

FAME

Karen NEW YORK TIMES BUTHOR LING AUTHOR

BAXTER FAMILY DRAMA™-FIRSTBORN SERIES #1

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Karen NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

BAXTER FAMILY DRAMA™~FIRSTBORN SERIES #1



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Fame

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To Donald, my forever prince

Can it be seventeen years ago that you swept me off my feet and showed me what true love was? How it puts our loving God first and how it waits as a way of honoring Him? People ask me if there are really guys like my characters Landon Blake and Ryan Taylor, and I always tell them yes. Of course guys like that exist. I should know; I'm married to one. We stand on the brink of a new season in life. I love you, and I can't wait to see what God's going to do next.

To Kelsey, my precious daughter

You are in the becoming years, my sweet daughter. And it delights my soul to see you becoming everything I prayed you would be—a young woman dedicated to the Lord and to family and to whatever plans God lays out for you in the years ahead. The other day you told me you loved high school, but that it was a little sad because we had so much less time together. That's true, but what we do share is golden, sweetheart. Thanks for our late-night talks. I love you, and I'll always have a light on for you.

To Tyler, my beautiful song

Your voice, your music are the sound track of our lives, dear oldest son. Having you home this year, homeschooling you, has given me more hours to enjoy the melody, to watch you go for your dreams. Keep God at the center, Ty, and I know He will give you the desires of your heart. When He does, your father and I will be in the front row. I love you always and forever.

To Sean, my happy boy

Of all the ways you've blessed our family since coming to us from Haiti, most of all I love how you make us smile. The other day the smile came when you rubbed my back as we all read Dr. Seuss and giggled at the silly rhymes. But my favorite smiles come each morning when you rush up to me with our devotion book, thrilled to the point of squealing that this day, like every other, we might get a chance to learn a little more about Jesus.

Good for you, Sean! I love you, honey.

To Josh, my softhearted leader boy

You define perfectionism, and still you have time to laugh once in a while. We gave you a flashlight for Christmas, and now—as a treat for doing so well in school—you get to read the Bible every night when the lights are off. Remember that, Josh. A decade from now when the NBA and NFL fight over which one wants you more, at the end of the day the best treat of all is God's Word. I'm grateful for you in our lives, and I love you so.

To EJ, my chosen one

Always that will be you, little son, the one chosen first. When God put it on our hearts to adopt, there was never a question after He led us to you. Something in your eyes told us that this terrifying idea of bringing new children into our family might just work out after all. I'm breathless at the ways you are growing and maturing, finding your way with the talents and gifts God has given you. I love you, EJ. Keep making Him proud!

To Austin, my tenderhearted boy

I'm amazed every time I watch you scoring circles around the competition on the basketball court or the soccer field. Often the image blurs and I see you as you were seven years ago—an infant facing emergency heart surgery. When you pulled through, I knew you would always have a special heart. But watching you put your arm around a buddy who's being picked on or seeing you get teary-eyed when Daddy sings praise songs tells me just how special your heart really is. You'll always be my little MJ, my Brett Favre, fist in the air, running across the field. I love you, and I thank God for every day we have together.

And to God Almighty, the Author of life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

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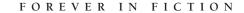
ministry. Among them are my sisters Susan, Tricia, and Lynne, and my brother, David. The Russells, the Cummins, and also my niece, Shannon, and my mother-in-law, Betty.

In addition, thanks to my precious friends Kathy and Ken Santschi, Bobbi and Erika Terret, Randy and Vicki and Lola Graves, John and Melinda Chapman, Stan and De-Ette Kaputska, Aaron Hisel, Theresa Thacker, Ann Hudson, Sylvia and Walt Walgren, Richard Camp and the entire Camp family, the Dillons, and dozens of friends at the high school.

Also a heartfelt thanks to the hundreds of retailers who carry my books. You are a vital part of what God is doing in changing lives through this Life-Changing Fiction, and I pray you will be inspired to keep on! Books make a difference! I'm honored to be partnering with you.

In that same light, thanks to the readers across the world who connect with God through reading these books. I hear from hundreds of you every week, and I'm touched to the center of my being. My soul rejoices at the news you report. Please know that you remain in my prayers as I write.

And of course, thanks most of all to God, who is allowing me to chase this wonderful dream, and I know without a doubt that all of it is for Him, because of Him, and through Him. To God be the glory always.





A SPECIAL THANKS to my Forever in Fiction winners whose characters are represented in this book—Krissie Schick, Chris and Amy Helmes, Kelly and Becky Helmes, and Tani Zarelli.

Krissie Schick, a thirty-six-year-old mother of four, won the Northshore Christian Academy auction in Everett, Washington, and chose to have a character named after herself. She loves being a mom and is grateful for her family. She has a zest for life that makes her a favorite among her friends.

Chris and Amy Helmes, and Kelly and Becky Helmes each won Forever in Fiction at the Firm Foundation Christian School auction in Vancouver, Washington. The two couples chose to have their characters named after Chris's and Kelly's parents, Alvar and Nancy Helmes. Alvar and Nancy have been married more than fifty years and stand as the pillars of the Helmes family. They have a deep and abiding love for Christ, for each other, and for their eight children. They spent most of their lives in Ironwood, Michigan, but since moving to Washington, they have become very involved in medical missions to the people of India. Al loves books and music—especially old hymns—and spending time with his family. The couple's youngest daughter, Cara, has Down syndrome

and is a special source of love for them. Nancy is a wonderfully loving mother and grandmother whose passion for her family is unequaled. She loves hot coffee and Cinnabon rolls, and her family always expects a fresh and witty saying whenever she's around.

Finally, Tani Zarelli won Forever in Fiction at the Salmon Creek Soccer Association auction and chose to name her character after her seventeen-year-old daughter, Ashley. Ashley is the adopted daughter of Tani and Senator Joseph Zarelli of Washington State. Ashley's passion is horseback riding and anything to do with horses. She loves spending an evening baking cookies and watching movies with her family. Her favorite color is blue, and she enjoys a strong understanding of God's providence in her life. Ashley, your parents want you to know you are very loved.

For those of you who are not familiar with Forever in Fiction, it is my way of involving you, the readers, in my stories while raising money for charities. To date this item has raised more than \$200,000 at charity auctions across the country. If you are interested in having a Forever in Fiction package donated to your auction, contact my assistant, Tricia Kingsbury, at office@KarenKingsbury.com. Please write *Forever in Fiction* in the subject line. Please note that I am able to donate only a limited number of these each year. For that reason I have set a fairly high minimum bid on this package. That way the maximum funds are raised for charities.



CHAPTER ONE

THE PART SHOULD'VE been easy to cast.

Dream On, the romantic comedy that would star Dayne Matthews, called for a small-town girl, an upbeat, outgoing type, with dreams of the big city and a genuine innocence that overshadowed everything about her.

Dayne had spent the morning watching half a dozen top Hollywood actresses file through the room for an interview and a quick read, and so far none of them fit the bill. They were talented actresses, friendly, beautiful. Two he'd starred with in other films, two he'd dated, and two he'd hung out with at some party or another.

He'd shared the night with three of the six.

They were girls whose faces decked the covers of every gossip rag in town, and in theory, any one of them could play the part of a small-town girl. How hard could it be? The actresses Dayne had seen today could be upbeat and outgoing, and they could certainly pull off the role of a dreamer.

But something was missing, and by three that afternoon Dayne knew what it was.

The innocence.

Dayne leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms as the last of the six read through her lines. A person couldn't fake innocence—not even with an Academy Award performance. Innocence was something that grew in the heart and shone through the eyes. And it was the innocence that was lacking with each of them.

Mitch Henry, casting director, was pacing near the back of the room. He finished with the final actress and bid her good-bye.

On her way out she looked at Dayne and gave him a teasing smile. "See ya." She was one of the ones he'd dated. Actually, he'd lived with her off and on for a month or so. Long enough that their pictures made the tabs a couple of times. Her eyes locked onto his. "Call me."

"Yeah." Dayne pretended to tip an invisible hat, but his grin faded before she left the room. He turned to Mitch. "Who's next?"

"Who's next?" Deep lines appeared between Mitch's eyes, his tone frustrated. "Do you know how hard it was to get six A-list actresses in here on the same day? The part doesn't even require the kind of talent we had in here, Dayne. Any one of them would knock it out of the park."

"They're good. They're all good." Dayne uncrossed his arms and tapped his fingers on the table. "But something's missing." He paused. "I'm not seeing innocent, Henry. Sophisticated, flirty, take me to bed, yes. But not innocent."

"Fine." Mitch tossed his clipboard on the table and yelled at a passing intern to shut the door. On the table were the files belonging to the six actresses, and when the door was shut, Mitch took a few steps closer. "We're on a schedule here, Matthews." He gripped the edge of the table and leaned in. "Hollywood isn't exactly a stable of innocence."

"Okay." Dayne pushed his chair back, stood, and walked to

the window, his back to Mitch. He stared out through the hazy blue, and a face came to mind. A face he hadn't forgotten in nearly a year. He held the image, mesmerized by it, and an idea started to form. It was possible, wasn't it? She worked in theater. She must've dreamed of the silver screen somewhere along the way, right?

Dayne felt Mitch's eyes on him, and he turned around. "I have an idea."

"An idea?" Mitch scratched the back of his head and strode to the door and back. "We don't need an idea; we need an actress. Filming starts in four months. This film is too big to wait until the last minute."

"I know." The idea was taking root. It was definitely possible. What girl wouldn't want a chance like this? Dayne sucked in a slow breath. He couldn't get ahead of himself. "Listen, Mitch, give me a week. I have someone in mind, but she's out of state." He leaned against the windowsill. "I think I can have her here in a week, by next Monday."

Mitch folded his arms, his expression hard. "Some girl you met at a club, Matthews? Someone you made drunken promises to? Is that what you want me to wait for?"

"No." Dayne held up his hand. "She's the real deal. Give me a chance."

A moment passed when Dayne wasn't sure which way the casting director was leaning. Then Mitch swept up the six files and the clipboard and shot him a look. "One week." He was halfway out the door when he turned once more and met Dayne's eyes. "She better be good."

Dayne waited until he was alone to look out the window again. What had he just done? Buying a week meant putting the other talent on hold. It meant playing with a budget of tens of millions of dollars so he could find a girl he'd seen just once and ask her to read for a starring role opposite him in a major motion picture.

All when she might not have the interest or ability to act at all.

The idea was crazy, except for one thing. In the past year the only time he'd seen genuine innocence was when he'd watched this same girl light up the stage at a small theater in Bloomington, Indiana, directing the chaos of a couple dozen kids in costumes at the close of what was apparently the theater troupe's first show.

He remembered most of what he'd seen that day, but still the details were sketchy. The location of the theater was easy, something he could definitely find again. But he had almost no information on the girl except her name.

Dayne gripped the windowsill and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. He could fly out and try to find her, but that would bring the paparazzi out of the woodwork for sure, make them crazy with questions about why Dayne Matthews was in Bloomington, Indiana.

Again.

He turned and grabbed his keys and cell phone. There had to be a way to reach her, to ask her out to Hollywood for an audition without the story making every tabloid in town. Dayne shoved the phone in his pocket and headed down the hall toward the elevator.

A coffee, that's what he needed. A double-shot espresso. Most of his friends in the industry had found offbeat coffee shops, places where they were less recognized. Not Dayne. He was a Starbucks man; nothing else would do. If the paparazzi wanted to take his picture coming and going with his double espresso—and they almost always did—that was fine with him. Maybe he'd get an endorsement deal and he could stand out front and pose for them. Dayne chuckled. That would send them packing. Take all the fun out of it.

He opened the back door of the office building and felt a blast of warmth as the sunshine hit his face. The weather was perfect, not the usual June fog. He crossed the studio's private parking lot to his black Escalade near the bushes and high privacy fence. Usually the studio back lots were free of the press hounds. Sometimes a lone photographer would climb the trees or sit on adjacent hillsides with high-power cameras trained on the office door. But only when a big deal was coming together or someone was in need of rehab—something like that.

Today things looked calm. This time of the day there wouldn't be too many camera hounds on the hunt. Besides, his SUV was new. Only a few of them would know it was him behind the tinted windows. He pulled out of the studio lot and turned left on La Cienaga Boulevard.

Two blocks down he looked in his rearview mirror and saw a familiar Volkswagen. Paparazzi. Even now, even with his new vehicle. He shrugged. Whatever. They can't crawl into my mind.

Once in a while he liked to lead them on. He glanced in his rearview mirror again and shrugged. He could use a little amusement. He turned into the Starbucks strip mall, but instead of stopping in front of the coffee shop, he parked near the Rite Aid, three doors down. He grabbed his baseball cap, slipped it low over his brow, and headed inside. There wasn't another person in the store. Dayne dashed to the magazine rack and found the current editions of each of the four national gossip rags—the colorful, busy magazines that reported all manner of information regarding celebrities.

Bloodsuckers, he and his friends called them.

The old, white-haired man at the register didn't recognize him. "That'll be nine fifty-eight." The guy hummed "Moon River" as he slipped the stack of magazines into a bag and handed it to Dayne. "Nice day, huh?"

"Yeah, beautiful." Dayne gave the man a ten-dollar bill. "June's not usually this sunny."

"Could be." Dayne grinned. He relished the moment. A sales clerk—probably a retiree—making casual conversation with him.

Moments like this were sometimes all the normalcy he had anymore. "See you later."

"Yep." The man shook his fist. "Go Dodgers."

Dayne walked outside, scanned the parking lot, and found the Volkswagen and the camera aimed straight at him. Then, with broad, dramatic gestures, he jerked one of the magazines from the bag and appeared to stare, shocked, at the cover. He covered his mouth and pretended to be absorbed in some scandalous story.

After a minute he saw a group of teenage girls headed his way. They hadn't recognized him yet, but they would. He slipped the magazine back in the bag, saluted the photographer, and slid back into his SUV. The fun was over. Enough of the cameraman. He hit the Lock button on his key chain, made sure his windows were rolled up tight, then pulled into the Starbucks drive-thru lane.

By the time he hit Pacific Coast Highway the double espresso was gone, and he'd forgotten about the photographer or whether the guy was still behind him. The girl from Bloomington. That's all he could think about now. How was he going to find her without flying to Indiana? And how crazy was he to tell Mitch he could get her into the studio for a reading in a single week?

Dayne passed the usual landmarks—the Malibu Surfer Motel and the Whole Foods Market. His home was just past that, sandwiched between others belonging to people in the entertainment industry. A director and his singer wife on one side and an aging actress and her much younger husband on the other. Nice people. All drawn to the ocean, the watery view of endless calm and serenity. The picture of everything their lives lacked.

Dayne took his bag of magazines inside and made himself another cup of coffee. Black, no sugar. Then he slipped on a pair of sunglasses and went outside onto his second-story deck. No photographer could see him up here, not with the steep walls

built around the deck's edges. He sat down, just barely able to see over the edge out to the Pacific Ocean.

One at a time he took out the magazines. Of the four, his face or name was on the cover of two. Dayne studied the first one: "Dayne Matthews: Hollywood's Most Eligible Bachelor Hits the Party Scene."

"I did?" he muttered and turned to the article. There were many more photos on the two-page spread, each one showing him with a different woman. One he was kissing. One was a waitress and no matter what the photo showed, he wasn't making moves on her. The bar had been loud, so he'd moved in a little closer when he ordered. Beneath that photo the caption read "Even barmaids are fair game."

"Nice." Dayne frowned. What would the waitress think? She was only doing her job, and now she had her picture splashed all over grocery checkouts throughout the country.

He flipped through the pages. There had to be other pictures of him; there always were. A few pages in he saw a short article in the section titled "Police Blotter." The small heading read "Is Dayne Matthews Being Stalked by a Woman? Police Find More Clues."

Dayne rolled his eyes. Often there was a nugget of truth to the articles in the gossip magazines. Police had notified him three times in the past month about a stalker, someone who was mailing strange letters to the police department threatening violence against Dayne Matthews.

So far Dayne hadn't seen any sign of a stalker. The matter wasn't something he thought about for more than a few minutes when he was talking to the police. But leave it to the rags to have the latest scoop. He read the article, looking for anything truthful.

Police say they've received another letter from the person writing threatening letters about Hollywood

heartthrob Dayne Matthews. This time handwriting specialists say the letter is from a woman.

One source close to the story said he was fairly certain the person writing the letters was a deranged fan, someone intent on harming Matthews. "She could be a phony, someone looking for attention, but still," the source said, "we can't be too careful."

Exact details of the letters were not available, but a source told our reporter that the person writing the letters is demanding a day with Dayne Matthews or his death.

Police will keep us posted on the story.

Dayne blinked and a chill ran down his arms—more because of the breeze off the Pacific than any fear the article might've stirred up. A day with him or his death? Were people really that crazy? He scanned the story again and dismissed it. Anytime information came from the ever-popular and oft-quoted "source," Dayne and his friends knew to ignore it.

Real truth came from real people—not imaginary sources.

He turned the page, looking for additional stories. This was his ritual, his way of staying in touch with the audience and its view of him. Whether the stories were true or not didn't matter. If they were in print, he wanted to know about them. He kept flipping. Near the front was a section titled "Regular People." Sure enough. There he was coming out of Starbucks with his double espresso. The caption read "Dayne Matthews loads up at his favorite haunt."

Ten pages later was a photo of him and J-Tee Ramiro, a hot Cuban singer he'd dated a month ago. Okay, maybe they never went on an actual date. But they spent the better part of a week together, and the paparazzi hadn't missed a moment. The shot was of the two of them sharing a salad at a small café near Zuma Beach. The point of the story was that J-Tee was seeing someone new and that she had better rebound abilities than half the guys on the LA Lakers.

Dayne thumbed through the rest of the magazine. For the most part the thing was made up of pictures. It was why the photographers followed him, why they followed anyone with celebrity status. Whatever the rags paid the paparazzi, it was enough to keep them coming back for more.

And some of the pictures were ridiculous.

A section near the middle of the magazine showed half a dozen actresses and the undersides of their arms. "Who's Flabby and Who's Not?" the banner headline shouted. The photos were close-ups of actresses caught pointing or raising their arms in a way that showed less-than-perfect triceps muscles.

Dayne rolled his eyes and turned the page. In the past few years the rags had gotten even uglier. One of his friends—an A-list actress named Kelly Parker—was definitely feeling the effects of the pressure. She used to go out dancing or shopping with friends. Now she rarely left her house, and the last time he talked to her the spark was missing from her voice.

He flipped another ten pages, and something at the bottom of one of the layouts caught his eye. A breeze off the ocean rustled the pages as Dayne squinted. It was a small article with two photos—one of Marc David, Dayne's friend and fellow actor, and the other of a bedraggled man behind bars.

Beneath the photos it said "Hollywood's People sent a reporter to investigate Marc David's recent trip to Leavenworth and guess what we found???" Dayne inched himself up in his chair. His heart raced, and he felt blood rush to his face. What was this? Marc was his friend, but the guy had never mentioned anything about Leavenworth. Dayne kept reading.

Marc says he was raised by his mom with no whereabouts of his father. Not true, *Hollywood's People* found out. Not true at all. Marc's dad isn't missing. He's Joseph L. David, a two-time felon, rapist, and drug addict serving time in Leavenworth. Our reporter followed Marc to the prison. Sources say Marc's known about his

father all along. Now you know the whole story and so do we!

Dayne felt his stomach turn. He slammed the magazine down on the table, reached into his pocket for his cell phone, flipped it open, and dialed Marc's number.

His friend picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Marc, it's Dayne." He stood up and moved to the balcony wall, staring at the surf. "Hey, I just picked up *Hollywood's People*. It came out today." He paused. "Is it true?"

There was the sound of a long breath on the other end. "About my dad?" Marc sounded tired. "Yeah, it's true."

"But you never . . . I thought he was missing."

"That's what I told everyone." Marc moaned. "Man, this stinks. My parents split when I was young, and after that my dad made some mistakes. Got into coke and speed and ran out of money. Robbed a few liquor stores. My mom tried to keep it from me, said it was too ugly. I was at New York University when I figured out how to reach him. He got some help. Then I started getting big, and we decided to keep it a secret."

"He's at Leavenworth?"

"Yeah."

"Man \dots " Dayne closed his eyes and shielded his face with his free hand. He didn't mention the part about Marc's dad being a rapist. "I'm sorry."

"It was bound to happen someday. The press . . . they're sharks." "How's your dad now?"

A sad chuckle came from the other end of the line. "That's just it. He's been clean for five years. Found Jesus, made a change. He gets out in two years. My mom and him are even talking."

The pieces were coming together. No wonder Marc hadn't wanted anyone to know about his father. The tabloids would print all the dirt and miss the part about how the man was doing today, how he'd changed for the better.

And that's exactly what happened.

"The picture?" Dayne glanced back at the magazine on the table, still open to that page. "He doesn't look too good."

"Yeah, I know. They found his booking pictures. They must've doctored it up. He wasn't behind bars when the police took those."

"Nice. So today the guy's clean shaven with sober eyes, but they run that one."

"Exactly." Marc was quiet a moment. "Dayne . . . I called an attorney. It's gone far enough."

Dayne felt a surge of adrenaline, the way he used to feel back at boarding school when he and the guys would get in a tight game of soccer. "Serious?"

"Yeah." Marc inhaled slowly. "My dad's never raped anyone. The rag threw that in, just made it up."

The hot feeling was back in Dayne's face. "Go for it, Marc. Make it hurt."

"That's the plan." Marc's voice was strained. "I talked to my dad. He's okay. We'll get through this."

"You will." Dayne clenched his jaw. He watched a seagull dive into the water and come back out with a fish. Every now and then a celebrity would sue one of the magazines and win. It didn't happen often, and the rags didn't care because they made enough money to defend an occasional lawsuit. But it still felt good.

Marc David taking on *Hollywood's People* magazine. Dayne straightened and scanned the beach for cameramen. There were none. "Listen, Marc, you'll have my support all the way."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot." His tone grew softer. "Hey, Dayne, I gotta go. One quick thing." He paused. "What do you hear from Kelly Parker?"

"Kelly?" Dayne returned to his chair and put his feet up on the railing of the balcony wall. "She never goes anywhere. The paparazzi are freaking her out."

"That's what I thought. Tell her to call me, will you?"

"Definitely."

When the call was over, Dayne tossed his phone on the table, pulled the magazine closer again, and stared at the picture. Suddenly the image changed in his mind, and it was no longer Marc and his father. Instead it became a family. His family. The biological family who didn't know he existed. He pictured them the way they'd looked that day in Bloomington. Eight or ten people with a few small children walking together through the parking lot of the local hospital, the same weekend he'd seen the girl at the theater. One of the little girls with them was in a wheelchair.

Even with the sun hot on his face, a chill made its way through him. He shut the magazine and threw it back on the table. What would the press do to the people he'd seen that day in the parking lot? What skeletons lay in the closet of the Baxter family? For starters, John and Elizabeth had given him up for adoption and apparently never told their other kids.

But what about the wheelchair? Was there a birth defect or an accident that put the child there? Whatever it was, the rags would find out and gleefully splash it across a centerfold given the chance.

Dayne stood and filled his lungs with the damp, salty air. He leaned his forearms on the railing and stared far out to sea this time. What were the Baxters doing now? No doubt they were still grieving the loss of Elizabeth. The private detective his agent used had found out the information almost immediately. Elizabeth Baxter died of breast cancer just hours after he had visited her briefly.

Down the beach a way, a young couple was holding hands and flying a bright yellow-striped kite. Dayne studied them, the way they easily kept their faces out in the open. Did they know how wonderful it was, being out of the limelight? Or did they long for fame the way so many did in Los Angeles?

He shifted his eyes upward. At least he'd found Elizabeth before she died. The conversation they'd shared was enough to answer his hardest questions—who was his birth mother and why did she give him up.

Elizabeth had loved him and longed for him. She had searched for him at one time and wondered about him all of her married life. In her dying days, her single prayer had been to find him, hold him once more the way she'd held him as a newborn, and tell him she loved him.

Those bits of truth were enough.

As for the others, his biological father and siblings, he'd made the right choice by leaving them alone. Dayne leaned hard against the railing. He'd only seen them for a handful of minutes as they walked from the hospital to their cars. They looked like nice people, loving and close. The sort of family he would've been proud to call his own.

But he could hardly land on their doorstep announcing the fact that he was their parents' firstborn. The paparazzi would capture the moment from the bushes for their next cover story. No, he could never contact the Baxters, never tell them the truth about who he was. They deserved their privacy. Dayne narrowed his eyes. He could see the headlines: "Dayne Matthews' Secret Family Revealed." He couldn't let that happen.

Even if he spent the rest of his life thinking about them.

He took his cell phone from the table, slipped back inside the house, and closed the screen door. Suddenly he knew how he was going to find the girl, the one from the Bloomington theater. He dialed his agent's number.

"Matthews, how you doing?"

"Great." Dayne didn't pause long. "Hey, I need a favor."

"Oh yeah?" There was an edge to his agent's voice, but it was a humorous one. "Mitch Henry tells me you need an actress."

"That too." Dayne managed a weak laugh. "That's the favor. I need you to find an actress in Bloomington."

"Matthews." The humor was gone. "Not Bloomington. I thought we agreed."

"No, this isn't about my family. It's about a girl, an actress I saw there. At the community theater."

Silence shouted at him from the other end. Then he heard his agent draw a long breath. "You saw a play at the community theater when you were in Bloomington?"

"Yes. Well, no." Dayne walked the length of his kitchen and stopped near the sink. The view from the window was the same as the one from the deck. "I mean, the girl wasn't in the play; she was the director."

"The director?"

"Yeah. She's perfect. Everything the part calls for." Dayne felt a grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

"How do you know she can act?" His agent sounded tired.

"Call it a hunch." Dayne took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. "Come on, man; do it for me. She's perfect; I'm telling you."

"I have a question." There was resignation in his agent's voice. "You didn't sleep with her, right?"

"Come on!" Dayne threw his free hand in the air. "Don't believe everything you read in the papers, friend."

"Okay, but did you?"

"Of course not." Dayne pictured the girl, the way she'd looked onstage surrounded by kids. "I never even talked to her."

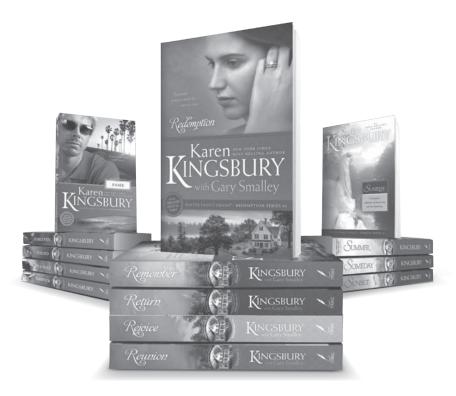
"Great." His agent let loose a long sigh. "So I send the investigator to Bloomington to find a girl who's perfect for the part, even though you're not sure she can act and you've never spoken to her."

"Right." Dayne felt himself relax. His agent liked toying with him, but in the end he'd do whatever was asked of him. It was why Dayne had stayed with him for so long.

"Do you have anything else? A name? Something?"

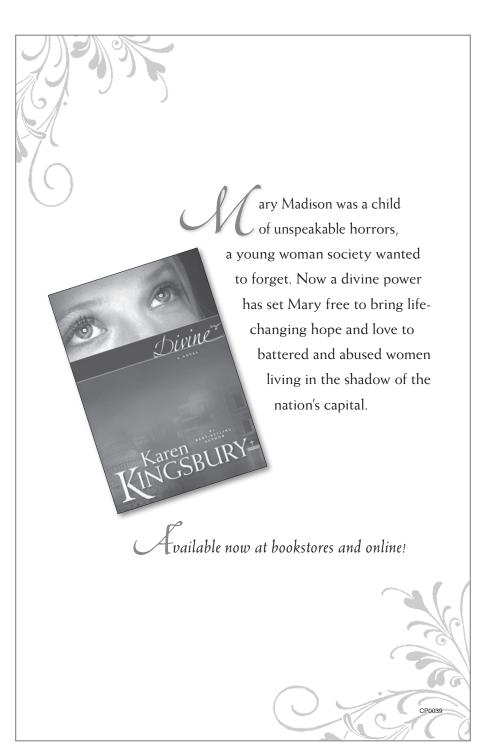
Dayne didn't hesitate. Her name had been on his tongue all afternoon. "Her name's Hart. Katy Hart."

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