



HARLEQUIN®

September

flipside



title: Who Wants To
Marry a Heartthrob?

author: Stephanie Doyle

scene
1

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5

Stephanie Doyle Who Wants To Marry a Heartthrob?

Аннотация

The Perfect Reality TV Show... The Cast 1) One buff, self-centered former soap star 2) Fifteen excessively ambitious beauties 3) One mouthwash sponsor (fresh breath is important) 4) One very driven advertising executive (Richard Wells) and his pert assistant (Bridget Connor—as un-Beauty Queen as they come) The Show One man, a bevy of beauties and cameras everywhere to record the catfights. The Really Big Problem When a bad boob job forces a contestant to bail, Richard begs Bridget to fill in—never expecting she'll make it past the first cut. But to Bridget's glee and Richard's dismay, it seems that the hunky star of the show is very interested in Bridget... Lights... camera... and plenty of action!

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Dear Reader,

Come on. Admit it. At one point in time you have caught a snippet of The Bachelor, or The Bachelorette, or Average Joe or Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire? Or maybe you're a dedicated viewer. Well, this story is for everyone who has watched those shows and been amazed that reality can be so...dramatic!

I had just finished being flabbergasted that Trista actually dumped Charlie for Ryan when this story came to me in a flash. I couldn't help but wonder what really happened when the cameras stopped rolling. What if the Bachelor wasn't what he seemed? What would they do with a contestant with an A-cup bra size?

I saw Bridget as the anti-contestant. And since I have always loved the boss/secretary relationship—I'm a longtime fan of Josh and Donna on the West Wing—adding Richard as the demanding boss seemed like a perfect recipe for love, some fun and a lot of chaos.

I hope you enjoy this journey into my very warped, highly dramatic and hopefully very entertaining version of reality TV.

I do love to hear from readers. Come visit me at www.stephaniedoyle.net.

Happy reading,
Stephanie Doyle

"There's only one thing to do. Trick him."

This caught Bridget's attention. "What do you mean?"

"Pretend you need him to kiss you for some other reason," Raquel said. "Like you've got a piece of gum stuck on your back

tooth and you need him to get it.... Only with his tongue.”

The concept had merit—the kissing part, not the gum part. But... “I don’t know,” Bridget hedged. “You don’t think it’s a little obvious? I would like to think that Richard and I were more mature than that.”

Of course, Richard was oblivious to her feelings, which were apparently pretty obvious to the world. She wouldn’t share them with him verbally because she was a scaredy-cat. The two of them basically were afraid of their respective families. Richard drew comic strips for entertainment.

So maybe they were not the two most mature people in the city.

“Trick him,” Raquel repeated firmly.

Trick him, Bridget repeated silently. It might just work. Wow, she truly was becoming an evil seductress. All she had to do was sleep with her sister’s husband or abscond with someone else’s baby, claiming it was hers and it would pretty much be a done deal.

Richard wasn’t going to know what hit him....

Who Wants To Marry a Heartthrob?

Stephanie Doyle



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Doyle began her writing career in eighth grade when she was given an assignment to write in a journal every day. Her own life being routine, she used the opportunity to write her own sequel to the Star Wars movies. One hundred and six handwritten pages later, she discovered her lifelong dream—to be a writer. Currently, Stephanie resides in South Jersey with her cat, Alexandria Hamilton Doyle. Single, she still waits for Mr. Right to sweep her off her feet. She vows that whoever he is, he'll decorate the cover of at least one of her books.

Books by Stephanie Doyle

HARLEQUIN FLIPSIDE

2—ONE TRUE LOVE?

HARLEQUIN DUETS

65—DOWN-HOME DIVA

88—BAILY'S IRISH DREAM

SILHOUETTE INTIMATE MOMENTS

792—UNDISCOVERED HERO

For my brother, Chris. The funniest person I know.

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EPILOGUE

1

“HOUSTON, we have a problem.”

“Huh?”

“We have a problem,” Bridget Connor repeated, although she didn’t know why she bothered. Her employer clearly was not listening. Right now his gaze was pinned on fourteen gorgeous women, each dressed more scantily than the next. Bridget had never seen so much Spandex in one sitting in her life. And she wondered about the engineering of some of the clothes that managed to hold certain body parts in place when it seemed as if the slightest shift might give away the farm, so to speak.

Not that her employer was waiting for a quick flash. Or maybe he was—he was a man after all. But he wasn’t ogling the women with the same intent that some of the other men in the room had. No, Richard Wells’s priority wasn’t sex right now.

It was money.

He turned his head and she could see him squint in her direction. Squinting was Richard’s universal sign for “Huh?” After three years of working for him, she was an expert on all of his subtle little expressions.

“Did you say something?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“Something about a problem,” he recalled. “In Houston?”

“No, here in New York.”

He looked confused. “Then why did you say Houston?”

“It’s an expression. Work with me, Richard.” Then she reminded herself that she needed to be patient with him tonight. Not that it didn’t require a great deal of patience to work with the moody ad executive on a normal day, but tonight was different. His focus was solely on the event that was to take place within the next half hour. Nothing short of a nuclear explosion would distract him from that.

“What is it?” he snapped impatiently.

She considered him while he continued to study the room. “You have no intention of listening to a word I say, do you?”

When he turned back to her, he was squinting again.

“I don’t have time for problems,” he announced.

“I can see that, but you do. Have a problem, that is.”

He shook his head as if to deny her words. “What could possibly go wrong? The camera crew is here, the women are here—well, most of them anyway—and my heartthrob is most definitely here.” Richard pointed to the man standing by himself, away from the women. Brock Brickman was broad, blond, buffed and the perfect choice for Breathe Better Mouthwash’s newly sponsored show—Who Wants To Marry a Heartthrob?

“It’s about one of the girls,” Bridget tried.

Distracted, Richard looked over his shoulder and spotted two men in suits walking through the entryway into the large living room, which had been temporarily transformed into a television set. Don and Dan Meadle were the co-CEOs and owners of

Breathe Better Mouthwash. They also happened to be twins, which never failed to amuse Richard and cause him to silently mock the parents who had named them. Obviously, they were here to check up on the project, but he refused to be nervous. Everything was on schedule for his advertising masterpiece.

Who Wants To Marry a Heartthrob? a reality dating show set in New York, was going to put the burgeoning mouthwash company on the map. Two live group shows, four taped individual dates and two romantic weekend getaways, also taped and edited for maximum dramatic effect, would feature exclusively the mouthwash commercials that he had created.

The entire package had been Richard's concept. Once he had found a cable channel that would support the dating show over the course of eight weeks, his vision had become a reality. Now it was time for the show to air and his nerves were being put to the test, although there was absolutely no reason for it, he assured himself. He had left no stone unturned.

The first piece of the puzzle had been finding the location. He and Bridget had searched the summer play area of New York's wealthy, South Hampton, for days. Then they had stumbled on a house that was both markedly luxurious and effortlessly romantic.

The sprawling Victorian sat on an inlet of Long Island Sound. Done in white both inside and out, except for the hints of color strategically added throughout, it lent itself to a summer dream. A covered pool took up space on the green lawn that

extended toward the water. And in back of the house there was a massive patio, complete with a hot tub and porch swing. It was a heartthrob's ultimate bait.

The season was right. It was late fall, a little chilly perhaps, but the summer season was over and most of the tourists were gone. This would allow them more flexibility to get the shots on the beach and in the restaurants that they wanted for the four hour-long dates that would be aired individually.

That's right, Richard thought. Not one stone. He had handpicked each of the fifteen women as well as the heartthrob. Every detail of the show was in his control. Nothing escaped his notice. Not Brock's cologne, not the host's tie, not the wardrobe of the ladies. Nothing.

He was investing everything he had into this ad campaign. If it was successful—and it would be because the idea was genius—the Breathe Better Mouthwash executives would have no choice but to follow him when he branched out and opened his own agency. He'd worked for this night for years and success, real success, which to date had been an elusive lady, was within his grasp.

Unfortunately, it was usually moments like this when he thought he was so close to something that nothing could go wrong—that it all went wrong. He need only reflect on that last week before he was to have graduated from Yale to get a reminder of that particularly painful lesson.

"They're here," Richard announced ominously, his chin lifting

slightly in the direction of the twins.

Bridget turned and glanced at the two men who were standing off to the side observing the spectacle that was a live television show.

“This is it,” Richard told her somewhat fatalistically, feeling his heart beat hard against his rib cage and his palms beginning to sweat. For the most part he wouldn’t have considered himself a nervous man, but right now it felt as if his whole life was coming down to this one crucial moment. He glanced at Bridget, grateful for her presence. Not only did he know that he had her support throughout this endeavor, but he also knew that she would cover his tracks if he needed to leave the room real quick to puke. “If this works—And it is going to work, right? We both agree it couldn’t fail. Right?”

“Right.”

“You’re only saying that because you know that’s what I want to hear, aren’t you,” he accused her.

“Right.”

He could live with that.

“This will be the big one. The one I’ve been looking for. The one that is going to free me and my creative genius from the death grip of the V.I.P. Advertising Agency.”

Bridget rolled her eyes.

“I saw you do that.”

“You’re so dramatic,” she said. “You’ve been looking for the ‘one’ for years now. And V.I.P. doesn’t have you in a death grip.

They pay you really well. That's why you stay with them."

"It's just that I have a loft in Soho. You know what I pay in rent. I can't quit and start my own agency until I'm positive, absolutely sure, that one of these big companies is going to follow me. But this is it. I can smell it."

"You don't think that's the mouthwash?"

Richard took his eyes off the two executives and focused them on his assistant again. Her lips were turned up in that soft smile that she was famous for. Subtlety, he thought, thy name is Bridget.

It was there in the way she pulled her midnight hair back into a tight bun, the way she always wore stark black clothes and the way she always maintained a sense of calm even in the face of chaos—as she was doing now. He couldn't help but envy her that serenity.

"You know this night is about your future, too," he told her. "Didn't I promise you I would make you vice president?"

"Ooh. Vice president of a two-person company. A staggering promotion," she quipped. But the truth was she knew that following Richard to his own company was the career break she'd been looking for since she'd graduated college and ended up in the assistant pool at V.I.P. It did occur to her that he'd never really asked her if she was willing to quit V.I.P. and join him in his endeavors. He'd just assumed she would.

He was right of course, but still...a girl liked to be asked.

"Don't you want me to be successful when I do leave?"

She shrugged. "It's not as important to me. I only have an efficiency in Brooklyn."

He smirked at her then turned his attention back to the scene before him. The women were arranging themselves around the room ready to greet their potential husband and heartthrob. Bridget watched Richard count them and waited for him to notice that something was missing.

Then Buzz, the cameraman/director that Richard had hired, approached the two of them. A mobile camera, one of three that they were using for the show, sat heavily on his thick shoulder. He had thick, salt-and-pepper-colored hair that hung heavily down his back, a bushy beard, several tattoos and Richard could see Buzz's round belly where his T-shirt didn't quite meet the top of his jeans.

Suddenly, Richard was very grateful that this man would always be behind the camera. Buzz was definitely not what America was tuning in to see. Richard quickly checked the living room for mirrors and was satisfied when he saw none.

"We've got a problem," Buzz announced.

"I told you," Bridget sang.

Richard glared her into silence. "I know. There are still only fourteen girls. Where's—" Richard scanned the faces of the women, ticking off in his head each of the candidates "—Bambi?"

"Boob accident," Bridget announced. Both men looked at her. "That's what I was trying to tell you. She just called. Apparently

she developed complications after her implant surgery.”

“What kind of complications?” Richard asked.

“It seems she might have gone a little overboard, three cup sizes overboard to be exact. Her body couldn’t hold them up, and as a result, she threw out her back. She’s going to be in traction for the next three weeks.”

“Three weeks!”

“Wow,” Buzz mumbled. “Must be some pretty big boobs.”

Richard instantly calmed down. “Fine, we’ll do the show with fourteen women.”

“We can’t,” Buzz complained. “You told me fifteen. I set up everything to work for fifteen. The camera shots, the furniture, the props. If there are only fourteen girls it’s not going to look right. The shots won’t be even.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, it’s only a cable show. At best what we’re attempting to do here is a beefed-up, overly dramatic infomercial. We’re not talking Masterpiece Theater,” Richard wailed.

“Fifteen is fifteen. I’m a perfectionist.”

“We’re going live in, like—” Richard glanced at his watch and immediately freaked “—ten minutes! Ten minutes. I can’t find another Bambi in ten minutes! Bridget, tell him I can’t find another Bambi in five minutes.”

“We’re fresh out of Bambis, Buzz,” she obliged and tried not to smile for fear it would upset Richard that much more. Not that it wasn’t fun to get him riled every once in a while, but tonight

really wasn't the time.

Buzz shrugged. "Fine. If that's the way you want it. I'm just saying it's going to look funny."

"What's going to look funny?" Dan, one of the co-CEOs, who had wandered over to their side of the room, asked.

Bridget watched in amazement as Richard instantly smoothed out his frazzled expression. He could go from hysterical lunatic to calm businessman like nobody else she knew. It was all an act, but it was a good one.

"Nothing. Everything is fine. "

Don joined them and pointed to Buzz. "He said that it was going to look funny. We don't want funny. We're not paying for funny. You said everything would be perfect."

"And it will be," Richard insisted to the two men.

"Not with fourteen girls," Buzz muttered.

Richard glared at the cameraman ferociously. "I'll get a girl," he announced.

Dan, Don and Buzz all looked at Richard expectantly.

"I'll get a girl," he repeated. This time with conviction.

Satisfied, Buzz wandered off and so did the executives.

"Great," Richard snapped once everyone was out of earshot. "Buzz, the biker cameraman is really a junior Steven Spielberg in training."

"You did insist on the best," Bridget reminded him.

"I need you to be on my side right now."

She snorted. "That should be in my job description. Filing,

message taking, errand running and permanently being on your side.”

“You mean it isn’t? Add that to your job description as my VP.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Find a girl,” he ordered her sounding somewhat desperate.

She laughed. “Where am I going to find a sane single woman who is willing to go on a television game show to win a husband in less than ten minutes?”

“Not just a husband... a heartthrob husband. Brock Brickman is America’s daytime heartthrob. Clearly you’ve never seen his work on *The Many Days of Life*.”

“Yes, but wasn’t he fired?”

“Only a few weeks ago. Which is the only reason he was available to do this show in the first place so let’s consider ourselves lucky. He’s a semi-star, he’s handsome and he’s going to pick one of these lucky women to be his wife. One of these lucky fifteen women. I just need one more...” Richard’s words trailed off even as he surveyed her up and down.

Bridget suddenly got very nervous. Either Richard somehow could see through her dark silk blouse and was checking her out—not likely—or she was being sized up as a piece of meat. A sacrificial piece of meat.

She isn’t Bambi, he concluded silently. She didn’t have the flowing blond hair, the blue eyes or the body. Bridget more or less resembled a modern-day Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*...

before the transformation.

She had little to no shape. Her golden-brown eyes, probably her best feature, were covered by thick, dark glasses that he knew she thought were chic, but that actually took up too much space on her face. No doubt her soft pale skin tone would translate as pasty on camera, but he was a desperate man. They could always add a lot of makeup.

“Richard,” Bridget growled. “Why are you looking at me like I’m steak and you are a hungry dog?”

“You’re single.”

“Oh, no,” she protested. “No way. Not me.”

“Bridge, I’m desperate. You heard Dan. He said no funny.”

“That was Don.”

“Whatever. I need you.”

“If you think I would go on a television show to get a husband...If you think I would go on a television show for any reason, you are out of your mind. You know how I hate the spotlight.”

“But this is our future, Bridge!”

Their future. Her heart skipped a beat at his words. She wasn’t sure exactly why. Possibly because she had a very real fear she was about to wet her pants. “I’m not going on TV.”

“Fine. Don’t do this. Don’t make this sacrifice. Really, I don’t know what I was thinking. I mean, hey, you’re happy just being my assistant, right? The idea of running an advertising company alongside me isn’t that important to you, is it?”

Bridget stood firm in the face of his guilt-mixed-with-bribery tactic. He was deluding himself if he thought for a moment that she was going to fall for it. She was way too skilled with this tactic to even flinch.

“Okay, I do know what I was thinking,” he said answering his own question. “I was thinking that you could, for the sake of Buzz’s desire to be a perfectionist, Dan’s—”

“Don’s.”

—Don’s desire that absolutely nothing go wrong on this million-dollar ad campaign and, of course, my desire that this show put Breathe Better Mouthwash on every grocery and drugstore shelf in America, thus securing my position as New York’s most creative and most successful advertising force, sit in one of those chairs for one hour and look at Brock as if he makes your mouth water! That’s it. That is all that I am asking.” Richard inhaled deeply, then added, “It’s not like you’re going to make the first cut.”

Why that statement, of all things, should sting, she couldn’t say. But she could feel her bottom lip puff out slightly in what she feared was a sulky pout. Bridget didn’t do the sulky pout well. Usually, she ended up looking as though her lower lip had been stung by a bee. “And why not?”

“Look at you,” Richard said, pointing at her chest. “Now look at them.”

Bridget scanned the room of women all working on poses that showed off their...posture...in the best possible light.

“All right,” Bridget conceded. “I get your point. Maybe I don’t have the figure of Pamela Anderson, but that doesn’t mean that Brock might not see my inner beauty.”

“Okay,” Richard said, using his hands on her shoulders to spin her and point her in the direction of Brock. “Now, look at him.”

Brock currently was trying to check out his reflection in one of the elegant silver pitchers sitting on one of the marble-top tables that lined the foyer of the house. Bridget couldn’t imagine that the distorted image satisfied his vanity.

“Hey, do I have something in my teeth?” Brock asked one of the cameramen.

Richard turned Bridget back around to face him. “Please, Bridge. I know you hate the spotlight. But you won’t even know the cameras are there. These guys are professionals. You’ll sit in one of the chairs, balancing out the shot for Buzz, maybe say hello and goodbye to Brock. He’ll pick eight girls, none of whom will be you, and bang! You’re back to being my assistant.”

“Oh, joy!” she exclaimed with mock enthusiasm. “You mean after being rejected and humiliated on network television, I get to go back to being your assistant.”

“It’s not network, sweetheart, it’s cable.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed.

“Please,” he cajoled, and she could hear him struggling to muster actual sincerity. She hated when he did that. It always weakened her.

“You’re my best friend. You’re going to be my future business

partner,” he added. “And friends and partners are supposed to be there for each other, aren’t they?”

“What a load of crap,” she groaned. Internally though, she felt herself caving.

“No, really, it’s true. I read it in a magazine.”

“Richard,” she pleaded, giving it one last shot. “Don’t make me do this.”

Damn, he thought. He was beginning to buckle. He hadn’t lied when he’d said she was his best friend. His only friend, if truth were told. He’d spent so much of his energy focused on this one goal of getting to the top that he hadn’t left a lot of room in his life for family, lovers or even friends. He was pretty sure that Bridget only hung around because of his promise to promote her. Still, she stayed with him and he didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize that. But he couldn’t blow this opportunity, either. He was so close to having everything.

Which meant it was time to bring out the trump card.

“I didn’t want to have to do this, Bridge...”

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to read his thoughts. “Oh, no, you wouldn’t...”

“Did I mention that I’m desperate?”

“You are a cad,” she accused him, sensing the type of blackmail he was about to inflict upon her.

“Did I or did I not attend your sister’s wedding with you?”

“Yes,” she muttered through gritted teeth knowing where the rest of this conversation was going.

“Did I or did I not pretend to be your loving boyfriend just to get your parents off your back about marriage?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“And did I or did I not dance with your aunt Edna?”

“Hey,” Bridget countered. “Nobody said you had to dance with Aunt Edna.”

“But I did it anyway. Danced with her and told her how much I was in love with you. How you were the woman of my dreams and that someday I would win you over and convince you to be my wife. And how many times has your mother tried to fix you up with a blind date since then?”

“None.”

“None. One hour. In one of those nice, white, over-stuffed chairs. ‘Hello, Brock. Goodbye, Brock.’ That’s all I’m asking.”

Bridget closed her eyes in defeat.

“And maybe if you could summon up a tear or two when he rejects you,” Richard added, but quickly shut his mouth when she glared at him.

Her shoulders slumped and she sighed in resignation. It was no use. There was no way she could refuse him. Not after what he had done for her. When she’d gotten the invitation to her sister’s wedding with the “and guest” printed on the envelope, she’d almost considered not even attending. If not for the fact that she was in the wedding party, she might have called in sick. But she hadn’t wanted to give her family the satisfaction of knowing that she wasn’t seeing someone.

Heck, the truth was she rarely was seeing anyone. It was sort of a theme she'd established in high school. Her beautiful sisters got the guys. Bridget...didn't. It had always been that simple.

With the wedding looming, and a very real fear that her mother would attempt to set her up with a date for the event, Bridget got desperate. Her mother didn't have the best taste when it came to picking out dates. They were always either the nephew of a friend's friend—desperately lonely and still living with his mother—or some recent divorcee who was looking to get back in the game. It was sad to acknowledge that her mother didn't really have much faith that Bridget could attract any other sort of man.

So she'd decided the answer to her problem was to take a date home to prove that she was all grown up and capable of attracting a successful, interesting man. Since a man was a mark of success in the Connor household, it was only logical that Bridget bring home the most successful man she knew.

She ended up being turned down by a bagman on the street before she resorted to asking Richard.

He said yes. And something happened that night. He stood by her side the entire evening—well, except for the Aunt Edna tango. Even when her younger sisters tried to lure him onto the dance floor, he resisted. He danced every dance with her, held her tightly in his arms and whispered jokes into her ear so that she would smile in the face of such familial scrutiny. He was sweet, caring, funny and he made her feel like the only woman alive. Most importantly, he saved her from the final humiliation

of having to stand in front of the room and not catch the bouquet. He'd been her hero that night.

And because of it, something had changed between them.

She didn't really have a name for it. Lately, she found herself looking at him differently. It was suddenly easier to see beyond the moody genius with the colossal ego and ridiculous demands to the considerate guy hidden beneath. She didn't mind the long hours or the occasional working weekend. And when he ordered in dinner for them and they talked late into the night, it felt... nice. Even a little warm and fuzzy.

A total turnaround from the beginning of their relationship. There had been no warm and fuzzy feelings when they'd started working together. He'd been rude, arrogant and impossible to deal with. Only the fact that she'd managed to match him in wits kept her coming back for more. She also admired his ambition. She'd known even then that if she stuck with him, he could take her as far as she wanted to go in advertising. She didn't have his creativity, but she made up for it with business savvy. Together, they were an unstoppable team at V.I.P.

Since the wedding, she had been wondering what was behind his unflappable drive. Why did he need to work so hard to get to the top? What was he trying to prove and to whom? The wedding had opened her eyes to Richard the man, rather than Richard the employer, adversary and sometimes friend.

She wasn't exactly sure that she liked having her eyes opened. In fact, she was sort of hoping that they would close again real

soon. Because one thing was for certain, under no circumstances would she do something so ridiculously cliché as falling for the boss.

Not her.

No way.

Wasn't going to happen.

Except that now, every time he barked an order, she remembered how he'd gotten her the last piece of dark chocolate off the dessert tray. Every time he crashed after he convinced himself that his storyboards were horrible—which they never were—she found herself wanting to pat his head and tell him that everything was going to be all right. And every time he raised his arms in victory and called her into his office so that she could tell him what a genius he was, she remembered how he'd put all that ego aside and made her the focus for one night.

He'd told her parents how amazing her work was and how, when he did leave to start his own ad agency, she was the only one he wanted to come with him. He'd said that he couldn't succeed without her.

And he'd meant it. The bastard!

One lousy night and suddenly she found herself doing the strangest things, like fussing with her appearance. Something she never did. Her sisters had taught her at a very early age that she was never going to be as pretty as they were so there was really no point in trying. Bridget agreed. In fact, she'd gone so far as to rebel against makeup, styling products and all beauty

accoutrements. She preferred looking like herself and not some made-up version of herself with too much eye shadow. And in doing so, she felt that she was making a personal stand for inner beauty in women everywhere.

Not to mention it saving her a lot of money.

Until now. These days she wore perfume to the office and tried to style her long, straight hair rather than wearing it in a bun every day. Not that Richard had noticed any of it. Heck, he didn't even think she would make the cut on his stupid show.

Wouldn't that show him if she did make the cut? What would he think then?

The fact that she shouldn't care so much what he thought didn't enter into Bridget's thought process at the moment. Instead she realized that making it to the second round of his stupid show might just prove to him and the world that she was, in fact, a woman.

A desirable woman, if not a spectacularly beautiful one.

Bridget's mind raced with the possibilities. If she could somehow manage to get close to Brock and dazzle him with her keen wit and natural charm, maybe she could convince him to keep her around for a while. Maybe he might actually fall for her and then Richard would be forced to acknowledge that it was possible for other men to find her attractive.

The seeds of a plan sprung deep in her cortex. All she had to do was attract Brock's attention.

Bridget turned her gaze to where he stood amongst five of

the bevy of beauties. He was flexing his bicep. They giggled, he smiled, and Bridget wanted to puke. Okay, maybe he wasn't her type. Still, all she had to do was get close enough to talk with him, maybe make him laugh, and she might have a shot.

If that didn't work, she could always try bribing him. It would be worth anything, if for no other reason than to see Richard eat his words.

"I'll do it," she finally announced.

"Really?" he asked, clearly astonished. "I thought you were going to make me do a lot more begging and pleading. All of which, I have to admit, I was willing to do."

"Not so fast," she said. "My surrender comes at a price. There is a condition."

"Damn, I knew that was too easy," he cursed under his breath. "Okay, let me have it. What do you want?"

"Christmas is coming up in a few months..."

"Oh, no."

"How many minutes before we go live?"

Her smile was sweet, albeit sinful, and his eyes narrowed as he pantomimed rolling up his sleeves. It's not as if he didn't know who he was messing with when he began this particular game. He knew exactly what she was playing for, and considering the stakes, he was willing to negotiate. "One day."

"Two."

"A day and a half."

"Christmas Eve dinner, Midnight Mass and brunch the

following morning, all in the presence of my family.”

She was going for the gusto. But so was he. “Fine.”

“And you have to buy me a present.”

“Evil,” he whispered.

“It’s a little game I like to play called hardball, Richard. You should know it, you’re the one who taught me how to play.”

“Agreed. Now, let’s try and do something with you.” Richard scanned the contestants. He remembered from their résumés that one of them was a makeup artist who worked in a salon. “Rachel,” he called to one of the girls and motioned her to come over.

A buxom, blue-eyed blonde stood and made her way toward them in a hip-swaying walk that drew the attention of every man in the room. “It’s Raquel,” the woman said in a perfect imitation of Marilyn Monroe’s breathy tones.

“Okay. You’re the makeup lady right?”

“I am an artist,” she replied, somewhat affronted.

Richard pushed Bridget in front of the woman’s face. “Can you do something with her?”

Raquel studied her face. “Well, first we would have to remove all that awful white powder.”

“I’m not wearing any makeup,” Bridget said.

“Ahh!” the woman gasped clearly horrified at such an announcement.

“Except for my Bobby Brown eyeliner,” Bridget conceded. “I mean a girl’s got to have something.”

“Look,” Richard snapped. “We’re running out of time. Just do something. Okay?”

“I can try,” the woman replied. “I’ll need my kit. Come with me.”

“Can’t you just get it and bring it here?” Bridget asked.

“Oh, I can’t carry it. It’s way too heavy. My boyfriend...I mean my ex-boyfriend...took it upstairs and left it in one of the bedrooms. Follow me.”

“Hurry,” Richard urged, only to have Bridget stick her tongue out at him as she walked by. “And while you’re at it, take off those glasses, too!”

BRIDGET FOLLOWED the voluptuous Raquel up the stairs, noting the makeup artist’s walk as she did. She tried to mimic the hip-swaying action, but each time she thrust her hip out to the left or to the right all she managed to do was throw her body off balance. Tripping her way up the stairs was nowhere near as sexy.

They reached the top hallway and turned into one of the bedrooms where a full-size trunk sat at the end of the bed. Raquel flipped the latches and opened the lid to reveal a treasure trove of color beneath it.

“Wow,” Bridget reacted. She hadn’t seen this much makeup in...she’d never seen this much makeup.

“I know. I’ve collected shades from all over the world.”

“Really?”

“No, I just think it sounds more exotic when I say that. But they’re definitely from all over the tri-state area. New York, New

Jersey and Long Island.”

Bridget considered informing Raquel that Long Island wasn't a state, but decided they really didn't have enough time. Instead she grabbed a chair from a corner of the room and pulled it close to the trunk. She took off her glasses and tucked them into the pocket of her black capri pants.

“Okay,” Bridget said lifting her face. “Have at it. Just don't make me look like a hooker.”

Again, Raquel appeared to be offended. “Do I look like a hooker?”

Bridget considered the body-hugging strapless red dress that clung to the woman's figure like plastic wrap. “Uh...no?”

Moments later various brushes were running over her face as Raquel talked. “The truth is you have very smooth skin. If I had more time, and could do something with your hair, and your clothes and your breasts—”

“Hey, no messing with my breasts,” Bridget stated. But the idea did have merit. If she could stay on the show for another round, get a little professional help, maybe she could pull an ugly duck-beautiful swan transformation. That would mean Raquel would have to stick around, too. “So, do you think you'll make the first cut?”

“Of course I do.”

Bridget envied the woman's confidence.

“What makes you so sure? There are a lot of beautiful women downstairs.”

"I gave him a note that said I would be willing to perform multiple sexual acts on his body."

"That's cheating!"

"It is?"

Bridget shook her head trying to understand. "But you don't even know him. And besides that you have a boyfriend."

"Shh," Raquel whispered. "Not so loud. The rules said you weren't supposed to have a boyfriend."

"For a very good reason," Bridget told her. "If Brock picks you, it's to be his wife."

"Oh, silly, that's not what this show is about."

"It's not?"

"No. I mean, of course that's the end result, but really we're all here for very different reasons. I'm here because I want to be a star. Maybe even do a cosmetics commercial one day."

Bridget considered the women downstairs and didn't imagine that their reasons were all that different. Except for hers, of course. Her reasons were perfectly legitimate. She was going to do the show to make her employer—who she secretly feared she was developing feelings for—eat crow for thinking she couldn't make the cut, and to prove to him that she was more than just an assistant. What more noble reasons could there be than that?

"All done," Raquel announced.

Bridget pulled back and took the hand mirror that Raquel handed her. Wow! She looked different. Not hooker-different, either. Raquel had just added subtle shades under her

cheekbones, over her eyes and on her lips that seemed to make her features stand out in the best sort of way. And she did it all without adding any more eyeliner.

So much for Bridget's great makeup rebellion. This actually looked good on her.

"You are an artist."

"Told you." Raquel closed her case and started for the door. "Come on, we don't want to be late."

Bridget agreed. She reached for the glasses in her pants pocket and put them on.

"Eeek!" Raquel screeched when she saw her. "You can't wear those, you might smudge. Besides that, I don't like to see my work go unnoticed. Call it the creative genius in me."

Great, Bridget thought. Between Buzz, Richard and Raquel this show was going to have more geniuses than it knew what to do with. "But I can't see. Seriously, after ten feet everything blurs."

The blonde held her two hands palms up then shifted them back and forth as if weighing the choices. "Beauty. Sight. Beauty. Sight. Beauty."

"How do you figure that?"

"Silly, beauty always wins."

"Fine," Bridget grumbled and put the glasses back into her pocket. She would just have to try really hard not to squint. She didn't imagine that Brock had a secret desire for squinters.

Carefully, she followed Raquel down the stairs and knew that

the foggy blur at the bottom was Richard.

“Hurry,” he urged the two women on.

“I can’t see,” Bridget hissed.

“And I can’t hurry in heels,” Raquel told him, pouting.

Finally, they made it to the bottom of the stairs. Richard took a hard look at Bridget, and up close, she could see that he nodded in satisfaction. “Okay, now let’s get you both on the set.”

Buzz directed them where to sit. He picked out a single hardback chair for Bridget and placed her in it. “Sit up, chin out, boobs...oh. Never mind.”

Bridget tried not to take offense. She saw Brock leaning against a wall in the foyer and tried to get his attention. At least she thought it was Brock. It could have been a coat rack for all she knew.

“Okay, this is it,” the host announced. “Smile, ladies, and remember you are trying to win the heart of America’s daytime heartthrob, so dirty tricks, cat fighting, name calling and tears are all perfectly acceptable. Good luck.”

Bridget saw one of the cameramen circle the room bringing the hulking piece of equipment with him. She tried to brace herself for the impact of knowing that in less than five, four, three...seconds, the camera was going to be on her.

She turned her head and saw Richard standing just out of range of the camera with his two thumbs in the air. Or were they two fingers?

Don’t think, she told herself. If she began to think she might

begin to realize that she was going to be on TV and that might cause her to panic.

Too late.

Breathe, she ordered herself. She was doing this for a reason. She was doing this to prove something to her family, to Richard...maybe even to herself. She could compete for a man's affection with gifts like intelligence and humor and she wasn't completely unworthy of a man's attention. She would show Richard that she could make the cut and then maybe he would stop taking her for granted.

That's right. It wasn't about any hidden feelings she had for him. It certainly wasn't because she wanted to make him jealous. That would be ridiculous. She only wanted him to see how wrong he was about her.

"Hey, can you pull back a little," she heard Richard say to Buzz, who now had the camera focused on her. "I think she's got something in her nose."

She was an idiot.

2

“SO BROCK,” Chuck, the show’s host began, as most hosts do, with a fake smile and an even faker-sounding voice. “Tell us what you are looking for in a woman.”

Brock, who sat next to Chuck in the center of a half arc of fawning women, seemed to ponder the question. He rubbed his chin for a moment, turned to the camera that was focused on him and gazed directly into it, as if letting the viewing audience in on his thoughts before he said anything aloud.

“So many things, Chuck,” he responded. “I’m not looking for someone who is just hot. You know what I mean?”

“I do, Brock. I do.”

Not just hot. Suddenly, Bridget perked up a little. She had to admit she’d been feeling somewhat disenchanted after she’d spent time conversing with the other contestants during the first commercial break. Apparently they were all as equally determined as her to land Brock’s affections and at least make the first cut. Only the most pathetic would be getting the boot tonight, and she sensed that most of the women she talked to counted her as being on that list.

Their reasons for wanting to stay did vary. Some wanted to continue because they thought he was a babe. Some because they wanted to be the wife of Dr. Noah Vanderhorn, the legendary thoracic surgeon with a troubled past and a vulnerability for

dangerous women, from the daytime television show *The Many Days of Life*. Most of them, however, wanted their own career in daytime television and starring with Brock Brickman, even if it was on a game show, seemed to be the best approach.

When Bridget suggested training as an actress, preparing a headshot and a résumé and going on auditions, they looked at her as if she was crazy. What did she know about anything? they asked. She wasn't even showing cleavage.

Well, now she knew that Brock wanted more than just someone who was attractive.

Take that, girls!

"I want someone with a soul, too," he confessed to Chuck. Soul. Bridget glanced around the room and decided that most of these women had foregone soul for silicon. It was beginning to look as though she had a shot at him after all. She smiled and tried to flutter her eyelashes, but Raquel had gone a little thick on the mascara and they ended up sticking a little.

"Of course, hot doesn't hurt," Brock added, then nudged the host's elbow with his own as if sharing a private joke.

The women, who had been slumping progressively throughout his little speech, suddenly came to life again. Shoulders were thrown back, chins were lifted and hair was flicked. The blonde next to Bridget caught her square in the mouth with a chunk of hair. Bridget turned her head away and the hair was gone, but the taste of hairspray lingered. She tried not to make a horrible scrunch face as she attempted to lick the spray from her teeth.

Please don't let the camera see me doing this.

"WHAT IS that one woman doing?" the Breathe Better Mouthwash executive asked, pointing to the screen.

Richard stood next to Dan or Don—he really needed to learn which one was which—off camera watching the show on a television monitor. He didn't have an answer for the CEO because he really didn't know what Bridget was doing. First, her eyes had started blinking furiously. Now, she was doing something with her face. For a moment, he feared she was having some kind of seizure. He never should have forced her to do this, he realized. Bridget simply wasn't cut out for this kind of attention. If he hadn't known that from his three years of working with her, he'd certainly learned it at her sister's wedding.

Bridget liked to blend. She was the kind of person who was always there, but was never seen. The ultimate assistant: always on hand, but never underfoot. It wasn't until after the wedding that he began to understand where that quality came from.

Four sisters. Each of them more stunning than the next. Each one of them knowing it, too. Bridget was the worst kind of Cinderella in a family like that, situated between the two older and two younger stars, with a mother who prized beauty and landing a prince above smarts and success.

And Bridget had too much pride even to ask for a fairy godmother.

"Can you make her stop doing that?" Don or Dan asked.

Richard took his eyes away from the monitor and moved back

toward the living room, standing just behind Pete, one of the cameramen. At least Bridget seemed to have cleared up her facial tic and once again was focused intently on Brock.

In this particular group of women, she stood out simply because she was so unremarkable. A bubble of annoyance gurgled in his gut and he suddenly had an irrational desire to walk onto the set, grab her arm and get her the hell out of there.

He didn't want anyone sitting at home watching this show to wonder what she was doing on TV with those other gorgeous women. He didn't want anyone thinking that she was desperate. She wasn't. She was doing him a favor. And in some ways, she was one of the most beautiful women he knew.

Not to mention the kind of guts it took to sit alongside a panel of women who looked like that. But the audience couldn't see guts.

This was his fault. He'd made her do this and now he regretted it. And the worst part was yet to come. Brock still had to reject her on television in front of everyone. The reality of that was sinking in now that the moment was fast approaching. Suddenly anxious, Richard wondered if she would ever forgive him for this...and why it mattered so much to him if she didn't.

"OKAY, let's hear from the ladies," Chuck decided, still oozing his unique charm. "Tell me what you're looking for in a potential mate. Raquel."

"I'm looking for someone just like Brick Brockman."

"You mean Brock Brickman," the host corrected her quickly.

“That’s right.” She smiled and pulled her shoulders together a bit more to enhance her cleavage. “Brick Brockman. He’s my ideal man.”

“Okay, moving right along. You, Jenna?”

A sultry brunette with impossibly blue eyes stood and drew all eyes to her. Bridget had already determined that this woman was no fool. She had a goal, and Bridget assessed that Jenna would be undaunted in the pursuit of that goal. This woman was going to marry Brock or land a role in a soap opera.

Whichever came first.

She looked at Brock then shifted her head slightly, no doubt to give her best side to the camera, and told everyone in clear strong tones, “I’m looking for someone who completes me. Someone who fills my heart and is filled in return by all the love I have to give. I don’t want just a husband, but a life mate. A partner. Someone I can share my innermost feelings with, not to mention my innermost...desires.” She sat down again with a flick of her hair and a sultry glance that might have been aimed at Brock, or at the camera behind him.

Wow. That was some speech, Bridget silently applauded. She only hoped she didn’t have to follow that.

“And Bridget, tell us what are the pieces that make up your Mr. Perfect?”

There were times, she decided, that life could be entirely unfair.

“Uh...well, he...should...uh...I suppose I’m looking for...”

The camera guy zoomed in on her and the blinking light above it forced her to turn her eyes away. The light also didn't help with her stuttering.

"Ah," Chuck extolled. "I see we have a shy one here. Please, don't be scared. All of America wants to know what it is you're looking for in a man."

All of America. Bridget gulped. "I guess what I'm really searching for is..."

"I'm sorry." Chuck stopped her with a raised hand and turned his back on her to speak directly to the camera. "But we're out of time."

"Why does that not surprise me," she muttered under her breath.

"This is the part of the show where Brock must retire to his solitary space. In that space he will have to ask himself 'Is she the right one for me?' Fifteen women will receive an invitation, and in that invitation there will be either a green card or a red card. Green means she gets to go on to the next show to see if she can win the heart of our heartthrob. Red means that life has chosen another course for her. Tonight only eight cards will be green. We'll be right back to watch our ladies open their invitations. As always Who Wants To Marry a Heartthrob? is brought to you by Breathe Better Mouthwash, the mouthwash choice of singles. Because at those critical moments it's important to have good breath. Your future could depend on it."

Bridget winced at the phrase that Richard had finally decided

on as the tag line for the campaign.

Breathe Better Mouthwash—because your future could depend on it.

She'd told him it was too dramatic. But with Chuck saying it as if mouthwash were a life-or-death decision, she thought it superceded dramatic and launched directly into the melodramatic. Typical Richard, she thought to herself. Always pushing. Always going over the top.

The red lights on top of the cameras abruptly went dark and Bridget breathed a sigh of relief. During each of the intermissions some of the women had had a chance to speak with Brock one-on-one. Getting close to him, however, meant running a gauntlet of pointed elbows and spiky heels.

Fortunately, Bridget had an edge over the crowd since she wasn't as afraid of bruising as some of the other women were. She had actually made it to his side during the last commercial, but had only managed, "Hi, my name is..." before someone—her money was on Jenna—had knocked her out of the way. Now would be her last chance to impress him if she had any hope of getting a green invitation.

She stood up, scanned the room for Brock and saw him being whisked away by Chuck down a hallway that led to one of the studies in the back of the house. She was about to follow in pursuit when, of all people, Richard moved in front of her path.

"Okay, I'll say it. I was wrong and you were right. I never should have made you do this. I'm sorry."

She knew she should have been thrilled with such a statement, especially coming from someone who hoarded apologies the way Scrooge hoarded coal on Christmas Eve. But hearing this from Richard at this particular moment wasn't good news. No doubt after watching her on the monitor, it was obvious that she didn't belong with the others. But she wasn't going to let the fear that she might have made a fool out of herself on television stop her from getting what she wanted.

And what she wanted was Richard. No, no, no, she thought, shaking that idea completely out of her head. She wanted Brock. Well, not really Brock. Just another night with Brock to teach Richard a lesson.

"Richard, move out of the way." Bridget attempted to move around him, but he stepped with her, continuing to block her path. And he was big. Sometimes she forgot how tall he was, but when she stood toe-to-toe with him she barely reached his chin. It was the lean, easy quality about him that made her forget sometimes that he was, in fact, a lot of man.

"No. I guilted you into it. I forced you in front of a camera, made you put on all that makeup, which I know goes against your whole inner-beauty-motto thing—although I have to say, it really does look nice on you—and now I've set you up for this failure."

His last item had her stopping in her tracks. "Failure?"

"I know and I'm sorry. You're going to have to open that stupid invitation, get that red card. It's going to be horrible. But listen, I talked to Buzz and I specifically told him to keep you off camera

as much as possible. It will be like the Oscars. As soon as he sees red, he'll move the camera off you."

It was stupid and not like her at all, but she actually felt tears welling up in her eyes. His lack of faith in her, well, womanhood, was crushing. Despite the makeup, despite taking off her glasses and despite her attempt at eye fluttering, he didn't even consider the possibility that Brock might pick her. All he saw was a failure.

"I'm really sorry, Bridge."

"Me, too," she mumbled trying to contain an odd feeling of loss, as though she'd had something within her reach, but now it was fading from sight. Forcefully, she stopped the tears. The last thing she needed to do was actually cry and ruin Raquel's artfully applied mascara.

"And if it means anything, I would have picked you."

She lifted her face and met his hazel-green gaze. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

He cupped her face in his hands and leaned down to give her a quick kiss on the nose. "Look into my eyes."

"You're not going to hypnotize me, are you?"

"No," he chuckled. "You know when I'm telling the truth. And you know when I'm lying, right?"

She did. She knew everything about him. His favorite foods, his weird allergy to all things sesame and his preference for tea over coffee. She also knew that often when he was in the middle of an important meeting, he was really zoned out creating cartoon characters in his head. Everything.

“Right.”

“I’m not lying now. I would pick you. It’s as plain as the nose on your face. And by the way, nice job getting rid of that booger.”

“It wasn’t a booger,” she hissed. “It was a piece of lint.”

“Whatever. The point is, you’re the only woman here I would want to get to know better.”

“Really?”

“I would want to know why you wear your hair all back in a bun like that. And I would want to know why you’re dressed all in black, and I would want to know why you keep squinting at the camera.”

“Because you made me take off my glasses, and I can’t see very far,” she reminded him.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t know that if I had just met you. Brock’s a fool. Here he’s got the most amazing woman right in front of him, and he doesn’t know it.”

A reply sprang to her lips, but before Bridget could open her mouth, Buzz interrupted her.

“Yo, chicks! Places.”

“Apparently Buzz doesn’t understand the basics of political correctness,” Richard murmured, turning his attention to the fact that they were about to start broadcasting again. “Go sit down, open your silly invitation and I’ll take you out for ice cream afterward.”

“Your treat,” she insisted. “And I’m ordering extra fudge.”

He smiled, bent down to kiss her cheek and headed back to

the foyer where the monitor was.

Bridget sat down in the chair that Buzz had picked out for her and girded herself against the rejection that was to come. She smiled at Raquel who gave her a thumbs-up sign, and Bridget mimicked the gesture.

Chuck came back into the room with the fifteen envelopes in his hand. He waited until the cameramen were in place around the room and watched Buzz as he silently counted down to live with his fingers.

As soon as Buzz made a fist, the lights on the camera lit up, and so did Chuck's smile. "Hello everybody, we're back." He turned to Brock who had come into the living room to stand next to him. "Brock, have you made your very difficult decision?"

"I have," he nodded dramatically. He wrapped an arm around the host's shoulders and shook him a bit. "And it was difficult. What man in his right mind could decide between all these lovely ladies? It was almost impossible."

"I understand, Brock. But rest assured that each of the women not selected tonight will receive as a consolation gift a free year's supply of Breathe Better Mouthwash. So you see, there is a light at the end of this particular tunnel."

Brock smiled wistfully. "That does make me feel better."

"Now to the moment we've been waiting for. I have in my hand fifteen invitations, ladies. Please wait until I've distributed them all, then when I give the word, go ahead and open them. Those with a green card will continue on, and those with a red

card... Well, at least you'll have fresh breath."

Brock lifted his arm from around Chuck's shoulders, and Chuck moved forward to present each of the invitations to the women. Some women tried to hold them up to the light to see the color of the card within it. Some blew kisses to Brock. Others tried to fan themselves with the invitation in an effort to calm their nerves.

Bridget dropped the invitation in her lap and tried to focus on the hot fudge sundae that she was going to order. She also was thinking that the idea of proving to Richard that there had to be some man out there... somewhere... who might find her desirable still had merit. Why it was important, she wasn't quite willing to deal with, but that it was important couldn't be denied.

First she would need to find someone who found her attractive enough to pursue her. Or pretend to pursue her.

Hey, that was an idea. Maybe she could hire an actor.

"Ladies, open your invitations," Chuck announced.

Of course, she wouldn't want an actor who looked like Brock. She would want someone more real looking. The type of man who Richard would believe she could attract. She wondered how much actors charged for a few hours of work.

"Wait, we're missing one."

If Richard and she did manage to steal Breathe Better Mouthwash from V.I.P. and Richard did open up his own ad agency, then no doubt times would be lean for a while until they got the business off the ground. She'd have to be frugal about this.

"I picked eight," Brock said forcibly enough to jar Bridget out of her musings.

Realizing that she actually had forgotten she was on a television show, she glanced around the room to size up the situation. All of the women had their invitations open. Green and red cards abounded. That is, seven green cards and seven red cards. One card was missing.

Hers!

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to open mine," Bridget muttered a little sheepishly digging into her invitation. She pulled the card from the envelope and held it up for the camera to see. There. Green. Just as she expected...

"Green!" she gasped.

"Green!" Richard shouted from off camera.

"Green!" fourteen women screeched simultaneously, turning their heads in unison to see this purported green card.

"Green," Brock confirmed. He turned to Chuck to explain. "She was always making funny faces at me. I like a woman who can make me laugh."

"And there you have it, everyone. Our heartthrob has chosen. Tune in next week to see how this particular plot thickens. Watch as some women will woo, and others will boo-hoo when they get the red card. Next time on Who Wants To Marry a Heartthrob? brought to you by Breathe Better Mouthwash, the mouthwash choice of singles. Because your future could depend on it."

"And cut," Buzz called. "Let's clean it up, guys."

Richard marched over to where Brock was chatting with Chuck and rudely tapped the actor on the shoulder.

“What in the hell was that?” Richard asked when Brock turned around.

Brock broke out into an all-white-tooth grin. “Great show, huh? Hey, man, thanks again for this opportunity. It’s only been a few weeks since I got canned from The Many Days of Life, but I’m really starting to worry about my career, you know. Last week at the mall I was only stopped twice for an autograph. Twice,” he repeated in low whisper. “That’s pathetic. But this is going to put me right back on top. I’m sure of it. The Many Days of Life will have to take me back.”

“Look at my face,” Richard demanded. “Do I look like a man who cares about your career?”

Brock’s brow furrowed. “Uh...no?”

“No! I want to know what the hell you were doing picking Bridget?”

Brock glanced over at the assembled green-card ladies who were chatting it up as they drank their celebratory glasses of champagne.

“Which one is Bridget?”

“That one.” Richard pointed to Bridget who stood apart from the other seven women still staring at her green card.

“Oh, her. She had a nice smile.”

“Yes, I know she has a nice smile, but look at her will you? She doesn’t belong on TV.”

Brock shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe if she was looking to do some character acting..."

"She doesn't want to act!" Richard shouted, incensed. "She's my assistant. You have to pick someone else."

"Too late for that, Richard," Chuck intervened. "The other women are already gone, and besides it made for great TV having the dark horse pull ahead in the end. She represents the every woman. You watch, the audience will eat her up. She'll be an asset to the show."

Richard wanted to shout again, but there was really no one to shout to. The deed was done and Bridget would be returning for another week. And it was his damn fault. Oh well, he thought. One more week couldn't hurt. By then Brock would come to his senses and Richard would have his Bridget back.

Chuck and Brock left and Richard made his way to where she was still standing in apparent shock, snatching two glasses of celebratory champagne off the table on his way.

He handed her one and she beamed at him.

"Green," she said, showing him the card.

"So I see."

"He picked me."

"Yes, I understand how the game is played."

Bridget sipped her champagne and tried to stifle a giggle. It was entertaining to see Richard so clearly agitated—a predictable state for him when things didn't go according to plan. "Funny, isn't it? Because you seemed so sure that he wasn't going to pick

me, then he did pick me.”

“Yes, yes,” he snapped. “I get it. He picked you. I was wrong.”

“Really wrong. Colossally wrong. Napoleon at Waterloo wrong. Britney Spears as a brunette wrong—”

“How long are you going to hold this over my head?” he asked, cutting her off.

“I would say the statute of limitations for mocking runs out in about a year on this one.”

Richard groaned. “Fine. Consider this though, getting picked means you have to go back on TV next week. Next week is party night, too. No formal questions, just mingling. And we all know how you love to mingle, Bridge.”

She scowled at him. She hated to mingle. In fact, she hated parties, borne from a lifetime of watching her sisters be the life of every one they had ever attended. Since from a very young age she had known she didn’t have it in her to be the life of the party, she had decided to go the other way. She hugged walls, watched people and counted away the hours until she could leave and be free of the pressure of being a Connor girl at a party.

“But I’m sure you’ll be fine,” he recanted.

Richard had watched her face fall and he’d felt a little guilty raining on her parade so quickly. She’d been truly pleased that she had been picked out from among the throng. He didn’t want to spoil that. But he also didn’t want her getting her hopes up. Next week would be the end of this particular fairy tale. And at the end of the day, he needed his sensible assistant back.

Bridget regarded him as he sipped his champagne.

"This tastes horrible," he noted, putting the glass down.

"It's domestic," she informed him. When he gasped, she reminded him, "Cable, remember. The budget didn't call for foreign. So, let me get this straight. You don't think I stand any chance of getting another green card next week, do you?"

"No."

"You didn't think I had any chance this week."

"No."

"But I did."

"Fluke," he quipped. He didn't want to believe otherwise.

"Really," she mumbled. "Care to place a wager on that?"

"You want to bet me?"

"A bet might make things more interesting."

"What do you want?"

"If I get the green card next week, you agree to go on a vacation with me and my family in the Poconos for an entire weekend."

"Deal. And if I win...you have to clean my loft for a month. Laundry and cooking included."

"Deal," she agreed and stretched out her hand. They shook and the bet was sealed. "That's odd, though, I assumed you would have wanted to get out of Christmas."

"The Christmas thing is only for two days, this is clean underwear for a month," he told her.

That wasn't entirely true. He'd cut his tongue out before

he admitted it to her, but the truth was he was glad to have somewhere to go during the holidays. Bridget was his closest friend, and there really wasn't anyone else he would rather spend that time with. Certainly not with his overly stuffy, extraordinarily successful family who would use the holidays to grill him about his net worth, his prospects for the future and his chances of making partner at V.I.P. Not that creating ad campaigns was a job worthy of the Wells name.

No, the next time he saw his family he wanted to present them with his own business. His name on the office door. His company that he would build into a success. Then maybe, just maybe, he would be forgiven for his lifetime of underachievement.

Bridget shrugged at his response and took another sip of her champagne. He was right. It was awful. But it didn't matter. Not tonight. She had been picked above seven other beautiful women. She planned to savor the victory.

Not for too long, though. There was work to be done if she was going to compete seriously in next week's show and she knew just the person to help her.

"Raquel!" Bridget called to the woman standing in the group of seven. Squealing with joy, Raquel bounced her way over to where Bridget and Richard stood.

"Oh, isn't this exciting? Imagine, me on TV two weeks in a row."

"Congratulations," Richard offered her.

"Thank you, but I really had no doubt. But you, Bridget. See

what mascara and the right shade of lipstick can do for you?"

"I'm beginning to," she replied. "Listen, Raquel, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, do you think you could help me out for next week? I'm going to need a dress and more makeup and—"

"More makeup?" Richard protested. "What happened to all that stuff about not giving in to society's dictates and taking the inner beauty high ground?"

"You were the one who made me put the makeup on in the first place!"

"That was when I thought it would be just once," he countered. "Twice might compromise your morals."

"Hello," Bridget replied. "One word—television. There are no morals here."

"She's right," Raquel agreed. "And say no more. Raquel to the rescue. Hee, hee, that rhymes."

Neither Richard nor Bridget had the heart to tell her that it really didn't.

"Give me your address and I will pick you up tomorrow. Then we'll go shopping."

"Hey," Richard complained. "Tomorrow is a work day."

"And this is work," Bridget informed him. "I'm doing this for the show and for the client."

"It will be so much fun," Raquel bubbled. "I know just the dress place we should hit first. They have the most marvelous things for women. Even for women without breasts!"

"I have breasts," Bridget grumbled.

“If you insist.”

“Sounds to me like a lot of effort for nothing.” This came from Jenna who had strolled over to their group during the conversation. “You don’t actually think a new dress is going to help you, do you dear?”

Bridget had to hand it to the woman, she played the catty bitch better than anyone on daytime television she’d ever seen. As a reply, she merely held up her card. “Green.”

Jenna smiled, displaying all of her white, perfectly formed teeth. “This week.”

She turned to Richard and moved up against him, definitively invading his personal space. “It’s good to see you again, Richard. I never really got a chance to tell you how much I enjoyed dinner with you the other evening.”

“Uh...” he stuttered. “Sure. Dinner. It was nice.”

Bridget watched the scene in complete fascination. She wasn’t jealous. Richard had dated several women throughout the three years she’d known him, none of whom had ever exceeded his four-date limit. He had several goals in life, but as far as she knew establishing a long-term relationship wasn’t one of them. Which was really one more reason why any nebulous and burgeoning feelings she might have for him were ludicrous. She was the ultimate long-term relationship girl. At least, she’d always thought she would be. Those kinds of thoughts, however, were for another time.

For now, Bridget needed to concentrate on Jenna. Maybe she

could learn something from her. Currently, she was wielding seduction skills the way a samurai wielded a sword. Bridget watched how Jenna slid her hand up the front of Richard's suit coat. The way she leaned into his body without actually touching him. The way she tilted her neck at just the right angle to give a man a few ideas. And Richard, Bridget did not doubt, was a man who could quickly get ideas.

Jenna made it all seem so effortless.

"We'll have to do it again sometime," she purred, then chuckled. "That is, if Brock doesn't pick me to be his wife."

"Sure," Richard concurred.

"Ladies. Until next week." She turned and sauntered away and again Bridget couldn't help but be impressed by how she managed to walk on those heels. It was something Bridget was going to have to practice. Right after she bought a pair of shoes with heels.

For effect however, she turned to glare at Richard. She wasn't really angry with him, but there was no point in letting him off the hook that easy.

"What?" he asked in reference to her glare. "I was interviewing her."

The glare continued.

"Hey, that's not fair," he replied to her silent accusation.

Her eyes only narrowed farther.

"Okay, maybe it is fair, but nothing happened. She's trying to mess with you. Don't let her get to you."

"I don't plan to," Bridget assured him. "Now, I believe someone promised me ice cream."

"That was for when you lost," he said. "You won, which means you treat."

Bridget scowled but figured that was only fair. "Want to come along, Raquel?"

"And do what?"

"Eat ice cream," Bridget explained although she was pretty sure that had been obvious given the fact that they were going out for ice cream.

"Ice cream? You mean that stuff with all the fat and sugar and calories in it?"

"Yep, that about sums up ice cream."

"I couldn't possibly."

But Bridget could see she was tempted. "When was the last time you had ice cream?"

"I don't remember," Raquel whispered as if she were committing some sin by even considering it.

"It's really good."

"I suppose, maybe, they have a low-fat variety?"

"Nope. Not this place. All fat and hot fudge."

"And sprinkles," Richard added.

"Sprinkles," Raquel repeated as if she were saying diamonds instead.

"My treat."

"Okay, but I want to state for the record that I agreed under

stress,” Raquel proclaimed and marched off in search of her coat.

Richard considered that. “I think she meant duress.”

Bridget smiled. Her new friend might not be the brightest, but she was an artist, and Bridget was planning on putting her face, hair and body safely in this woman’s hands.

She only hoped that Raquel was up to the challenge.

3

“YOU HAVE to come out,” Raquel explained patiently. “Or how can I possibly see what the dress looks like on you?”

“Trust me. It’s no good,” Bridget said from behind the dressing-room curtain.

“That’s what you’ve said about every one so far.”

“Because they have all been no good.” Bridget looked in the mirror and winced. This dress was a clingy, strapless silk number done in a deep purple that fell to just below her butt. Every time she tried to pull it down to completely cover her bottom one of her breasts popped free.

Suddenly, the curtain was thrust aside and Bridget tried to cover her exposed breast with her hands.

“No,” Raquel determined. “That’s not right.”

“Thank you,” Bridget sighed. “Let’s face it. It’s hopeless. We’re never going to agree. Why can’t I just find a nice, simple, black cocktail dress?”

“Because the point of this game is to stand out. We have to be like the peacock and ruffle our feathers.”

“What are you wearing?”

“A black cocktail dress,” Raquel admitted. “But I am, by my very nature, a peacock.”

Having no idea what that meant, Bridget instead glanced down at the one-billionth dress Raquel held in her hands.

“Try this one.” Raquel shoved the dress at her, pushed her back into the dressing room and closed the curtain with a deft motion.

Bridget stared down at the garment and sighed. It was time to face facts. A dress wasn’t going to turn her into a beauty. She looked into the mirror and took in her white skin, dark hair, which today she had pulled back into a ponytail, and her sticklike body.

Okay, maybe not sticklike, she decided. She did, in fact, have breasts, just not that much of them. She knew that because they kept popping out of dresses at the most unexpected times.

This dress was red. A vibrant red. A red so bright, she considered putting on sunglasses before trying it on. But she knew if she balked, Raquel would stomp her foot and pout, and for whatever reason, Bridget found herself slightly intimidated by the pout.

So she removed the purple concoction and stepped into the red number. It circled her neck leaving her shoulders and arms bare. It fell to the top of her knees, for which she was truly grateful, and when she turned...

“Something is missing,” Bridget announced through the curtain.

Again, it slid open and Raquel stood in the doorway. “What?”
“It’s got no back. Go out there and find it for me will you?”

“Silly, it’s not supposed to have a back. Now turn around and let me see the front.”

Bridget did as instructed and Raquel oohed. “You’re oohing. Don’t ooh. This is not an ooh dress. It’s got no back.”

“Just look at yourself, will you?” Raquel moved out of the way and Bridget left the tiny dressing area. Three full-length mirrors stood at the end of the tiny dressing-room hallway and Bridget walked toward them, wondering the whole time who the girl in the red dress was. It shimmered as she moved. Instead of making her seem too pale, it made her skin glow. The neckline plunged, but the gathered material sort of left the contents of her chest a mystery and when she turned...

“Ooh,” Bridget moaned.

“See.”

The dress did scoop dramatically, barely covering the small of her back, but the effect was...not so bad. Who knew she had such a killer back?

“This one?” she asked Raquel, confirming what she already suspected.

“That one.”

Bridget turned and studied herself again. “I’ll take it.”

“Wonderful,” Raquel stated.

“Does this mean we’re done?” Bridget asked hopefully. She couldn’t remember a day when she’d worked harder, and all they had done so far was shop.

“Don’t be silly. Now we need shoes.”

Bridget groaned. Shoes. She was never going to make it.

LATER THAT DAY, she limped her way into Richard’s

office. He looked up from his drafting table and grimaced. “What happened to you?”

“Shoe accident,” she muttered. She hung her dress, draped in black plastic, on his coat rack then hobbled her way to the stool positioned on the other side of his drawing table. She climbed up on it and sighed in blessed relief to be off her feet.

“Shoe accident?”

“Yeah, I fell off a pair. You would be amazed at how high those things can actually go.”

He chuckled and nodded his head toward the dress. “Is that it?”

“It is.”

“Can I see it?”

“No.” She wanted it to be a surprise. Raquel had big plans for her including the dress, the sandals they had picked out to go with it that were currently being dyed to match, a new hairstyle and makeup. When all was said and done, Bridget was going to be a new woman and she wanted the effect to be startling.

So startling Richard might feel compelled to walk up to her, proclaim to the world his hidden passion for her—which, in all honesty, she wasn’t sure she exactly wanted him to have, but it played much better in her fantasy—and then sweep her off her feet.

At least she hoped he would sweep her off her feet. She really didn’t walk so well in the shoes.

“What are you doing?” she wondered aloud, taking a peek at

his drawing.

He glanced around to make sure no one was passing by his office door then answered, “Stuff.”

“Stuff” for Richard meant non-work-related comic-strip stuff. Bridget never understood why he got so anxious about people uncovering his big dark secret. The great mystery was that the creative force behind most of V.I.P.’s successful ad campaigns was also a truly gifted cartoonist.

Whenever she asked him when he’d begun drawing comics, he’d shrug and mumble something about being a kid. Then invariably he would try to pretend it meant nothing to him. He would demean it by calling it a hobby. Or recreational drawing. Her favorite was when he referred to it as his creative Drano. Whenever the ideas stopped flowing for a product, he invariably turned back to the strip to get the creative juices moving.

The first time she saw one of his strips, she had immediately fallen in love with his talent. For months afterward she had begged him to submit the strip to a paper, a magazine, someone who could render a professional judgment. But he refused. Every once in a while, she would broach the subject again, but invariably he would balk.

Comic strips weren’t serious; advertising was serious, he would tell her.

The last time he’d said that she’d pointed out that writing an ad for a company called Breathe Better Mouthwash was not exactly what she would call serious. But he hadn’t budged.

“Let me see this one,” Bridget said.

He pushed the white paper filled with the neatly arranged boxes over the top of the two-sided desk and let her study it.

“So what has Betty gotten herself into this time?” Betty was his latest cartoon character. She’d shown up over a year ago in a drawing and had been a constant in his work since then. Betty coincidentally bore a striking resemblance to...well, Bridget.

“Her boss has asked her for a favor and now she finds herself in a bit of trouble.”

“I don’t know where you get your ideas,” Bridget said sarcastically.

He smiled innocently. “They just come to me. Hey, can I use that shoe bit?”

“Sure. Mock my life. As long as it brings a chuckle to you, that’s all that matters.”

“Speaking of mocking, your mother called,” Richard told her, pulling his drawings back to his side of the desk. “She wants to know why you were on television trying to get a husband when you have such a wonderful man like me in your life.”

“Did you explain how you sold me into the servitude of Breathe Better Mouthwash?”

“I told her it was my fault. I begged her for forgiveness. She asked me if I was coming for Christmas, to which I said yes. There, you see? I’m not all bad.”

“Not all bad.”

Richard glanced again at the now mysterious dress. “So you’re

all set for next week?”

“Hardly. I’ve got a facial, a pedicure and a manicure all scheduled for this weekend. This whole caving into society and trying to live up to impossible physical standards is exhausting work. I don’t know how women do it on a regular basis.”

“Practice,” Richard guessed. “Were you planning on spending any time here at the office?”

She shook her head. “After all that is done, Raquel is going to try and fit me in with Lars—”

“Lars?”

“Her hairstyling boyfriend.”

“You mean ex-boyfriend.”

“Right,” Bridget affirmed even as she was rolling her eyes. “She wants to get me in with him the day of the show to do my do.”

“Mountain Dew?”

“Hairdo,” she corrected, although she knew he knew what she meant. He was just being difficult. She was curious as to why. After all, putting her on the show had been his idea. Granted, he hadn’t expected her to make the first cut, but now that she had, he seemed almost surly about it and she didn’t think it was just about her missing work. “Anyway, then Raquel will do my makeup right before we go live.”

Richard scowled a little. “That’s an awful lot of effort for a guy you don’t even like.”

“How do I know if I don’t like him?” Bridget pointed out. “I

haven't really gotten to know him."

"Trust me. With Brock, what you see is what you get. The man is as fake as his capped teeth and sunless tan."

"That's unfair. He might have hidden depths to him. Levels to his character that even he isn't aware of. He is an actor. Surely he has to pull from some internal emotional wellspring. If not, then maybe I will bring something out in him that no other woman has."

Richard's scowl increased tenfold. "You're not serious. You're not actually interested in a soap opera actor?"

Hmm, Bridget mused. Was that jealousy she heard in the subtle undertones of his shouting?

"Like I said, I don't know him well enough to know whether I like him or not. But he certainly deserves a chance. Let's put aside the fact that he picked me over several other beautiful women—"

"You know," he stated, cutting her off, very obviously irritated. "You're not dog meat. Or horrifically disfigured in some way. It's not the biggest shock in the world that you were selected."

"You said before the show even began that there was no way he was going to pick me. Until the end you had me pegged as one of the losers."

"Because of the sort of person he is and the type of woman I imagined he might be attracted to, not because of you," Richard clarified. "You're not ugly."

"Thank you," she beamed, tucking that little gem of a

compliment away to savor the next time he ticked her off for some reason. “But let’s put that aside for now. The truth is I’m not getting any younger.”

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