choice really that much of a surprise? Andi should know by now that the Leading Ladies never go for the safe choice. Safe choices are for real life. Dramatic reality dating shows are for taking risks, going all-in on something you never thought you could have in the real world. Something like an exceptionally good-looking man with a swoony accent and passion to last a lifetime. I don’t know why Andi would think, for one second, that Ravi ever had a chance of being the last man standing.

The very moment Rachel concludes the interview, Andi is

striding out the front door and around the side of the cottage. I take a beat, then follow her.

When I round the corner of the house, Andi is staring off into the distance, hand over her stomach, breathing heavily.

"You okay?" I ask her.

She takes a few breaths and shakes her head. "He's going to be crushed."

"Who, Ravi? Of course, he is."

She gives me an indignant look. "How can you say it like that? Like you don't even care?"

My eyebrows shoot up. What's her deal? This is exactly how this moment always goes down, every season. She's acting like she's never done this before.

"Uh . . . the same way I do every season. The same way *you* do every season," I remind her. "Andi, they're always blindsided."

Her cheeks go red. I think about the past few weeks, how hard she had been rooting for Ravi, and suddenly, it all clicks into place.

"You broke the cardinal rule, didn't you?" I ask her gently.

Her eyes jerk up to mine. "I didn't tell anybody anything," she insists. "I don't even tell my sisters about eliminations. Not until after they air."

I sigh, shaking my head. "Not that rule."

Her eyes search my face, and I can see the moment when she realizes what I'm getting at.

"You got too close, huh?" I ask.

I remember my early days, back when I had more hope and believed in "true love" or whatever. It was hard not to get too invested in whoever you're shadowing. Especially after my very first shadow, Brad, went on to marry his Leading Lady and live happily ever after.

But all it took was one more season, when my shadow got the boot, for me to realize that the only way I'm going to be able to do this job is if I can stay emotionally detached. I thought Andi had figured that out already, but I guess she never had to learn that lesson the hard way. Until now.

Her eyes start to water, and she bites her lip, trying to keep it together.

I sigh. "You should go home, Andi."

She looks at me with glassy eyes. "What? No. I have to go back to the mansion and prepare Ravi for tomorrow."

I almost laugh, but I catch myself. No need to be rude.

"Andi, if Ravi takes one look at your face right now, he's going to know what's up. And that's going to ruin the entire finale."

"Oh, my gosh," she groans, covering her face with her hands. "You're right. I'm ruining everything."

I take in a deep breath, trying to think of a way to get her out of this as painlessly as possible.

"Look, I'll cover for you with Rachel, okay?" I tell her, and she looks at me. "Just go home, crack open a bottle of wine, cry into a pillow. Whatever you've got to do, do it. Then pull yourself together and be here tomorrow for the final ring."

The tears spring up in her eyes again, a few falling to her cheeks. She wipes them away quickly.

"Thank you," she says, voice thick with emotion.

I hate seeing her like this. She might be my competition, but still, I don't want her to be humiliated.

"Of course." I give her a small smirk, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "I don't want to get this promotion by default. I want a fair fight."

She tries to smile back, but it's too stiff. She gives me one last grateful look as she walks away, heading toward her car.

I go back inside, and Rachel approaches me immediately.

"Where's Andi? You two need to get to the mansion and start prepping the men for the finale."

I try to think of an excuse that would be serious enough for Andi to leave suddenly, but something that wouldn't beg a lot of questions.

"She's got food poisoning," I decide. "I guess her breakfast with her sisters this morning didn't agree with her. She had to run to the bathroom. Not sure she'll be able to make it to the mansion, but it's all right. I'll make sure Ravi is taken care of."

As expected, Rachel doesn't seem to want any more details about that. She accepts the excuse with a nod and sends me on my way.



SETTLING into my car after several hours of preparing for the finale tomorrow, I look at the clock on the dashboard and wonder how Andi's doing.

It's about dinner time. I picture her pulling a Lean Cuisine out of the freezer, and the mental image makes me wince.

At my place, she said something about missing Chinese takeout. Maybe I should pick us up some food and head over to her apartment . . .

No. That sounds like something a boyfriend would do, not a concerned co-worker.

Instead, I take out my phone, look up the number for my favorite Chinese place, and call in an order on her behalf.

I don't want her to be confused when the food arrives, so I shoot off a quick text, too.

The thought of you going home to eat a Lean Cuisine over the kitchen sink was bumming me out. Have some real food, on me.

Fifteen

I EXPECT to get a reply from Andi, confused by my text. But to my disappointment, by the time I arrive home I still have no new messages.

Maybe she hasn't seen the text yet. Or she has, but the food hasn't arrived yet, so she doesn't understand it. I shove my phone in my pocket, reminding myself to give it some more time before I start to worry that the gesture was too much for her.

I head inside, going through my typical nightly routine. I let Bowser out, fill his food bowl, let him back in, and get started on dinner for myself.

About halfway through my dinner preparation, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I nearly drop my whole container of rosemary on top of the chicken I'm seasoning in my haste to grab my phone and check the message. My face falls when I read the text on my screen.

BETH

Have you dropped off the papers with the lawyer yet?

I let out a sigh, setting the rosemary down so I can type out a quick reply.

MAX

No. Haven't had the time.

I stare at the phone, watching the three little dots hover as she types out her reply.

BETH

I can come pick them up from you tomorrow.

My stomach clenches at the thought of having to see her, to hand the papers to her directly. But she quickly replies again.

BETH

After you leave for work, I mean.

Ah. So, by "pick them up from you" she means pick them up from the house.

MAX

Tomorrow's finale night. Should be out late filming. Stop by whenever.

I set my phone on the counter, focusing on my dinner prep. A moment later, my phone vibrates again, and I pick it up eagerly.

BETH

I'll leave my key under the mat when I'm done.

The words are like a dagger to the heart. I have no idea what to say to that, so I ignore it, setting my phone down again. I'm plating my food when it buzzes again, and I sigh, picking it up. What more could she possibly have to say?

ANDI

Wow. That was really nice of you.
Thank you.

My breath catches when I see the text from Andi. I grab my plate and take my food to the couch, settling in for the night. But despite my hunger, my food goes untouched for several minutes as I try to think of something else to say to Andi.

There's nothing else that needs to be said, really. I told her about the food, she got it, she thanked me. That's that.

But I don't want the conversation to end. I think about how upset she was when I saw her earlier, and I want to reassure her, ease her worries, if I can.

MAX

Don't worry about Ravi. He's a big boy, he'll be okay.

I take a few bites of my food, keeping one eye on my phone as I wait for her reply.

ANDI

I know. I'm usually good at keeping my heart out of it. I don't know what's different about this time.

Well, that's easy.

MAX

Ravi's different. He's too good for this show. But you've got to get it together before tomorrow.

I cringe when I hit send on that one, hoping it didn't come across as condescending. She really hates it when I tell her how to do her job.

But she texts back quickly.

ANDI

I know.

I can't tell if that was a cordial "thank you for the reminder" kind

of *I know*, or an “I don’t need you to tell me things I’m already well aware of, Maxine” kind of *I know*. But she doesn’t say anything else.

All throughout my meal, I keep checking my phone again, wondering if she’ll say anything more. But she doesn’t.

I try to think of something I could say to keep the conversation going.

Bowser yawns and stretches on his bed. I think back to the night Andi came over here and met him for the first time. She told me a story about her childhood dog, and how sad she was to have to leave her behind when she moved out from her father’s house. She said that her father still sends her pictures of the dog, regularly, whenever she’s having a bad day.

I look at Bowser and grab my phone, crawling over to where he lies on his bed in the corner of the room.

He perks up when I get closer, and I instruct him to sit up. He obeys, and I try to think of what kind of picture I should be taking. Something that signals encouragement, so she knows she isn’t totally screwed for having gone home early today.

Pulling up my camera app, I hold out my hand to Bowser, requesting a high-five. It takes a couple tries, but I’m finally able to get a decent photo. Returning to the couch, I try to think of what to say along with the picture. “Sorry you’re having a ruff day” is the first thing that crosses my mind, but it makes me cringe to even imagine typing those words. I settle for something slightly less corny, but hopefully still heartfelt and genuine.

MAX

Bowser says you’ve got this!

She doesn’t respond right away, and I start to panic.

Was that too much? Is it weird that I remembered that random detail about her dad sending her pictures of her childhood dog?

Just to balance things out, I decide to throw in some of our more standard, expected snark.

MAX

By the way, I told everyone you had food poisoning. Real explosive stuff. Nobody'll ask any questions about you taking the night off.

My teasing does the trick, because she replies right away, this time.

ANDI

Gee, thanks so much.

I chuckle.

MAX

Anytime

There's a long pause. The pause gets even longer, and I realize she's not planning to say anything more.

A pang of disappointment rolls through me, followed by loneliness when I look up from my phone and remember that I'm still sitting, alone, in my living room. Andi's not here, and I'm not there. Which is for the best. Everything is as it should be.

Sixteen

I PULL into the lot at the venue we've chosen for this season's finale shooting. As I park my car, I see Andi standing near the producer's tent, scanning the parking lot. Is she looking for me?

I shake my head at myself. Why would she be looking for me? She's probably keeping an eye out for when Ravi arrives.

Getting out of the car, I straighten my tie. Never been much of a fan of ties, but for finale night, we're supposed to dress up. I wonder what Andi will be wearing.

When I get to where the rest of the crew is stationed, she's standing by the snack table, chewing nervously on a baby carrot.

"Morning," I say, standing beside her.

"Hey," she replies.

I try to be covert as I take a look at her attire, but I can't help the chuckle that escapes when I give her a once-over.

"What?" she asks, looking down at her dress.

"You look like you're in mourning," I point out. "You could have been a bit more subtle."

I mean, I know she's bummed about the whole Ravi thing, but seriously, she's dressed like the grieving widow in a movie funeral scene.

Still looks amazing, though. That dress looks like it was made for her curves.

Andi swears under her breath, looking down at her outfit again.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” I ask her. I can’t even imagine what kind of tongue-lashing she’d get from Rachel if she left right now, but if there’s any chance of her breaking down like she did yesterday, it’d be better for her to go. We can’t have Ravi seeing that.

“Yes,” she answers me, and I nod.

“Good,” I say.

She glances at me and sighs, her shoulders relaxing. I take in the scene our set designers have come up with for the big proposal, but I can feel Andi’s eyes on me. She’s looking me over, like I just did to her, probably trying to come up with something snarky to say about my outfit choice.

Footsteps approach behind us.

“Max?” someone says.

Andi and I both turn toward the sound, and my stomach drops.

“Beth?”

I shake my head, trying to move past the shock of her being here. How did she even know where we were? Did she call the office to try to find me?

But that question doesn’t seem important once I take in her glassy eyes, the tissue in her hands, and the panicked look on her face. I rush toward her.

“What are you doing here? What’s wrong?”

She chokes back a sob. “I have to talk to you.”

Her gaze shifts to Andi. I pull Beth aside, and Andi takes a couple steps away, giving us privacy.

“What’s going on?” I ask, scanning Beth’s tear-stained cheeks.

She starts to cry in earnest, now. “Max, I’m so sorry. You always tell me, and I should have remembered, but I just . . . it’s been so long since I’ve been there, and—”

“Whoa, slow down,” I say, holding up my hands. “What are you talking about? Sorry for what?”

For a brief second, my mind flits to the divorce papers. To everything. But that's not what she's here to apologize for. I know that.

Even if it were, I'm not sure it would matter at this point. It's a little late for second thoughts.

Beth looks up at me with fear-stricken sadness in her eyes. "Bowser got out of the house when I came by to pick up the papers," she says. "He was hit by a car."

My gut churns with dread. But she continues, quickly.

"I took him to the animal hospital," she explains. "He's . . . I mean, he's not . . . I don't know what's gonna happen, but they're taking him into surgery."

A fierce rush of emotion floods through me. After the shock comes anger. How many times have I told her that the front door doesn't latch all the way unless you push it closed? We've had this argument countless times, for this exact reason.

But when I look into her eyes, she bursts into another sob.

"Max, I'm so sorry," she blubbers.

The pure guilt on her face softens my anger. I bite my lip, suppressing all of the words that are aching to escape my mouth.

Instead, I pull her into me, wrapping my arms tightly around her.

She cries harder against my chest, and my heart aches at the familiar touch.

"It's okay," I say. "Which hospital is he at?"

I release her and she steps back, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "I can take you."

She gestures to her car in the parking lot, still running.

I don't even have to think about it. Screw this job. If anything happens to Bowser, and I'm not there . . . I would never forgive myself for that.

I nod, and we head for the car together. Halfway to the lot, I hear Andi call my name.

"You don't have to cover for me," I call back to her, over my shoulder.

“You’re leaving?” she asks. “Are you serious? Max, this is important.”

I scoff. “Yeah, Andi, so is this,” I snap back, losing some of my control over the emotions bottled up inside me.

We get in the car, and I look back at where Andi stands, frozen on the sidewalk, staring after me. And I can’t help but think that I just might be looking at *Marriage Material*’s new showrunner.

Seventeen

DESPITE THE FIASCO of finale night, Rachel seems to have understood my reason for running out so suddenly. I explained the situation to her and assured her that, thankfully, my dog ended up coming home that night with only a few broken bones.

Even after all of that, the meeting seemed to go fairly well. Although, I'm sure Andi could say the same about hers. She's tough competition. This isn't going to be an easy fight.

Hence the reason I'm steaming my worries away in the mansion's hot tub right now. I couldn't stick around the office, waiting for Rachel and the committee to make their choice. I had to get out of there. Be alone for a while.

The gate behind me creaks open, and I turn around.

"Andi?"

"I see you've learned how to use the sign-up sheet," she says.

She tosses her purse on the lounge chair, kicks off her shoes, and sets up a towel to sit on as she dips her feet into the water.

"Yes, I did," I say, giving a pointed look at her. "And it seems like that was a pointless endeavor."

She appraises me. "Well, I wanted to see how your meeting with Rachel went."

I smirk. "I take it yours went well, and you wanted to come brag about how easily you're going to beat me?"

She laughs. "Well, mine did go pretty well, but you'll be getting the job."

What?

"How do you figure?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at her as I settle back on the hot tub bench, resting my arms on the pavement behind me.

"I told Rachel that I think the show could improve if we went back to some of the ways we used to do things in season one," she says. "Honestly, I think the whole process needs a total mindset shift. The show's supposed to be about finding someone who's '*Marriage Material*,' but now it's just about the drama. It's shallow. That's why none of the final couples end up lasting. So, I told her we need to go back to how things used to be."

Wow. I can't believe I never thought about that. She's completely right.

"That's a big idea. Could be risky," I say, which is also true. But it's definitely a risk worth taking. "But it makes sense."

She watches me carefully. "And then I told her that she should put you in charge of it all."

Uh . . . what?

"Why would you do that?"

She sighs. "Because what our show needs right now is romance and heart and soul, and between the two of us, that sounds a whole lot more like you than me. This whole thing is about love and marriage, and you're the perfect person to lead everybody in that mission."

I bark a laugh. Is she serious?

"The perfect person? I'm divorced."

She smirks. "You're not divorced, you're separated."

I'm confused for a moment, before I realize that she doesn't know I signed the papers. I meet her eyes as I drop the news.

"No, Andi . . . I'm divorced."

It feels so wrong to say out loud. Like admitting defeat. But I suppose admitting defeat is the reasonable thing to do if the alternative is living in denial.

"Since when?" she asks.

I look down at the water, wondering if she'll be able to make the connection as to why, exactly, I finally signed the papers.

"Since overnights," I say.

She frowns. "But that night, when I asked you if you signed the papers, you said no."

I sigh, splashing some water on my face. Is she really not getting this?

"I hadn't yet. When I left the room that night, I went home and signed them."

I watch her face as she processes that. I can see the wheels turning, the light bulbs flickering to life as she puts two and two together.

"Beth has moved on," I explain. "She's still with the Pilates guy, you know," I add, realizing that detail might have been unclear before. "In fact, when she gave me the papers, she told me I could have the house, because they're moving to Texas together to be closer to his family."

Andi's jaw drops, and I can feel the heat of shame rising to my face.

"She moved on a long time ago. I just couldn't let go, but after the overnights . . ." I pause, looking up at her. Does she get it now? "I realized that I'm ready to move on, too."

Her breath catches. She gets it.

"But what about the finale?" she asks. "Beth came to set in tears, and you ran off together. You dropped everything for her."

What? Is that what she thinks happened? Beth came to set to tell me what a mistake she made with all of this divorce nonsense, and I ran off into the sunset with her, leaving everything else behind?

"Andi, Beth came by the set to tell me that Bowser was at the emergency clinic," I say. "I told her I signed the papers, so she went by the house to pick them up, and he got out and got hit by a car."

“Oh, my gosh!” She gasps, her hand pressing to her chest. “Is he okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, he’s fine. Just a couple broken bones, but he’ll recover. The only reason Beth was even crying was because she knew I’d be pissed at her. I’ve told her a thousand times that that door doesn’t latch well, but she never pays attention to it.”

Andi takes a beat to process everything I’ve just told her.

“Wow,” she finally says. “So . . . you’re not married anymore.”

I look at her. That’s the part she’s chosen to fixate on?

“Nope,” I say.

She nods. “And you’re . . . ready to move on.”

“Yes.” I search her eyes, and something in them urges me to be a little bolder. “I guess I should thank you for laying one on me that night. It made me realize that I might be ready for something new.”

She blushes. “Well . . . I’m glad I could be of service,” she says, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

Is that what she thinks? Her kiss was just a “service” to me, nothing more?

“I realized something else that night, too,” I say, my pulse picking up speed as I make the choice to be even more bold.

She looks up at me. “Oh?”

Here we go.

“That was the first night since my separation that I felt something . . . for someone else.” I pause, watching her face as she listens. “Something real. Something I think I’ve probably been feeling for a while now. And I realized that if that’s what Beth feels for this other guy, what she’s been feeling for the past year? Well, then my marriage was over a long time ago.”

I wait, hoping she picks up on the important part of that little speech.

“I’m sorry,” she tells me, still fixating on the wrong details. Or maybe she’s choosing to focus on the part about Beth because she doesn’t want to have to address the other part and be forced to tell me that she only thinks of me as a co-worker.

"It's okay. It was good. And then it wasn't, and now it's over. And I finally have the closure I need to move on to something else."

She nods, listening. After a long pause, she speaks again.

"So . . . when you said you felt something for someone else . . . did you mean me?"

I force myself to look at her, despite the anxiety raging within me. I desperately want for her to be happy with my answer, but I know this will only make things awkward and uncomfortable between us.

"Yes," I admit.

She lets out a breath and bites her lip.

"But don't worry. I know you don't feel that way," I quickly say. Trying to make things lighter, I give her a half-hearted chuckle, putting on a smirk. "And besides, I'm about to be your boss, anyway, so . . ."

I try not to meet her gaze as I wait for whatever she has to say. It's silent for a long moment.

"Yeah," she finally says. "You're right. You are about to be my boss."

I look up at her, waiting for the rest. But she doesn't say anything else. It's painful to have to pry it out of her, but I feel like getting confirmation will provide closure.

"And . . . you don't feel that way about me," I repeat, waiting for her to agree.

She doesn't say anything.

Anticipation stirs in my gut.

"Right?" I ask more directly.

She opens her mouth, but it takes a minute for any words to come out.

Finally, she answers.

"I don't know."

I gape at her. "You don't know?"

"Well . . . I *didn't* feel that way," she says. "But then you kissed me, and—"

A scoff escapes my lips, cutting her off. "I'm sorry, are we re-writing history here? *You kissed me.*"

She rolls her eyes. "Well, yeah, I kissed you. But you, like . . . *kissed me.*"

I stare at her, trying to make sense of the words.

I think back to that night. She pulled me into her lips, yes, but it was clear to both of us that it was a meaningless gesture. A desperate attempt to feel something good for the moment.

But then I pulled away . . . I looked into her eyes, and mine were opened. I pulled her in again, but it was different that time. *That* kiss meant something. I knew it, and apparently, she knew it, too.

I can't help the cocky smirk that overtakes me when her words start to make sense.

"So, you're saying it was a pretty great kiss, huh?"

She huffs a sigh at me. "Oh, my gosh. Stop. Your head is big enough as it is."

My smirk fades as I meet her gaze.

"Andi, what are you saying?" I ask, reading every emotion that crosses her face.

She bites her lip, hesitating. My pulse races, adrenaline pumping through me.

"I'm saying I feel something, too," she admits. "For you."

Eighteen

MY HEART SWELLS.

She feels something. For me.

A wide grin overtakes me.

“But it doesn’t matter,” she says. “You just said it yourself. You’re about to be my boss.”

I smile wider, standing up in the hot tub and stepping toward her. None of that matters. The only thing in the world that matters, in this moment, is that Andrea Starr feels something, too. For me.

Once I’m standing nearly a foot away from her, I drink her in, looking her over. My eyes settle on her face. Her soft, hazel eyes. Her smooth skin. Her sweet, inviting lips.

There’s not a promotion in the world that could stop me from kissing this woman.

With a smile, I whisper, “I’m not your boss right now.”

Her breath catches, and I lean in.

She quickly puts a hand to my bare chest, stopping me in my tracks. For a moment, my heart sinks, but then she speaks.

“You’re *wet* right now,” she says.

“So?”

She sighs. "So, we have to head back to the office after this. I don't want my clothes to get wet."

This woman is unbelievable. I would barely even get a few drops on her if I kissed her right now. She'd be more than dry by the time we got back to the office.

And even if she did get wet, she lives five minutes away. She could easily run home and change, if she needed to. It wouldn't be a big deal.

In fact, why should I bother holding back when she has a fresh change of clothes five minutes from here, anyway? If I'm finally going to kiss Andi and have her kiss me back—for real, this time—I'm not holding anything back.

I purse my lips, looking over her attire and pretending to care.

"I'll be careful," I say.

And then, I place my wet hands on the sides of her waist and pull her into the tub with me.

She gasps. "Max! What the—"

I cut off her admonishment, pressing my lips to hers.

Since I don't have to worry about keeping her dry anymore, I move my hands up her back and pull her more firmly against my chest. Her irritation fades in an instant, and she sinks into the kiss, her lips moving with mine.

In between kisses, she pulls back.

"If the chlorine ruins my skirt, you're buying me a new one," she says.

"Kay," I answer quickly, longing for her lips to return to mine.

She pulls back again, her lips still slightly grazing mine. "It's two-hundred dollars."

That snaps me out of my haze.

"What?" I look down at her skirt. It just looks like a plain, black skirt to me. How on earth could that cost so much? "*Why?*" I ask.

She shrugs. "It's real leather. But it's worth it. It's lasted years, and it goes with everything."

I shake my head, huffing a sigh at her. Why are we talking about fashion right now when we should be doing more kissing?

"Okay, fine, whatever," I agree. "Now, can you shut up?"

She raises her eyebrows at me, pulling away from me as much as she can with me still holding her firmly to my chest.

Oops. That might have come out wrong.

I give her an apologetic grin. "Please?"

She laughs. "You're lucky you're so cute."

That comment elicits another wide grin, but I try to get it under control when she grabs me by the back of the neck, pulling my lips into hers again.

I think back to that night in the hotel room, and I try to guide us into the same smooth, soft rhythm that felt so right to me, then. Only this time, she doesn't try to take back control. She just melts into me, letting me take the lead.

To my great dismay, our phones both chime, interrupting the moment. I rest my forehead against hers, letting out a sigh.

"That's probably Rachel," I whisper.

"Yeah," she replies.

Neither of us move. We just stand in that warm, wet embrace for as long as we can, until finally, I have to pull away.

I walk to the edge of the tub, reaching to snatch my phone from on top of my clothes. I read the text quickly and send a message back.

"It's Rachel," I say, setting my phone back on the lounge chair. "She wants us back at the office. The committee's made their decision."

Andi nods, looking unbelievably hot, all wet, her lips red from kissing.

As I take her in, I remember what it is we're about to be walking into. One of us is going to be named the new showrunner. Which means, one of us is about to be the other's superior.

I have no idea what we're going to do about that, but I know we're not going to figure it out here.

"We should go," I say.

I get out of the tub. Andi's walking up the steps behind me, so I hold out a hand for her. She just stares at it, like she doesn't understand what I could possibly be holding my hand out for.

Once she's out of the tub, I drop my hand with a chuckle, shaking my head at her. Someone needs to teach this girl what it looks like to be romanced. I smile to myself as I grab us some towels.

Challenge accepted.

"I guess I have to go home and change before I head back to the office," Andi says, giving me a death glare.

I laugh, getting one last long look at her soaked clothes.

Before I can even understand what's happening, she swoops down, scoops up my pile of clothes from the lounge chair, and tosses them into the tub.

"Andi!" I yell, rushing to try to grab them before they get soaked. But it's too late.

She giggles. "Guess you'll have to go change, too."

I sigh. "My house is half an hour away. You live five minutes from the office."

I can see the guilt flash across her face, briefly. Clearly, she hadn't thought about that little detail. But she covers it up with a sassy smirk.

"Looks like you'd better get going then," she says, blowing me a kiss as she heads for the gate. "See you back at the office."

Nineteen

THIS IS SO HUMILIATING. I'm about to potentially be named the new showrunner of *Marriage Material*, and I look like I'm ready to record a YouTube ad for protein powder.

I'm waiting for the elevator when Andi enters the building. One look at my clothes, and she smirks.

"Don't even start," I say. "It's all I had in my car."

Not even a hoodie or a basic T-shirt. No, it had to be my most obnoxious gym tank. At least it's relatively clean and doesn't smell like sweat. I got lucky, there.

"Is this what you usually wear to the gym?" Andi asks.

"Yeah," I say, and we step into the elevator together.

I hit the button for our floor. Andi gives me a long, appraising look, and I fold my arms, waiting for whatever teasing comment she's about to make. She should be careful what she says next, because this whole wardrobe malfunction is entirely her fault.

"Maybe I *should* join you at the gym sometime," she says.

I look down at her and she has a small, appreciative grin on her face. Was she checking me out?

My own lips turn up at the thought of her taking me up on my offer to work out together.

"I'd like that," I tell her.

She smiles, and the elevator reaches our floor. We make our way to the conference room, where everyone else is already gathered. I get a few glances at my attire, but nobody says anything about it.

"Great, now that we're all here, I have an important announcement to make," Rachel says, drawing everyone's attention. "A few months ago, I told you all that at the end of this season, I would be stepping down as showrunner. And today, I'd like to announce my replacement."

Here it is. The moment of truth.

I glance at Andi. She looks as nervous as I feel. Looking down at her hand by her side, beneath the table, I reach out, smoothly sliding my fingers between hers.

I can't manage to look at Andi's face again, to see how she's reacting to this. I know if I do, I won't be able to control my own dopey smile. Instead, I keep my eyes fixed on Rachel as she looks toward the two of us. I give Andi's hand a light squeeze.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please say hello to your new showrunner, Max Bloom."

Mixed feelings rise when I hear her say my name. I'm happy, of course, but disappointed on Andi's behalf.

That is, until Rachel speaks again.

"And his co-showrunner, Andi Starr."

I give Andi a grin, squeezing her hand under the table.

Rachel explains that after this season, she and the committee agreed that Andi and I seem to work better together than apart. She invites us to say a few words to our team, and by the smiles on everyone's faces, I have no doubt Andi and I will be warmly welcomed into our new roles as leaders of the show.

Once the meeting is complete, Rachel excuses us for the weekend. Everyone disperses. Andi heads for her cubicle, and I follow close behind.

She sits down and swivels in her chair to face me. I lean against her desk, looking down at her with a grin.

"So . . . looks like I'm not going to be your boss anytime soon."

She gives me a small smile. "Looks like it."

I glance around us, making sure nobody is close enough to overhear.

"Does that mean if I asked you out, you'd say yes?"

She considers that for a moment. "I guess you'll have to ask and find out."

I sigh, laughing to myself. "You're really going to make me work for this, aren't you?"

Her eyes shift to the words printed on my chest and she smirks. "Well, you *are* currently in beast-mode."

I laugh again. "Fair enough."

I'm surprised how high my nerves are as I meet her gaze. She wouldn't be teasing me like this if she was going to say no, so why am I still so nervous?

"Andrea?" I ask.

"Yes, Maxwell?"

I swallow my nerves. "Would you like to go out with me sometime?"

She purses her lips, narrowing her eyes at me as she swivels back and forth in her chair, giving me a long appraisal.

I roll my eyes. Come *on*, woman.

"I'll see if I can pencil you into my schedule," she finally answers.

I smile, shaking my head at her as I take in her teasing expression. My eyes fall to her lips.

"I assume if I were to kiss you in the middle of the office, you'd smack me?" I ask.

She glances around us, gauging how many of our co-workers are close by.

"You assume correctly," she says.

My thoughts shift to the future, co-running the show together. We'll have more than enough privacy, then.

"That's okay," I say. "We'll have our own private office soon. Just the two of us."

She groans as she stands up. "I have no idea how I'm going to survive sharing a workspace with you."

Is she for real?

"Me? You're the one with all the clutter," I say, gesturing to her messy desk. "In case you haven't noticed, I keep my station nice and tidy."

"That's because that chaos is all in here," she says, giving my temple two light taps with her finger. "You can't sit still to save your life. It drives me nuts."

"It's called ADHD," I inform her. "You should read up on it, if we're going to be partners."

She looks at me, and I expect a snarky quip.

"I will," she says, surprising me.

I smile, and I can't stop my eyes from falling to her lips again, wishing we were still back in the hot tub at the mansion.

"So . . . if you won't let me kiss you here, how about I take you to dinner tonight?" I suggest. "We can celebrate our promotions."

Her face falls.

"Actually, I already have plans with my sisters. I thought you were going to be getting the job, so I figured I'd need some cheering up tonight. I made dinner plans with them this morning."

"Oh." I try to cover my disappointment with a smile. "Well, I'm sure they'll be happy to hear the good news. About the job, I mean."

She bites her lip, thinking for a moment.

"You could come," she says. "If you want."

Wow. Dinner with the sisters. That's . . . fast.

But good. The fact that Andi is even open to inviting me into that part of her life tells me that this isn't just some casual fling. She's taking this seriously, and that sends a comforting warmth through my chest.

"You sure they wouldn't mind?" I ask. I don't want to be a party crasher.

She laughs. "Positive."

I smile, and despite the potential of being seen, I can't help but reach out to take her fingers between mine again.

"Well, in that case, I'd love to," I say.

Andi looks down at our hands and her cheeks go pink.

"Just prepare yourself for the inquisition," she says. "I'm sure they'll want to know all about every little private thought you've ever had about me."

With a laugh, I give her hand a squeeze and release it.

"Consider me prepared."

We walk to the elevator together, Andi glancing up at me every few seconds to read my face.

I wonder if she's expecting me to be nervous about meeting her family. I suppose I am a bit, but she talks about her sisters so much, I feel like I already know them. I wonder if they feel the same? Does she ever talk about me?

"What would you tell them, exactly?" Andi asks me.

The elevator dings and I give her a smirk. Like I'm gonna let her off that easy.

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see," I say.

Once we're both inside the elevator and the doors close, I take my hand from my pocket and slide my fingers between hers again.

Twenty

“OKAY, REMIND ME AGAIN,” I say, putting the car in park outside of Andi’s sister’s house.

“Emily, Grace, and Ailey,” she says. “Em’s the oldest—this is her house. Then Grace, then me, and Ailey’s the baby.”

“She’s the one who’s getting married soon?”

“Right.”

I nod, and Andi gives me a nervous smile. She looks more nervous about this dinner than I feel, and that makes me chuckle.

“Relax,” I say, taking her hand.

She sighs. “It’s just . . . this is like . . . brand new. Maybe it’s too soon to throw you to the sisters.”

“Do they . . . know about us?” I ask.

She thinks for a second. “I mean . . . not about today. I haven’t had time to tell them about that. But I told them about the hotel, and they’re the ones who told me how stupid I was for not realizing I’m crazy about you.”

A few hours ago, it was “I feel something for you.” Now she’s crazy about me? My lips turn up at that. It’s hard to believe how much has changed in such a short amount of time.

Capturing her gaze, I lean over the center console to stroke her cheek. I guide her to my lips, and we get lost there for a few moments.

"It'll be great," I tell her when we finally pull away. "Don't worry."

We get out of the car and meet on the sidewalk. I look down at her hand.

"Should we . . ." I trail off, unsure of how she wants to handle this. Her sisters know I'm coming to dinner tonight, but they have no idea everything that's happened between Andi and me today. If we walk up to the door holding hands, that's sure to send a clear message.

Andi hesitates, thinking. After a moment of consideration, she takes my hand in hers, weaving her fingers between mine.

I smile, giving her hand a squeeze as we make our way up the driveway. Andi opens the front door without knocking and steps inside, pulling me along with her.

She kicks off her shoes by the pile of other shoes by the front door, so I do the same. We make our way through the hallway and into a large, open space that holds a living room and kitchen.

Three women are waiting there, one sitting on a barstool, one bouncing a fussy baby, and the other moving around the kitchen, setting dishes on the table.

"Hey," Andi says, and they all look up.

I watch as, simultaneously, each pair of eyes flits from Andi's face, to mine, to our clasped hands.

"Ahh!" the girl closest to us screeches, hopping down from her stool. "What is this?! What's happening?!"

Andi and I laugh, and the other two women gape at us with open mouths.

"Um . . . it's kind of a long story," Andi says.

"Well, tell it!" the woman with the baby demands, and even the little one chimes in with a happy squeal, making us all laugh.

"Wait, hang on," the woman setting the table interjects. "Everybody sit and start eating. The food's gonna get cold. Then you can tell us."

The ladies all move to the table, and I follow Andi, taking the seat beside her.

"Oh, and hi!" the woman with the long, dark hair says to me with a smile as she sets the last dish on the table and takes her seat. She points to her sisters as she speaks quickly. "Grace, Ailey, and I'm Emily. Nice to finally meet you, Max." She turns back to Andi with excitement in her eyes. "Now, go!"

I chuckle as the girls all settle in with eager anticipation, hanging on Andi's every word as she tells them about everything that happened today, from the hot tub to the promotion.

Their responses take me by surprise. Given how much of a cynic their sister has always been, I didn't expect the rest of the Starr women to be such hopeless romantics. They swoon and "aw" throughout the whole story, listening with rapt attention, chiming in for more details whenever Andi is too vague for their liking.

Once the conversation shifts to discussing the details of our new positions as co-runners, I excuse myself to the bathroom. It's only a wall away from the dining room, and I can still hear them clearly as they drop the work-talk and return to gushing over all of the details of our steamy hot tub kiss.

"Um, also, why did you never mention how cute he is?" one of the girls asks Andi.

She snorts a laugh. "Grace, you know he can still hear you, right?"

"Oh, who cares," Grace replies. In a slightly louder voice, she calls out, "You're really cute, Max!"

I laugh to myself. "Um, thank you," I call back, sending the girls into a fit of giggles.

They start talking in hushed tones then, and I can't hear them anymore over the sound of the water as I wash my hands.

When I return to the table, Andi's blushing, and the other girls look up at me with bashful smirks. What exactly were they talking about?

I shake my head. "I don't want to know," I say.

They all laugh, and Emily has me pop open a bottle of champagne. She pours us each a glass to toast to our promotions.

"You just had a bottle of champagne in the fridge for no reason?" Andi asks, taking a sip of her drink.

"No, silly. I bought it for tonight," Emily says.

"But I told you I probably wasn't going to be getting the job," Andi replies.

Emily smirks. "Uh huh. And I didn't believe that for a second, so I got a bottle, just in case."

Andi smiles at that, a bit of water rising to her eyes.

I put my hand on her knee, under the table, and she looks over at me. I give her a smile, my eyes falling to her mouth. She seems to catch my train of thought, because she bites her lip and her cheeks go pink again as she takes another sip of her drink.

"Ugh, my gosh, you guys are so freaking adorable. I can't," Ailey says, downing the rest of her champagne.

We all laugh. I settle deeper into my chair, shifting closer to Andi. Grace excuses herself to go feed her baby, and Ailey suggests we play a board game. She goes to pick one out, and Emily begins clearing the table. I start to get up to help, but Andi stops me for a moment, pulling me closer to her.

With the other women all preoccupied on other tasks, she tugs on my shirt, pulling my lips to hers. I want to stay there forever, melting into her kiss, but she keeps it short and sweet, giving my chest a pat as she stands up and helps clear the dishes from the table.

I can't help but watch her for a moment, as she moves around the kitchen with her sister. Ailey returns with a few games, asking the other girls what they're in the mood for. My gaze is fixed on Andi, and I get a brief flash of what could be.

Sharing a meal in this house, surrounded by her sisters, their husbands, their children. I've never been close with my family, and Beth didn't have much to begin with. But being a part of Andi's family tonight feels comfortable and happy and warm. It feels like something I could get used to.

Thank You

I hope you enjoyed reading this novella from Max's POV!

Now that you're a part of my super-special newsletter crew, don't forget to head over to my website and check out all of the bonus content you have access to! You're sure to find something to tide you over until the next *Marriage Material* installment. ;)

Until next time, happy reading!

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