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**THE
BOYFRIEND**

FREIDA McFADDEN


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PROLOGUE

BEFORE

TOM

I am desperately, painfully, completely, and stupidly in love.

Her name is Daisy. We met when we were four years old. I've been in love with the girl since age four—that's how pathetic I am. I saw her at the playground feeding bits of her sandwich to the hungry squirrels, and all I could think was that I had never met any living creature as beautiful or as kind as Daisy Driscoll. And I was gone.

For a long time, I didn't tell her how I felt. I couldn't. It seemed impossible that this angel with golden hair and pale blue eyes and skin like the porcelain of our bathroom sink could ever feel a tenth of what I felt for her, so there was no point in trying.

But lately, that's changed.

Lately, Daisy has been letting me walk her home from school. If I'm lucky, she lets me hold her hand, and she gives me that secret little smile on her cherry-red lips that makes my knees weak. I'm starting to think she might want me to kiss her.

But I'm scared. I'm scared that if I tried to kiss her, she would slap me across the face. I'm scared that if I told her how I really feel, she would look at me in sympathy and tell me she doesn't feel the same way. I'm scared she might never let me walk her home again.

But that's not what I'm most scared of.

What I am most scared of is that if I lean in to kiss Daisy, she will let me do it. I'm scared that she will agree to be my girlfriend. I'm scared that she will allow me into her bedroom when her parents aren't home so that we can finally be alone together.

And I'm terrified that the moment I get her alone, I will wrap my fingers around her pretty, white neck and squeeze the life out of her.

CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

SYDNEY

Who is this man, and what has he done with my date? I'm supposed to be meeting a man named Kevin for dinner tonight at eight o'clock. Well, it was supposed to be drinks at six o'clock—drinks are easier to escape from—but Kevin messaged me through the Cynch dating app that he was running late at work and could we push it to dinner at eight?

Against my better judgment, I said yes.

But Kevin seemed really nice when we were texting. And in his photos, he was cute. *Really* cute. He had this boyish smile with a twinkle in his eye, and his light-brown hair was adorably messy as it fell over his forehead. He looked like a young Matt Damon. I've been on a lot of bad dates through Cynch, but I was cautiously optimistic about this one. I even arrived early at the restaurant, and I have spent the last ten minutes eagerly waiting at the bar for him to arrive.

"Sydney?" the man standing before me asks.

“Yes?”

I stare at the man, waiting for him to tell me that Kevin was killed in a tragic taxi accident on the way to our date, because this guy is definitely *not* Kevin. But instead, he sticks out his hand.

“I’m Kevin,” he says.

I don’t budge from my barstool. “You are?”

Okay, let’s be real here—nobody looks as good in real life as their dating-app photos. I mean, if you’re looking to score a date, you’re not going to snap a photo of yourself when you’re rolling out of bed with a hangover. You’re going to doll yourself up, take about fifty different shots from every conceivable angle and with a dozen lighting options, and you’re going to pick the very best one. That’s just good sense.

And hey, maybe that one perfect photo was taken ten years ago. I don’t agree with this logic, but I understand why people do it.

But this guy...

There’s no way he is the same man as in his Cynch profile. Not ten years ago—not *ever*. I just don’t believe it.

Even though it’s an obnoxious move, I grab my phone from my purse and bring up the app right in front of him. I compare the boyishly handsome man in the photo to the man standing in front of me. Yeah—nope.

My date for the evening is at least ten years older than the guy in the photo and bone thin, bordering on gaunt. I think his eye color is different too. His blond hair is badly receding, but what’s left of it is long and pulled back into an unkempt ponytail.

This is not the same man as in the photo. I’m even more sure of that than I am of the fact that I enjoy long walks through Central Park and bingeing Netflix.

“Yes, that’s me,” Fake Kevin assures me. (Although really, the guy in the photo is Fake Kevin. Maybe the photo really *is* of Matt Damon. I’m starting to think it might be.)

I begin to protest that he doesn’t look anything like the photo, but the words sound so superficial in my head. Okay, yes, Kevin looks vastly different from his profile photo. But does that really matter? We have been texting through Cynch, and he seems like a nice enough guy. I should give him a chance.

And if it’s not going well, my friend Gretchen will be calling me in twenty minutes with a manufactured excuse to get me the hell out of here. I never, *ever* go on a date without a planned rescue call.

“It’s really great to meet you in real life,” the real Kevin says. “You look exactly like your photo.”

Does he expect me to say it back? Is this some kind of test? “Um,” I say.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s get a seat.”

We snag a booth in the corner of the bar. As we’re walking over there, I can’t help but notice the way Kevin towers over me. I tend to like tall men, but he badly needs a little meat on his bones. It feels like I’m walking next to a broomstick.

“I’m so glad we are finally doing this,” Kevin tells me as he slides into the seat across from me. Why is his ponytail so messy? Couldn’t he have at least combed it before our date?

“Me too,” I say, which is only slightly a lie.

He rakes his gaze over me, an approving expression on his gaunt face. “I have to tell you, Sydney, now that we’re actually meeting in person, I genuinely feel like you are the perfect woman.”

"Oh?"

"Absolutely." He beams at me. "If I closed my eyes and imagined the perfect girl, it would be you."

Wow. That's...sweet. Possibly one of the nicest compliments I have received on a date. Thank you, Real Kevin. I'm starting to feel glad that I stayed. And like I said, I do like tall men, so even though he looks vastly different from his profile, I get a tiny tug of attraction. "Thank you."

"Well," he adds, "except for your arms."

"My *arms*?"

"They're kind of flabby." He wrinkles his nose. "But other than that, wow. Like I said, you're the perfect woman."

Wait. My arms are *too flabby*? Did he really just say that to me?

Worse, now I am straining to surreptitiously examine my bare arms. And why did I wear a sleeveless dress tonight? I have only two sleeveless dresses in my closet. I could have worn something with sleeves that would have concealed my apparently hideous arms, but no, I chose *this*.

"Can I get you two something to drink?"

A waitress is standing over us, her eyebrows raised. I pry my gaze away from my monstrous arms and look up at her. "I...I'll have a Diet Coke."

"A Diet Coke?" Kevin seems affronted. "That's boring. Get a real drink."

I never drink alcohol when I'm on a first date with a man I've met on Cynch. I don't want to impair my judgment in any way. "Diet Coke *is* a real drink."

"No, it's not."

"Well, it's a *liquid*." I glare at him across the sticky wooden table. "So I would call it a drink."

Kevin rolls his eyes at the waitress. "Fine, I will have a Corona, and she will have a *Diet Coke*." Then he winks at the waitress and mouths the word *Sorry*.

I glance over at my purse next to me. When is Gretchen going to call? I need an escape route.

But maybe I'm not being fair. I've only known Real Kevin for five minutes. I should give him more of a chance. That's why I told Gretchen to call twenty minutes into the date after all. Five minutes is a snap judgment. If I can't give a guy more than five minutes, I'm going to be having first dates for the next twenty years. And now that I'm thirty-four years old, I don't have that luxury.

"Hot damn," Kevin remarks, following the path of the waitress with his eyes as she goes to get our drinks. "She has *really* nice arms."

Gretchen, where are you?

CHAPTER 2

So you have to pay two thousand dollars if you're a new member joining the group," Kevin explains to me, "but for every vacation package you sell, you earn a five-thousand-dollar commission. Pretty amazing, right?"

I drag one of my french fries through a little trail of ketchup on my plate. We are nearly forty minutes into this date, and I am inexplicably still here. Stupid Gretchen. She's making out with her boyfriend or something and has forgotten all about poor little me. I even texted her "SOS" and she still didn't call me.

"I could definitely get you into the group." Kevin chomps on one of his spicy barbecue chicken wings—he's got an incredibly healthy appetite for such a skinny guy. I pointed out to him once that the barbecue sauce was getting on his cheek, and he wiped it off that time, but every single time he takes a bite, more of it gets all over his face. At some point, I got sick of telling him his face was dirty. "Do you want me to call Lois at the corporate

headquarters? This is an amazing opportunity, Sydney. You're lucky I came along."

"No, thank you," I say.

Kevin reaches over and grabs my Diet Coke. When his wings arrived, he complained they were too spicy, and then, over the course of fifteen minutes, he proceeded to drain his beer, then a second beer, and now he has commandeered my Diet Coke. "Why not? Why would you turn down an opportunity to make, like, six figures a year?"

"Because it's a pyramid scheme?"

"A pyramid scheme!" Kevin chuckles. "Why would you think that?"

"Because I am an accountant and I know what a pyramid scheme is?"

"No, you just don't understand," he insists. "Look, I'm trying to do you a favor, Sydney. You've got this super boring job crunching numbers all day. Wouldn't you rather make a few sales a year and relax the rest of the time on your own luxury vacation property?"

I don't know what to say to that, so instead, I grab my purse. "I'm going to the bathroom."

I hope the bathroom has a window I can climb out of.

When I get to the ladies' room, I find that there is sadly no window. So I actually use the toilet, then I spend another two minutes looking at myself in the mirror, carefully examining my "flabby" arms. They don't look that bad, do they?

Do they?

I am googling "arm slimming exercises" on my phone when it starts to ring. Gretchen's name pops up on the screen, and my jaw tightens. *Finally*, she's calling. Forty-five freaking minutes into the meal. I swipe to take the call.

“Seriously, Gretchen?” I bark into the phone without even saying hello. “I have been on the worst date ever, and it’s pretty much all your fault.”

That’s not entirely fair. The real Kevin deserves at least 50 percent of the credit for this awful evening. But I’m pissed off, and I need to take it out on *somebody*.

“I’m so sorry!” Gretchen cries. “Randy and I were watching a movie and we just lost track of time...”

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn’t even want to watch the movie,” she insists. “Randy promised me he wouldn’t let me forget about the call, but then, well, you know.”

I can hear Randy in the background, saying, “Hey! Don’t tell her it’s *my* fault!” And then Gretchen giggles like he’s tickling her or something. I bite my lip, resentful of how cute Gretchen and Randy are together. When she and I became friends, she was single, like me. Then one day, we were riding up in the elevator together, and she started gushing about how adorable the super in my building is. And now they’ve been dating for, like, six months!

Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy my friend has found the guy of her dreams. I’m just still trying to find mine.

“Where are you now?” she asks.

“Hiding in the bathroom, obviously.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I grumble. “You were probably making passionate love to your boyfriend, while I’m stuck here with a guy who is trying to talk me into a pyramid scheme.”

“Oh no, Syd! Seriously?”

“That’s not even the worst of it,” I say. “His mother tried to FaceTime him in the middle of our meal, and he

actually took the call. I had to say hello to her! His *mother*, Gretchen! On our first date!”

“I’m truly sorry,” she says, even though I can tell she’s trying not to laugh.

“I’m sure.”

“Really, Syd. I’m the worst. Tomorrow after yoga, lattes and muffins are on me.”

I suppose I can accept that apology. Anyway, the date is almost over. I am about five minutes away from never seeing Real Kevin or Fake Kevin ever again. Well, I might see Fake Kevin again if I go to a Matt Damon movie.

I tell Gretchen goodbye, take one last critical look at my arms (which are *fine* the way they are, Kevin!), then I head back out to the table. And lo and behold, a miracle has occurred and our check is on the table, waiting for me. I might get out of here sooner than expected.

“You were in there forever,” Kevin comments. He wipes his lips with the back of his sleeve. It gets the sauce off his lips but smears it all over his white-and-red-checked shirt. I don’t even care anymore. “Did you fall in?”

I manage a thin smile. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Sure thing.” Kevin slides the check across the table to me. “Your share comes to thirty-eight dollars.”

I wouldn’t have wanted Kevin to treat me to this meal, because I don’t want to owe him, but I’m having trouble figuring out how my small salad and Diet Coke plus tip somehow cost thirty-eight dollars. The accountant in me wants to pick up the check and calculate my actual share of the meal, but the woman in me doesn’t want to prolong this another second. So instead, I toss two twenties on the table.

While Kevin is climbing out of the booth, the song “Eye of the Tiger” comes on the radio. He grins at me and