



*Soulmate,*   
**STAGE RIGHT**

LOVE SCENES, BOOK ONE

**BIXBY JONES**

*Soulmate, Stage Right* (Love Scenes, Book One)

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# Advanced Praise

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

-Cloud S. Riser, Author

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

-Matthew Mozingo, Author

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

-B.N. Laux, Author

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

-Emily House, Writer



# Acknowledgements

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

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn’t the only school of its kind in the Houston area, but it was the oldest, most prestigious and most expensive by far. Those distinctions essentially placed Winthrop Academy in a class by itself, allowing it to play by its own rules. There was no such thing as “three strikes and you’re out” here; a single misstep could get a student expelled. But they weren’t the only ones expected to toe the line. Every school year, Abby had to sign a new pledge not to engage in harmful behaviors that could set a poor example for the student body,

but since Winthrop never specified what *harmful behaviors* they meant, the faculty was flying blind. Some were of the firm opinion that as long as they did nothing illegal, they should be fine, but others, like Abby, took their cues from the student rulebook. If they weren't allowed to do it, it probably wasn't a good idea for her to do it, either—and that meant no gum, no sandals, no distracting jewelry or hair ornaments, and absolutely no cell phones. Damn it.

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

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

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

“Absolutely. You have a lot of talent, Billy. I’m very proud of your progress.”

“You really think so?”

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

Billy smiled, lifting his head. “Okay, I’ll try.”

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

“I will. Thanks, Miss Devlin!”

“You’re welcome. Have a good weekend, Billy.”

“You too.”

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

*OMG I can’t believe it!!!!!!!!!!*

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

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

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

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

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

*DALTON GILES!!!!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three dots appeared, indicating Ray was typing a reply, but he clearly thought better of it, opting for a phone call instead. Abby lifted the phone to her ear. "Ray, please tell me that Wendy's on drugs or something."

His reply was solemn. "Wendy's not on drugs."

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

"He's not a soap star—not anymore. He lives in Houston now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But Wendy said—”

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

“And what if he’s terrible? He’s a soap star, for Pete’s sake! How good could he possibly...” Abby trailed off because the answer to her unfinished question was obvious: he was good enough to land a role on a television series. He was good enough to have fans and a following. He was good enough to have actually made a living as a real, legitimate actor—all feats she’d yet to accomplish, though not for lack of trying.

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

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

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

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

“What time is he coming in?”

Ray’s tone brightened. “You want to read with him?”

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

“He’s coming in at five-thirty.”

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

“Okay, I’ll be there,” she resolved in her cheeriest voice.

“Good. He’ll appreciate that. I appreciate it, too. You’re a real pro, Abby. I know this isn’t what you wanted, but you two will make it work. Just you wait and see.”



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

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

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

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

*You’ll be fine! You got this!*

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

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

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

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

*I didn’t tell her to say that!* Mom’s next message insisted, though if he knew her at all, that wasn’t necessarily the case. *That was all from the heart. She loves you and she’s so proud of you, and so am I. You can do this, baby!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wow, thank you. That's really nice. Thanks so much."

"I can't believe you're here! I always, always wanted to meet you, but I could never get to the conventions—and then, when I finally did save the money to go to one, you weren't there! You were in Vancouver doing a film! I was so sad! *But* you're here now, and I can't

believe it, and I'm making a complete fool of myself. Sorry!" Red-faced, Wendy finally let go of his hand. "Well, let me just let Ray know you're here."

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

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

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

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

Ray Fontaine cocked his head to the side. "D? Okay, sure. Well, come on back, and I'll show you around."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, that was one way to look at it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her insistent stare made it clear she knew something he didn’t, and that reassurance couldn’t have come at a better time. If he stood there stewing over things any longer, he might’ve found reason to leave.

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

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

Hopefully.



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

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

She wanted to call Ray or Gina or Wendy or *someone* to let them know about the delay, but after a long day in the drawer without a charge, her battery died somewhere between Winthrop Academy and the traffic jam. Dang. She hoped this wouldn't be misconstrued, especially after her less-than-enthusiastic reaction to the news. The last thing she wanted was to come across as some diva, or make it appear that she didn't want to meet or work with Dr. Sixpack—even if, deep down, she didn't.

Try as she might, Abby couldn't wrap her mind around it. Why would someone like him want to audition at their little two-bit playhouse, anyhow? Last time she'd checked, there were still soaps on the air, and one of them was bound to need a hulking, sexy beast to round out the cast. Looking like that, he could've gotten a job anywhere—even a teensy part like

“hottie in the underwear ad” would’ve been better than some small-time gig like this. What a comedown. She shuddered to imagine how he could’ve possibly sunk so low.

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

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

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

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

“I thought you had to work late.”

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

“Oh, good grief. Not you, too.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Considering what?”

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

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

“And what did he mess up on?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Lucky me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She’s playing Bernadette,” Ray informed.

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

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

“It’s cool, no worries.”

“Well, I’ll let you two get acquainted,” Ray announced, beaming. “I need to talk to Gina about a few things. D, come find me whenever you’re done. We’ll go get a drink.”

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

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

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

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

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

"For a little while, yeah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

It was half-past eight by the time he got home, despite his earlier resolve that he wouldn't stay a second longer at the playhouse than he had to. The people there were nice, and he was looking forward to working with all of them, but man, were they relentless. They were constantly finding more people to introduce him to, more ways to fawn over him, more unwarranted, overly generous compliments to offer, and more places to invite him to. Ray and some of the backstage people asked if he wanted to join them for a drink at some bar in Midtown, while the cast (namely the mildly standoffish, but undeniably intriguing Abby Devlin) expressed interest in him sticking around to watch them rehearse. It was nice of them to offer, sure—and he was grateful that they wanted to include him, but he couldn't say no to either invitation fast enough. All he wanted to do this weekend was soak up as much normalcy and time with Pres as possible, because come Monday, everything was going to change.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, I guess.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey, I cook sometimes. When I can.”

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

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

“Well, it’s not like you ever do!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Good point.”

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

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

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

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

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

*Good evening, someone called “caseyshamblinPA” wrote. My name is Casey, and I’m Kristen Horner’s PA. Sorry to reach out to you like this, but I didn’t have any other contact info. Kristen’s fan club is throwing a virtual event in November, honoring her tenth anniversary as Sonya, and they’re inviting all her leading men to take part. Right now, they’re looking at the week of Thanksgiving, but I know that’s a pretty busy time for people, so that’s subject to change once we hear from everyone. It’s just going to be virtual, a real “come as you are” informal type of thing, and there will be fans there in the chatroom, but you’ll just be video chatting with Kristen, Jesse Foster, Mark LeBlanc, the host and some others we haven’t determined yet. You’ll have the opportunity to talk to Kristen and the others, as well as plug any new projects you’re working on and let people know what you’re doing now. I think it will be a lot of fun for everybody, and Kristen would love it if you could be there. The Branson story was always her favorite, and it’s still really popular with the fans, too. Let me know if you’d be interested and I can put you in touch with the right people. You can call me anytime, email or respond to me through here. I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks, Casey*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She’ll be fine! I already told you, I don’t mind coming over every night to watch her. It’s not like I have a whole lot else going on!”

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

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

“Maybe not,” he conceded, swallowing, “but I’d still like to be the one to tuck her in.”

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

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

What the hell had he gotten himself into?



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

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

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

Right, she knew that part. Next.

His IEDB page was a bit more revealing. He boasted seven credits as an actor, in roles such as “John the Hottie” on a 2013 episode of *Wanda and Wally*, “Nash Dupree” on two episodes of *Texas Justice*, and “Edward West” in the television film *One Lover Wasn't Enough*—and though the site did not specify, Abby was willing to bet, just from its title, that was one of those insufferable Lifestyle flicks.

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

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

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

Credits—a blatant rehash of his IEDB page.

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

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

All About Dalton—bingo!

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

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

*Dalton did not originally plan to go into the entertainment industry. While on vacation in Los Angeles, he was scouted for modeling. As a model, he was seen in ads for Harrington’s New York, Nautical cologne and Insyde, a clothing brand based out of San Diego. His highest profile modeling job came in 2010, when he was featured alongside Sabrina Dillon on a billboard for Torrent by EP, which was prominently displayed in Times Square. This led to roles in commercials for fast-food chain Bacon Brothers, Ensley’s Beer and Washington Credit Union. Dalton also appeared in music videos for Robin Hazelton, Jennifer Grant and, most notably, as the love interest of Kat Miceli in the video for her ballad All Out of Tries.*

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

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

That paragraph stopped Abby cold, though she could not for the life of her determine why. Seemed simple enough. He was once married to a model—not surprising, because look at him—and they had a kid. They weren’t together anymore, sadly going the way of every beautiful Hollywood pair after a couple of years or so. None of that was earth-shattering information, but for some reason, it sparked something deep within her. Before she could

stop herself, she'd typed *Chelsie Crane* into the search engine, bracing for the images that were bound to pop up. They didn't disappoint.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



That photo, and the man it depicted, stayed on Abby's mind all weekend, with random currents of outrage springing up at the most inopportune times. It seemed he was all anyone at McMillan wanted to talk about—even Steve called from Austin, to ask if the rumors were true. Abby had never pegged him for much of a soap fan, but when she

confirmed that, sadly, it was, he spent the next half hour gushing about how *great* Dalton had been on the soap and how *amazing* it was that McMillan landed a *real star* like him.

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

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

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

*Damn it.*

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

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

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

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

*Abby?*

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

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

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

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

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

*K,* he sent back, with a little thumb’s up emoji. *Be there soon.*

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



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

Sincerely bewildered by the outburst, he tried to point out that, per the texts he exchanged with Ray this afternoon, he was actually fifteen minutes *early*, but that seemed to make her angrier. Red-faced and practically seething, she’d excused herself to make a phone call—a very loud and emotional one, he was sure—but she seemed calmer when she returned, and even apologized for the misunderstanding. Though annoyed, Dean shrugged it off, in the hopes that by doing so, they could salvage the rest of the evening...but somehow, it just got worse from there.

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

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

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

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

“Hey, it’s D. Listen, I just left rehearsal with Abby and this is not gonna work. I appreciate you guys giving me a chance, and I’m really sorry to do this to you, but I just don’t think it’s gonna work, so it’s best we end it here, okay? Thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh.” She frowned, her disappointment clear. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s fine,” he dismissed, shrugging. “Pres in bed?”

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

Lying down, he reached for the remote. “No, I think I’m good, thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shifted on the couch, readjusting the pillows. “I’m not worried.”

“Good.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last couple of texts were from Mom, promising she'd set the alarm and locked up before leaving. He flicked off the television, intent on dragging himself upstairs to spend the last forty-five minutes before his alarm in comfort, but the phone in his hand vibrated before he could get very far.

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

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

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

*Sure.*

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

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

“It's all right. Dumb idea, anyway.”

Margot sighed at that. “What happened?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe he could make her respect you.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And don’t yell at him this time!”

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

“You’d best not.”

**To read more, please visit <https://books2read.com/u/bz1v9j> to purchase a copy of *Soulmate, Stage Right* in your preferred format!**

