

A Sweet Hockey Romance

The Love Trick



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Kristine W. Joy

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To the ones who are different.

The ones who dance to the beat of their own drum and forge their own path.

Don't ever change.

Contents

1. Chapter One

Blaze

2. Chapter Two

Addy

3. Chapter Three

Blaze

4. Chapter Four

Addy

5. Chapter Five

Addy

6. Chapter Six

Blaze

7. Chapter Seven

Addy

8. Chapter Eight

Blaze

9. Chapter Nine

Blaze

10. Chapter Ten

Addy

11. Chapter Eleven

Blaze

12. Chapter Twelve

Addy

13. Chapter Thirteen

Blaze

14. Chapter Fourteen

Addy

15. Chapter Fifteen

Blaze

16. Chapter Sixteen

Addy

17. Chapter Seventeen

Blaze

18. Chapter Eighteen

Addy

19. Chapter Nineteen

Blaze

20. Chapter Twenty

Addy

21. Chapter Twenty-One

Blaze

22. Chapter Twenty-Two

Addy

23. Chapter Twenty-Three

Blaze

24. Chapter Twenty-Four

Addy

25. Chapter Twenty-Five

Blaze

26. Chapter Twenty-Six

Addy

27. Chapter Twenty-Seven

Blaze

28. Chapter Twenty-Eight

Addy

29. Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blaze

30. Chapter Thirty

Addy

31. Epilogue

Blaze

32. Extended Epilogue

Addy

Also By Kristine W. Joy

Acknowledgements

Get Connected

About the Author

Chapter One

Blaze

Game Seven. This is it.

I tug at my laces, tightening them for the umpteenth time in anticipation. The atmosphere in the locker room is electric as we prepare to take the ice for the most important game of our lives.

I steal a glance at Cam, his jaw set in determination as he nods at me. “You ready, Blaze?”

I smirk. “Born ready.”

The Stanley Cup gleams in the distance, a tantalizing reminder of what we’ve been fighting for all season. And now it all comes down to this final showdown.

It’s our turn to raise the Cup.

“You guys *better* be ready,” Kade adds, closing his locker. “We didn’t claw our way back from 3-0 for nothing. Let’s finish this thing.”

“Oh, we’re finishing it alright,” Dylan interjects before looking toward Cam with a smirk. “Just try not to punch any *fans* in the face this time.”

The tension in the room eases as we share a collective laugh.

“Hey, that guy had it coming,” Cam retorts. “And I still don’t regret it.”

The memory of Cam jumping to my defense last season after a fan insulted me floods back into my mind. The guy *did* have it coming. And it really should’ve been *me* who decked him in the face.

But Cam got there first.

The repercussions were harsh. Cam faced criticism, fines, and backlash from the media. But to me, it only solidified what I already knew: he’s more than a teammate; he’s family.

All these guys are.

“Alright, boys. This is your moment.” Coach Wilson’s voice cuts through my thoughts. “Tonight, we make history. Let’s go!”

The roar of the crowd vibrates through the arena as we step onto the ice. The stadium is packed to the brim, every seat filled with eager fans waving banners and wearing team colors.

I scan the crowd, looking for my best friend who, outside of my teammates, is the only family I have. And sure enough, there she is, sitting in the stands, her platinum blonde hair shining under the stadium lights. She’s looking beautiful as ever, wearing my jersey and a proud smile on her face. When our eyes meet, she holds up a homemade sign that reads, “Go, Blaze! Bring it home!”

My heart swells with gratitude. Addy’s been my rock throughout my entire hockey career—she’s never missed a home game in all the years I’ve played for the Atlanta Glaciers.

With her unwavering support and love, I feel invincible.

And tonight is just as much for her as it is for me.

When the puck finally drops, the crisp sound echoes off the ice as we explode into action.

The game is fast-paced and intense, and we fight relentlessly for every inch of ice. Midway through the second period, Cam steals the puck and speeds toward the goal. He dekes past the defense and sends a rocket of a shot flying straight into the top corner of the net.

Yes! Let's gooooo!

The arena erupts into chaos, the crowd on their feet screaming and cheering as the scoreboard lights up 1-0, marking the first goal of the game.

Our opponents do not back down.

The rest of the period and into the third is a grueling battle that pushes us to our limits. Every second feels like an eternity as we defend our slim lead.

Lucky for us, Kade is a wall of steel in front of the net, making impressive save after save and keeping our hope alive.

As the clock ticks down to the final seconds, everyone is on their feet, holding their breath in anticipation.

And then it happens:

The buzzer sounds.

And the crowd goes wild.

We won! The realization hits me like a ton of bricks.

We're Stanley Cup champions.

The ice is a blur of celebration as my teammates rush toward me, shouting and cheering. Cam pulls me into a bone-crushing hug.

"We did it, Blaze! We actually did it!" he exclaims, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

Kade joins us, pumping his fists in the air, followed by Dylan and the rest of the team. I can't help but let out a whoop of joy, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

The Cup glitters in the center of the rink like a beacon as we skate over to claim our prize. The weight of its significance is almost tangible as I hoist the Cup above my head.

This isn't just a trophy; it's a symbol of dedication, resilience, and teamwork.

As I look out at the sea of faces roaring their approval, I see Addy cheering the loudest of them all. Her tear-streaked face beams with pride and love. I wink at her and mouth, "We did it," before skating over to join my teammates in a victory lap around the rink. Passing the Cup from player to player, each of us basks in the sweet taste of victory.

We eventually gather for the official team photo with the Cup. And as I look around, I can't help but feel a wave of nostalgia thinking back to everything that led me to this moment.

If you had told me back in high school, as a struggling foster kid, that one day I'd win the Stanley Cup with a team that became my family, I wouldn't have believed you. But here I am, living out a dream I never dared to have.

Addy sprints down from the stands the moment she's allowed onto the rink. She jumps into my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist as I spin her around in a whirl of pure joy. Her laughter is the most beautiful sound, echoing in my ears as I finally set her down.

"Nice game, Twenty-Six. I'm so proud of you!" Awe fills her voice. "I never doubted you for a second."

I hold her close, soaking in the warmth of her presence and the knowledge that she's been with me every step of the way.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Addy."

Chapter Two

Addy

“Good boy, Charlie.” I unhook the leash from the border collie mix and check my watch. I partied way too hard with Blaze and the team this past weekend, celebrating the Glaciers’ Stanley Cup win, which led to me hitting the snooze button just a few too many times this morning.

I’ve been behind schedule all day.

“I’ll get you some fresh water, and then I’ve gotta get going. Mom will be on me if I’m late.” I speak to Charlie like he understands every word. And maybe he does, with those big brown eyes fixed on me. He’s one of my most easygoing clients—which is saying something, considering I’ve been a professional dog walker for the past three years. I’ve met a lot of dogs, but Charlie’s one of a kind.

After making sure Charlie has everything he needs, I quickly grab my bag and change my clothes before heading out the door. He barks once, almost as if to say thank you, reminding me why I love my job so much.

The summer sun shines brightly, casting a warm glow on the sidewalk. As I navigate through the Atlanta streets, the buildings tower overhead, creating patches of shade that provide a welcome respite from the Southern heat and humidity.

I check my watch again and quicken my pace, expertly dodging bustling pedestrians and sidewalk obstacles with the ease of someone who knows the city like the back of their hand. Perks of dog walking.

Turning a corner, I finally catch sight of my destination.

Phew. Five minutes early.

I smile to myself as I approach Tea Parlor, the irritatingly upscale tearoom where my family happens to meet for everything. On today’s agenda?

My little sister’s wedding.

“At least Granny Esme won’t be obsessing over *my* relationship status today,” I mutter under my breath as I enter the establishment. The historic brick building has been redone by the finest in the nation—or so the sign says when you walk through the door.

I wave to Molly, the hostess who’s been working here for years now.

“Your family’s already in their private dining room,” she says with a smile.

“Great, thanks.” I smile back, smoothing out my disheveled hair from my near jog to get here on time.

I brush my fingers over the crisp, clean white blouse that I threw on right before I left and take a deep breath. I catch a whiff of the vanilla jasmine perfume I sprayed all over myself in hopes it would hide the pungent reminder that my parents’ highly esteemed socialite daughter is, indeed, a dog walker.

“Ah, Addy.” Mom perks up as I finally enter the room. Her blonde hair is pulled up in the perfect bun, and based on her lack of wrinkles, I’d guess she got her Botox done this week. “Come take a seat beside me, honey. We’re just waiting on Aurora.”

“The bride-to-be is late for her *own* bridal meeting?” I joke, pulling out a chair. I glance around the room as I take a seat, wondering if anyone heard me since nobody even cracked a smile. Aurora’s college sorority sisters are all sitting together and looking at their phones. My mom is sitting between me and Granny Esme. And my three aunts are across from us, also on their phones. And then there’s the wedding planner—a middle-aged woman who looks like she could be named Nancy...

Oh, and she’s on her phone too.

Cool.

I shift my attention to my mom, who’s now glaring at the door.

“I’m sure Aurora’s just running a little late.” I place my arm on her shoulder and then instantly retract it when I realize my nails are chipped. I don’t want to give her a reason to glare at me, too.

I do that enough as it is.

“She’s probably off rendezvousing with Robert,” Mom says through a terse smile.

I giggle. “Well, considering they’re about to get married, there will be plenty of time for *rendezvousing* later.”

“*Adeline Harper Williams*,” Granny pipes, her tone scolding as her blue eyes sear into me over her pink-framed glasses.

“Have some manners.” Her eyes tell me that, at nearly thirty years old, I should know better.

I duck my head. “Sorry, Granny.” I tuck my loose strands of hair behind my ears and keep my gaze on my hands until I hear the door open once again. When I look up, my sister, in all her elegant ways, steps into the room. Her designer floral outfit makes the floral wallpaper look drab and dull. It’s like something straight off the runway—which she’s gorgeous enough to have walked herself.

We may share similar facial features and slender builds, but our styles couldn’t be more different. And there’s no denying that she got *all* the grace and charm in the Williams family gene pool. Whereas I tend to stumble into situations with the subtlety of a bull in a china shop.

“Sorry, I’m late,” she chimes, her tone light and sweet. “Robert needed me to stop by his office for a minute. We had to talk about something.”

I hide the face I’m making, trying to stifle a laugh as my mother grimaces and Granny’s face grows a shade paler. While I *don’t* think my sister was being ‘promiscuous’ as Granny would say, given the conversation we all just had, it definitely sets the wrong tone.

“Take a seat, Aurora. We need to get this meeting underway.” Mom drives the conversation as my sister pulls out the empty chair beside me and takes a seat. I catch a whiff of her peachy perfume and inhale deeply, thinking of orchards ... and *anywhere* else but this stuffy tearoom.

“You’re actually on time.” Aurora shoots me a sideways glance. “It’s a miracle.”

“Ha ha,” I mouth back to her, and we both crack a grin. My baby sister and I like to poke fun at each other, but it’s all out of love. We’ve always had each other’s backs, even when our personalities couldn’t be more different.

“Okay, so we’re leaving for Hawaii in two weeks,” Mom says, placing her freshly manicured hands on the table. “It’s time to nail down the final guest list.”

“Will you be bringing a plus one?” Granny asks. But when she doesn’t get a response, she sharply adds, “*Adeline*, I’m speaking to you.”

My eyes widen.

Oh no. Not again.

“Um...”

Granny sighs the moment she senses my hesitation. “You do realize that your *twenty-five-year-old sister* is about to marry a nice, stately man who comes from a wonderful family... You’re turning thirty soon, dear. This isn’t looking good.”

I try to conjure up a reply, but as my lips part, nothing comes out. I can’t think of a single thing to say to her. I’ve already said it all, and it never makes a difference.

“She’ll find someone,” Aurora says, attempting to come to my rescue. “Anyway, we need to talk about the wedding.”

“Yes, and the fact that my oldest granddaughter is going to be coming to your wedding *alone*.” Granny narrows her gaze at me—like it’s my fault the cesspool of men in Atlanta sucks. “I just want better for you, Adeline. By the time a man turns thirty, he ought to be starting a family.”

Vomit.

“And most of the good ones are taken by thirty,” one of my aunts chimes in, though I don’t catch which one.

“Can we focus on the wedd—”

“Maybe I should set you up with—”

“Absolutely not.” Mom holds up a hand, halting the conversation. “This is Aurora’s *wedding*. We *don’t* need a repeat of what happened last time Aunt Kay tried to set Addy up.”

I cringe internally as Aurora’s sorority sisters start to giggle—probably recalling the near fire at our family Christmas party last year when my date knocked over a candle in his drunken stupor. Aunt Kay had been so blinded by his last name and his family ties when she set us up that she failed to see he had a major drinking problem. Never mind the fact that he’s a tax attorney who couldn’t be more wrong for me if he tried.

I close my eyes, wishing I was somewhere else. Someplace where I wouldn’t have to worry about all *this*.

“I just think she ought to see someone.” Granny Esme is not letting up on her rant. “Maybe if we worked on her manners—”

“That’s enough,” Aurora interjects, mimicking my mother’s previous gesture by holding up her hand. “We’re here to talk about *my* wedding. I really don’t want to discuss Addy’s love life right now. Now can we start walking through the itinerary, please? I have a busy afternoon planned.”

A busy afternoon of spending Robert’s money...

I let out a quiet sigh. My family is probably one of the wealthiest in the area, but both my sister and I receive a meager stipend from my parents—in the name of preventing us from becoming ‘ungrateful trust fund babies,’ per my father. So, Aurora went and found herself an older, wealthy man who treats her ... well, like a trust fund baby—a traditional one ... without a monthly spending budget.

As for me? I own a dog-walking business and pay my own bills. It’s not glorious by any means, but it’s mine, and I like it.

“Let’s just assume that Addy will be a one-person party.” Aurora’s voice grabs my attention, and I suddenly realize I’ve zoned out. “And move on.”

Oh my gosh, they’re still talking about me?

I nearly facepalm myself, my cheeks growing hot. I glance around once Aurora goes into talking about the seating arrangement—even though it’s a small destination wedding—and pull out my phone, seeing a message from my best friend.

Blaze: *Enjoying wedding planning?*

I roll my eyes, typing a text back to him.

Me: *Literally want to die right now. Can I send an SOS?*

Three dots immediately pop up on the screen, and I'm so thankful he's officially in the off-season of hockey right now. I don't think I could stand to have to wait for his reply at a time like this.

Blaze: *Is it really that bad? SOS IS FOR EMERGENCIES.*

Blaze: *I didn't mean to capitalize that, but it fits.*

I laugh out loud, and right as I do, an elbow lands in my rib.

"Hey," I mumble, glancing up to see my mother scowling at me. "What?" I mouth as the wedding planner begins her spiel about the charter jets.

"Put that down," Mom scolds in a hushed tone.

I gesture toward all the other women at the table who are *literally* holding their phones in front of their faces and open my mouth to protest. But before I can say anything, my mom gives me one of those *don't you even go there* looks and I retreat, my shoulders falling...

But I still manage to send one last text.

Me: *SOS!*

"Addy," Mom whispers in a low, warning tone. "Put it down."

Yes, Your Highness.

Of course I don't say that out loud, opting for silence as I slide the phone into my pocket and fold my arms across my chest. Don't get me wrong. I love my family. I love them more than anything.

But I do *not* fit their vibe ninety-nine percent of the time.

Despite my best efforts to blend in, I'm fully aware that I've always been the odd one out. I much prefer wearing yoga pants over designer outfits. I'd rather hang out with dogs than socialites. And I'd choose getting lost in a book over gossiping at a tea party any day. I just wish they could understand and accept me for who I truly am. But it's hard to feel seen when everyone has a predetermined idea of who you should be.

Not to mention, my mom acts like a Stepford wife when she gets around my granny—as if she's suddenly transported back to the 1950s, all perfect hair and impeccable manners.

And she expects us to act the same.

I take a deep breath and zone out, ignoring my buzzing phone.

I'm sure it's Blaze. And considering I just sent an SOS, he's probably worried about my actual well-being.

"So, I'll finish booking all the rooms today," the wedding planner says, smiling as she flips a page in her notebook. "And the photographer is also taken care of."

"Were you able to get the videographer I wanted?" Aurora sounds legitimately concerned right now. "It's *so* important that we book him."

"When I reached out to him, he said he had a conflict..." The wedding planner suddenly looks worried.

"Just pay whatever it takes to get him there," Mom intervenes. "At this point, I'll do anything to make her wedding day exactly what she wants it to be."

Spoiled.

Of course, I know my mom would do the same for me. She'd probably *love* to fuss over holy matrimony on my behalf. It's just too bad that I'm on the verge of being forever alone. It's a real problem.

Well, for them.

Not so much for me.

I've been there, done that. I've dated the kinds of men that are considered "acceptable" to my family. But most of them were like hollow shells, too consumed with appearances and their own self-importance to truly connect with another human being.

Needless to say, the relationships never lasted longer than a few months, if that.

I've since learned to be content with my independence and the company of Blaze and dogs. At least dogs don't judge you or try to change you into something you're not.

Ugh.

The pressure to fit into my family's mold has always weighed heavy on my shoulders, but today for some reason, it feels unbearable.

Why does my worth have to be measured by the man on my arm or the size of the diamond on my finger?

I stare off at the wallpaper as they go on to talk about music playlists, fittings for the dresses, and toasts. I don't know when wallpaper started coming back in style, but I wish it hadn't.

"Excuse me?" Our hostess Molly steps into the room, her face pale.

Mom looks immediately annoyed. "Yes?"

"It appears that Miss Adeline Harper Williams"—she refers to the notepad in her hand as she spouts off my full name—"is needed right away. I believe it's a *family* emergency."

I raise a brow and then turn to my mother. "I have no idea what could be wrong."

"You must have the wrong person," Aurora argues. "Our entire family is here. Well, except for our father, but he wouldn't call for *Addy*."

Ah yes, because I'm the last person anyone wants.

Molly shakes her head. "The gentleman in the lobby is extremely adamant that *Adeline Harper Williams* is, indeed, needed."

I try to peer around Molly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the *gentleman* in the lobby—though I must admit, I've got a pretty good idea as to who it might be.

And I'm literally going to attack him with joy.

"She cannot possibly have an emergency," Mom reiterates, her voice growing tired as she turns to me. "If this is another one of Blaze's schemes to get you out of doing something..."

"Mom, I don't know. What if he's actually in trouble?" I use my most innocent tone, shrugging my shoulders like I absolutely did *not* send an *SOS* text.

She narrows her eyes at me. "Adeline, I hope, for your sake, you're not trying to finagle your way out of helping your sister plan her wedding."

"I'm not." I raise my hands in surrender and then scoot back in my chair, turning to Aurora. "I'll make it up to you."

She smiles and then mouths, "Lucky."

And just like that, I'm off to see what this *emergency* is all about.

Chapter Three

Blaze

If the Williams family didn't already think I was a little obnoxious, after this, they *definitely* will...

But Addy sent an SOS. So, did I even have a choice?

Sometimes, I wonder if her family thinks I've corrupted her over the years since we met in college. After all, I'm nothing more than an aged-out foster kid who only made it to college because of a hockey coach who wouldn't give up on me.

And sure, as a result of all that, I was drafted to the NHL, and the rest is history...

But internally, I'm still an orphan of sorts.

"Oh my gosh," Addy huffs as she comes storming into the lobby. "I could *kiss* you right now!"

"That bad, huh?" I smirk.

"It was the absolute worst." She beelines straight out of the building, shaking her head.

"Thanks, Molly." I smile at the hostess before turning to leave. But she doesn't smile back.

Whatever.

I jog to catch up with Addy. The afternoon sun hangs high in the Atlanta sky, and the heat is brutal right now. And it's on days like today that I wish I'd have gotten drafted for a team located further away from the equator...

But then I'd be further from Addy, and that's not worth the tradeoff.

"If I were to ever move teams to a different state, would you come?" I blurt out, the random question causing her to peer up at me with a funny expression.

"Uh ... *Are* you changing teams? You literally *just* won the Stanley Cup..."

I shake my head. "Intrusive thought."

She laughs, threading her arm through mine. "Those are seriously the worst, but to answer your question, I might follow you. Maybe even hide in your suitcase. At this point, I think my own family would be relieved if I left town."

"Oh, stop," I tell her, rolling my eyes. "Your family loves you."

"Yeah, as long as I do exactly what they say and get married before I turn thirty." Her tone sours as we continue down the street. It's full of tourists this time of year, so it's fairly easy to blend in. Most people don't recognize me outside of the rink.

Thank goodness.

I couldn't handle that level of fame.

"Are you even listening, Blaze?" Addy nudges me.

"Yes, sorry." I rub the dark stubble on my jaw. "I think you're going to be just fine. It's rare for your parents to say anything to you about your marital status unless it's the holidays or something, and even then—"

"It's my grandma Esme," she interjects with a heavy sigh. "She acts like being single at thirty is a death sentence or something. It's ridiculous. And my mom goes along with it because life is apparently just a series of boxes that must be checked

off.”

“Okay, but you’ve always done things your own way. It’s never seemed to bother you before. So, why now?”

She falls silent, her lips flatlining like they do when she’s trying to decide if I’m making a solid point or if she’d like to murder me.

It could go either way.

However, this time, she just sighs again. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m a little jealous of my sister. But that’s only because *everything* always works out for her. She’s only twenty-five, yet she’s already got a rich fiancé who perfectly fits my family’s expectations, and now she’s about to have the perfect wedding…”

“I’d hardly call Robert Welch a real catch.” I snort, earning myself a dirty look.

“He’s a little old, sure, but he’s nice,” Addy reasons, her dark brows furrowed beneath her platinum blonde hair. I’m pretty sure her hair has been every color under the sun at some point, and now that I think about it, I have no idea what the natural one is. But I digress.

“He’s forty.”

“And you know you’re only nine years away from that.” Addy rolls her eyes.

“Okay, but your sister is only twenty-five,” I reason with a shrug as we make it to our favorite pizza spot. “I think that’s a pretty significant age gap. Just saying.”

She lets out a frustrated sigh. “Okay, but he’s also an investment guru who’s made more money at forty than my family will inherit in their lifetime. Not to mention, he has a reputable last name. Trust me, my family couldn’t be more *thrilled* that Aurora is marrying him. And it’s a win-win because she gets to keep living her luxurious lifestyle—never having to lift a finger. But, anyway, enough about Robert.”

I purse my lips as I grab the door, holding it open for her. While I refrain from making any further comments about the subject, my mind instantly wonders if Addy feels like she’s missing out.

My best friend works harder than anyone I know, and even though her parents have offered to foot the bill for things, she, instead, works overtime in the business she started to support herself. It’s admirable—much more so than someone who’s just searching for a deep wallet and a diamond ring.

“Just the two of you?” the hostess asks.

“Yeah,” Addy mutters, brushing some of her hair out of her face. “Just the two of us.”

I frown at the saltiness in her voice before following her in silence to our usual back corner booth. I slide in across from her, and before I can even ask her about her work schedule tomorrow, she’s off on another tangent.

“You should’ve heard them, Blaze.” She groans. “They were going on and on about how I don’t have a plus one for the wedding—it’s so embarrassing. They act like there aren’t *tons* of people who are still single at thirty.”

“You’re only twenty-nine,” I say, eyeing the waiter as he sets down our waters. I thank him on behalf of both of us and then order our usual pineapple and bacon pizza.

“I just don’t get it. Why have I had such horrible luck finding a true connection?” Addy rakes her black, chipped fingernails through her hair. “I’m a catch, right?”

“Uh-huh.” I clear my throat. “But I don’t know why you’re suddenly so upset about this. Why don’t you just ignore them and go have a good time in Hawaii? Who knows, you may end up meeting some surfer dude that’ll accompany you to the wedding.”

Addy suddenly looks hopeful, but it quickly fades. “There’s no way my family would ever be okay with that. They didn’t even like *Harrison*.”

I make a face. “Duh, that dude was weird.”

She throws her hands up. “He was an aerospace engineer. *Of course* he was weird.”

“He told me the first time I met him that *origami* was one of his greatest passions in life, Addy,” I drawl. “I don’t think origami has anything to do with his career.”

“Okay. So, he liked to fold paper ... *a lot*. What’s so bad about that?” She shrugs. “I wonder if he’d want to go to the wedding with me as my plus one.”

I think back to the Facebook post I saw a few weeks ago. “He’s married now. His wife is some kind of origami artist, too.”

“Match made in heaven.” Addy groans. “If *he* can find love, why can’t I? And why can’t my family just accept it?”

“Maybe you should try talking to your girlfriend Penny about this.” I offer up the advice mostly because I *don’t* know what to say. I don’t have a family that puts pressure on me to be anyone or anything. Nobody—aside from my teammates and Addy—thinks twice about what I do with myself and my life.

Addy sighs and slumps down in the booth. “That’s probably a good idea. She was raised in a similar household. She’ll know how to handle this. I’m sorry for bugging you.” She gives me one of her famous soft smiles, her plump, glossy lips turning upward, and as always, I return it.

She has the kind of smile you can’t meet with anything other than joy.

It’s one of the many reasons why I adore her.

“I’ll let it go,” I tease, “*if* you stop worrying so much about what your family thinks. I know you’re close with them and all. But lately, I don’t know ... I think you’ve been letting them get under your skin too much.”

“I know,” she agrees, and then her blue eyes grow wide. “Oh my gosh, I totally just word-vomited all over you and never once asked what you were up to. I’m so sorry. How’s your day?”

I chuckle. “I think that’s our norm, right?” I shoot her a wink and lean back in the booth, watching as she rolls her eyes at me for the hundredth time. “My day has been good. Settling into the off-season. Enjoying some rest, but also preparing to spend lots of time in the gym with the team—all that good stuff. I’m waiting for you to put me to work walking some of those dogs.”

She tips her head back, giggling. “I can’t pay you.”

“I don’t need you to pay me.”

Addy meets my gaze, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Funny how the tables have turned, huh? You’re Mr. Millionaire NHL player now, and *I’m* the one scraping by.”

I shrug. “You could have access to the parental fund if you wanted it.”

“True, but then I’d be under even *more* pressure to find Mr. Right. Which is the last thing I need right now, considering my terrible track record with men.” She sighs. “I’m an ever-loving mess.”

“Aren’t we all?” I say, just as the waiter sets our pizza down in front of us. I immediately grab a steaming slice, unbothered by the burn that comes with the melty cheese and warm fruit. Some people probably think it’s gross that we like pineapple on our pizza, but they’re nuts.

Addy chews on her bottom lip, her arms folded across her chest. I can see it all over her face that she *wants* to keep talking about how unfair her family’s expectations are. I nearly laugh and kind of find it endearing that I know her so well. I’ve never known anyone as well as I know her—and I don’t think I ever will.

“Go ahead,” I tell her as soon as I swallow. “Keep going.”

She shakes her head and waves me off. “No, I know you’ve heard enough.”

“But I can tell you need to get it out of your system,” I reason. “If you need to vent more about how unfair your family is, I’m all ears. I have pizza now. My emergency is over.”

She bursts into giggles. “So *pizza* was the emergency?”

I cock a brow at her. “Isn’t it always?”

“Touché.” She grabs a slice and then immediately drops it on her plate. “I don’t know how you eat it at this temperature.”

“I don’t know how you eat it dang near frozen right out of the fridge, but you do,” I shoot back. “Different strokes for different folks.”

“I hate that saying.”

I grin, flashing my freshly whitened smile. “I know.” I scoop up another slice and eat. She watches me like I’m some kind of science experiment.

“I’m probably gonna have to walk down the aisle with Robert’s brother,” Addy says as I continue to chow down on my pizza.

“I don’t like him.”

“You don’t like anyone,” I say through a mouthful.

“Wow, you’re so kind.” She huffs, her eyes darting toward the exit. “No wonder I’m alone.”

My chest pangs with a little guilt mixed with sympathy, and I nudge her under the table with my Nike. “Hey.”

Her eyes shift back to mine, and I see she’s more than flustered... She’s *hurt*. “What?”

“You’ll find the right person one of these days, Addy,” I tell her, holding her gaze. “You just haven’t found him yet. But I’m sure that once you stumble into his arms, the world will suddenly make sense. It’ll be a happily ever after and what-not. You know, the same stuff you read in your books. That’ll happen to you. When the timing is right.”

“What if my family doesn’t like him?” Addy’s voice grows quiet.

I shrug. “I don’t think it’ll matter when it’s the right person. I don’t think you’ll care as much about it as you do now.”

“What if I’ve already missed him? What if he was on a train or something, and I just walked right past him? What if he already died or something?”

I raise my brows. “That escalated quickly, but um—” I pause, trying to dig deep. “I’m sure *whoever* he is is still living, and I’m sure he’s waiting for you as much as you are for him.”

She smiles her famous smile, and I bask in the warmth it emits. As far as I’m concerned, it’s mission accomplished. I’d do anything to keep a smile on Addy’s face.

After all, she’s my best friend.

Chapter Four

Addy

“Come on, Bruno. It’s just a leash,” I say to the little Chihuahua mix, who happens to be one of my most ornery clients.

He hides beneath his owner’s table, peering up at me, and lets out a miserable growl.

I sigh, holding the pink leather leash in my hand. I don’t blame him for not wanting me to clip it on his collar. The pink hardly matches his ferocious personality, but his owner insists that pink is for *all* dogs of his size.

“It’s not my fault you have to use this thing,” I tell him, kneeling down and peering under the table at him. “I wouldn’t want to, either.”

He tilts his head at me. His massive, tent-like ears are way too big for his little brindle head. He doesn’t growl at me this time. Instead, he full-on *barks*.

I tip my head back, frustration building in my chest. “We still have to pick up other dogs, little buddy. You’ve gotta come along now. I have to eat, too.”

His big brown eyes stay focused on me, and I’m thankful that Miss Louise isn’t here right now to see this. She’d probably be hovering over me, her fiery red hair all piled up on top of her head as she berates me for scaring her dog. She thinks little Bruno can do no wrong.

“You’re spoiled,” I inform him with a sigh. I stand to my feet. It’s musty and stale in the dining room, and I cough as I retreat from the space. I *don’t* want to have to tell Miss Louise I skipped Bruno’s walk—even if I usually end up carrying him the entire way home.

As I turn around, Bruno finally juts out from the table and follows me to the sitting room. I let him, smiling to myself. He loves to play these cat and mouse games, but he can’t *stand* being left alone, either.

I then turn, placing my hands on my hips. “Ready to give it up now?”

He cocks his head at me, his pink tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as if to challenge me to try and clip the leash to his collar.

“I really need to get this day moving,” I mutter, leaning toward him. “I have to go to another one of those *miserable* wedding planning luncheons. Family bonding and all that.”

Bruno huffs, blowing out a little Chihuahua-style sigh, and I seize the opportunity to lunge, snapping the leash to his collar. Now that I have a hold on him, I’m finally able to fit the little monster into his harness and reclip the leash to that.

Who knew such a tiny dog could be so difficult?

“Your mother spends too much time toting you around in a bag,” I tell him in a loving tone, patting his little head and then wiping the sweat from my brow. “Let’s go. We still have to stop by and grab Tiny this morning.”

Tiny, the near one-hundred-thirty-pound Great Dane. How in the world were Bruno and Tiny scheduled for the same walk? Well, that’s beyond me, but the scheduling app I created for my clients clearly has some glitches.

I lead Bruno out of the townhouse and start our walk to Tiny's home, which is only a few blocks away. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I fish it out while I still can.

Mom: *Try not to be late today. Great-Grandma Jean is coming.*

"You've got to be kidding me." I grimace and glance down at my light-wash jeans and plain black T-shirt. There's no way this outfit will meet her standards. Great-Grandma Jean has always been particular about appearances and tradition, expecting everyone around her to dress to the nines, no matter the occasion.

I glance at my watch. *Shoot.* I won't have time to swing home and change before the luncheon. Imagining her disapproving gaze when she sees me in such casual attire, my mind races to come up with a solution.

Suddenly, I have an idea. With a deep breath, I pull out my phone and dial Blaze's number.

"Yeah?" He answers his usual on the first ring.

"You know, sometimes it might be nice to hear a hello," I joke. "But seriously, what're you doing right now?"

"Uh, I'm at the gym. Why?"

"Oh, um, nevermind."

"What is it, Addy?" he insists.

"Well ... it's just that, I don't think I'm dressed nice enough for the luncheon I have to go to, and I was hoping that you could bring me some clothes. But it's okay, I'll figure something else—"

"No, it's okay," he interjects. "Just tell me where to meet you and what you want me to get from your closet."

Relief bursts through my chest. "Have I ever told you that I love you?"

"Yeah, all the time." He chuckles.

"Okay good," I breathe out. "If you could just grab that old lady red dress and my black sandals, that would be great."

"Alright. I have your location, so I'll find you."

"Thank you."

"Yep." With that, he hangs up, and I breathe out a sigh.

Everything is going to be okay.

I pick up Tiny—who's always ready to go, thanks to his sweet, elderly dog dad—and head toward the park. The pace is miserable with Tiny *dragging* me forward and Bruno huffing along at a snail's pace, but somehow, we make it there. As soon as I'm inside the chain link area for the dogs, I unhook their leashes and let them run.

"You look fine in what you have on," a deep voice says from behind.

I turn with a smile to see Blaze in his gym shorts and white T-shirt. His dark hair is slightly disheveled, and his muscles glisten under the sun with a light layer of sweat. And while yes, he's my best friend, sometimes I forget how attractive he is.

"What?" He makes a face at me, his hazel eyes sparkling. "Do I really look *that* unpresentable right now? Because, for the record, you're covered in dog hair."

"Oh, stop." I laugh, swatting him as I open the gate for him to enter.

He shakes his head. "I can't hang around. I've gotta get back to the gym. It just seemed like this red dress situation was an emergency. Here." He holds out one of my bags. "I went ahead and put your makeup bag in there, too."

"You're seriously the best," I say, taking the backpack from him. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably have a lot of nervous breakdowns," he jokes, flashing me a crooked grin. "Walk safe, though. I gotta go."

I nod and then watch him leave, wondering why in the world I can't find someone just like him to take home to my family. I mean, Blaze isn't exactly the kind of man they're hoping for—considering his rough upbringing and lack of old money—but

he's nice to me. I just want someone who's nice to me *and* thinks I'm pretty.

Which apparently is asking too much.

I round up the dogs and head back to their houses, dropping off Tiny and Bruno. Thankfully, Miss Louise lets me use her restroom to change my clothes and freshen up. I put on the red dress and sandals, shake out my hair, and apply a light layer of makeup.

It's *perfect*.

Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I head toward Tea Parlor, mentally preparing myself for what's to come. My great-grandma is worse than her daughter, who berated me for being single and forever alone. I'm bound to hear similar comments, but maybe if I look the part...

"Hey, watch out!" The words cut through my thoughts right as I bump into something hot ... *and wet*.

I back away and glance down, seeing the coffee stain now covering the entire front of my pale red dress. "Oh no... *No*..."

"Yeah, you *should* be saying sorry!"

I look up to see a dark-headed woman glaring at me with an empty, smashed coffee cup. "I'm so sorry," I say, but I can hardly think as I stare at the massive spot on my dress. It runs from my chest all the way down to the hem. It looks like I have an oil leak.

"Your dress is def ruined." She hums like it brings her some sort of satisfaction in her high heels and white pantsuit. "I'm not sure if you'll be able to get that out."

It won't matter. I probably won't live through the afternoon.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I can give you money to replace your coffee."

"No thanks," she snips. "I think *you're* going to need it more than me." The woman with the hot coffee in the middle of summer saunters away, her heels clicking on the sidewalk.

I glance up at Tea Parlor and then back to my dress. There's no way I have time to change. I check my watch, feeling myself on the verge of pathetic tears, but I shake them off. It's not like I could've prevented someone from running into me...

Well, me running into them.

But whatever.

I head up the steps and through the door, beelining it for the restroom to assess the damage and attempt to salvage my dress. I try to dab at the coffee stain with paper towels, but it only seems to spread further. I stare at my reflection in the mirror, and with a heavy sigh, I resign myself to the fact that there's no salvaging the dress now.

I'm out of time.

I straighten my shoulders and step out of the restroom, plastering a fake smile on my face as I see Molly, her eyebrow already raised.

"Just tell me what room they're in."

"Same as before," she says. "You're the last one here."

I squeeze my eyes shut, ignoring the way the wet fabric still clings to my skin, and then force myself forward, trying not to have a panic attack as I push open the door and present myself in a worse-for-wear condition.

"Oh my..." My mother draws it out like she's struggling to cope with what she's seeing. "What ... what *happened*, Adeline?"

Granny Esme huffs. "It looks like she fell in the mud. I swear, I don't even know where the girl could find mud in the city."

I stare past them all to Aurora, whose expression is nothing short of sympathy.

"Someone spilled coffee down my dress just outside." My tone is flat.

“That’s why you should always bring a change of clothes with you,” Great-Grandma Jean finally speaks up, her eyes laser-focused on my face. “And maybe not wait until the last minute to get here. I can see that you’re winded, Adeline. Rushing leads to clumsiness.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, dipping my head. “I have a change of clothes in my bag, but—”

“You need to clean up before tea,” Granny Esme interjects. “I’m disappointed, Adeline.”

“Yes, ma’am.” My voice softens once more. I look to my mother. She shakes her head, giving me that *I don’t know how to help you out of this one* face. “I…”

“You know when I was your age, I was married with children, managing a household and making sure everyone was presentable at all times. Yet, you can’t even manage to show up to tea on time in a clean dress,” Granny Esme adds, leaving me sweating and growing angry on top of being humiliated. “It’s starting to make sense why you can’t find a husband ... or even a *date* for the wedding.”

My hands begin to tremble.

I can’t take this anymore.

“I *have* a date to the wedding,” I blurt out, my voice sharp and confident. “And he’s not just my date, he’s my *boyfriend*.”

Everyone in the room goes deathly quiet, and I stomp around the table, jerking out my chair and plopping down.

My sister watches me with wide eyes, handing me a napkin—like it can save the monstrosity of a stain on my dress. She leans in and asks the one question everyone else is waiting for: “Who is it?”

I look her dead in the face, shoving the napkin in the top of my dress. “You can meet him when we’re getting on the plane for Hawaii.”

Because I have to find him first.

Chapter Five

Addy

What have I done?

I rake my fingers through my hair as I bring up the calendar on my phone. I literally have *one week* to find a boyfriend who's willing to fly with me to Hawaii for a wedding. It's impossible. It's not logical.

Why did I run my big fat mouth?

Shoving my phone into my dress pocket, I storm up the steps to my townhouse, a cute Manhattan-style home smack dab in the middle of Atlanta. I punch the keycode into the door and then step inside, breathing in the sweet, homey scent.

"I have to figure this out," I say aloud as I hang my backpack on the hook and slide out of my sandals. Slowly but surely, I pad across the hardwood floors to the staircase. I'm still stuck in the soiled red dress—a pitiful reminder of what put me in this predicament in the first place.

I've got to get out of this thing.

Five minutes later, I'm in an oversized black T-shirt and running shorts, lying flat on my back on my fluffy white duvet. My phone is right beside me, and I know I have to do something to fix this...

I could just say we broke up...

But then everyone will know I was lying.

I could post an ad and offer a free vacation in exchange for someone posing as my boyfriend...

But that might draw in some real weirdos.

"Ugh," I mumble, running my hands over my face. I pick up my phone and scroll to Blaze's number, hesitating before clicking the call button.

As much as I love him, I don't think he'd understand the dire aspect of my situation.

So, I call Penny instead.

"Girl, it's been three days since I've heard your voice," Penny chimes in my ear. She's the closest thing I have to a *childhood* friend, and I met her at a rich-kid summer program in Europe when I was sixteen. "How are you?"

"Not good. In fact, I'm *really* stressed right now." I sigh. "I just put myself in the worst predicament."

"*Ooh*," she hums. "Do tell. This sounds way more exciting than all the diapers I've been changing today."

I furrow my brow. "I thought you had a nanny?"

"Yeah, I let her go. She had some other dreams she wanted to chase. So here I am, doing it myself." She laughs. "I'm actually having the time of my life, really. But I don't want to make you feel bad."

I giggle, imagining the stately redheaded friend of mine elbow-deep in baby mess. "I'm not jealous of changing your twins' dirty diapers, Penny, but thank you for your concern."

“You’re welcome,” she chimes. “Now, onto your *predicament*. I’m dying to know what trouble you could’ve possibly gotten yourself into.”

“Well, you know Aurora is getting married in Hawaii, right?”

“Yes. And I thought it was supposed to be a small wedding, but I got an invitation. I’m not going, of course, because Sam and I can’t find a babysitter. That’s neither here nor there, though. Continue.”

I sigh, dreading the next part. “You also know that my family constantly reminds me how terrible it is that I don’t have a boyfriend or husband. They love to drone on and on about how I’m running out of time to find the right guy.”

“Mmm, yes.” She sounds like she’s frowning. “I, unfortunately, have witnessed this plenty of times when sitting in your circle.”

I nearly laugh at how proper she sounds—it’s just how she talks, having been raised all over the world and in a variety of cultures.

“Addy, just tell me what happened...”

“I lied and said I had a boyfriend to go with me to the wedding to shut them up,” I blurt out, facepalming myself as I admit the truth. “I’m literally going to look like such an idiot when I show up alone.”

“Wow,” Penny says. She falls into silence for a few moments.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. It’s not like I can find a boyfriend in a week.”

She lets out a sigh. “You can either own up to your lie—or cover and say you broke up with the guy or vice versa or...”

“Or I have to find an *actual* boyfriend.”

“Exactly. I mean, it couldn’t be *that* hard. You’d be essentially offering up a free trip to Hawaii. I bet tons of men would jump on that, especially with a pretty woman like yourself.”

I frown. “I can’t even get a guy to meet me two blocks from his house for a coffee date. How am I supposed to convince someone to fly across the ocean with me?”

“I don’t know, ask?”

“*Ugh*.” I let out a frustrated groan and shake my head. “This kind of stuff doesn’t come as easy for me as it does for you. You’ve always had men falling at your feet. But I don’t have that. I’ve never had a guy truly care about me.”

“Um...” Penny’s voice trails off. “You act like your best friend isn’t a man.”

“Who? Blaze? He doesn’t count.”

“Why not? He’s super hot, super rich, and would literally go to the ends of the earth for you.”

“As a friend,” I remind her. “He’s never seen me as anything more than his basket-case best friend.”

“I’m not going to argue with you there, because we’ve gone down this road before, but...” Her voice trails off. “I think you should give yourself a little credit. You’re beautiful, smart, funny, and you work harder than anyone I know. You’re a catch. And you need to start *believing* that you are.”

I sigh, pushing myself up into a seated position. “Okay, but here’s the problem. Even *if* I believed all those things, I still don’t have a date for my sister’s wedding, and I’m *so* tired of always being *that* person.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that.” Penny laughs. “But the answer to your problem is literally right in front of your face, honey.”

“Huh?”

“Blaze.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” she says. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t.”

I groan. “He’s my *friend*.”

Penny lets out an overdramatic, exaggerated sigh. “That’s the point. Have him *pretend* to go as your boyfriend. He gets to go to Hawaii, and you get to spend time with someone you’re comfortable with—*strangely* comfortable with, actually.”

I blow out a sharp breath, mulling it over. “My family would never approve of him as more than just my friend, though.” Penny is quiet for a few moments. “Penny?”

“Sorry,” she says. “I just think you’re nuts, but honestly, who cares if they approve of him? He’s a little rough around the edges, yeah, but maybe if you take him as your date, they’ll let up. Or maybe they’ll see they shouldn’t be pressuring you so much. I don’t know.”

I think about it for a few minutes, including how I would even go about trying to explain this predicament to Blaze, or if he’d even agree to it—and it makes me nervous. “Maybe I should try to find another date before I go asking him.”

“Okay, you could try. I mean, who knows, maybe you’ll walk out your front door and smack right into the man of your dreams? Though, I have to ask... Do you even know what the man of your dreams would be?”

I hesitate, trying to conjure up an answer. “I ... I’m not sure. Probably someone who cares about me like Blaze does, but who also wants to kiss me and stuff?”

She bursts into laughter. “Oh, my goodness.”

“What?”

“Do you remember when you had a crush on Blaze in college? He was *all* you talked about. I thought you were borderline obsessive.”

“Oh, stop,” I warn her. “I was just a clueless, sheltered eighteen-year-old kid. And Blaze was the bad boy on the hockey team with all his mystery and intrigue. He rode a motorcycle. Tons of girls drooled over him.”

“And yet, he chose you.”

“As his friend,” I clarify for what feels like the hundredth time. “He chose me as his friend.”

“Has he ever had a girlfriend?”

I shrug. “Not that I know of. He pretty much puts all his time and energy into hockey. He’s always said that he doesn’t have time to date. You know, the typical excuse that a guy uses when he doesn’t want to commit. I’m pretty sure half the hockey team is like that. I don’t think any of them have serious relationships, except for Cam.”

Penny sighs. “Well, still, my point remains. I think your best bet is to ask Blaze to be your date—I mean *fake* date. That way, you’ll be with someone you know and trust, which will make the wedding way more enjoyable. And it wouldn’t be *that* awkward. I mean, the two of you have basically seen each other naked.”

I nearly choke on the air in my lungs. “What? No, we haven’t!”

“Oh, sorry. I guess that was just an assumption because you two watch so much Netflix together.” She giggles. “Anyway, just ask him. He’s made it pretty obvious over the years that he’ll do practically anything for you, so I can’t see why he wouldn’t agree to do this.”

My heart jumps to my throat as I try to picture the conversation. He’s going to balk at the idea, I know that—and he’s probably going to think I’m completely *insane* for not being honest with my family.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep breath.

I should just try to find a random guy to take, but...

Penny does have a point. I’m safe and comfortable with Blaze.

And maybe if I brought someone who’s the total opposite of all the previous guys I’ve dated, my family will finally back off.

“But I don’t know,” I think aloud. “I’d be putting Blaze under the scrutiny of my family. I don’t see how that could possibly be a good idea.”

“Like he hasn’t been scrutinized by them before?” Penny muses. “He’s been around your family for a decade. I don’t think there’s anything they could say or do that would surprise him. Besides, I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but your family is really not all *that* bad. Not your parents anyway.”

“I know, I know,” I mumble. “But when my mom gets around my granny Esme, it’s like she transforms into this Stepford wife.”

“Is that because she’s trying to keep up appearances for her own mother?”

I pause, never having considered this before.

“Maybe. My grandparents are very traditional and have high expectations for all of us. It’s exhausting. I mean, they think that women should be married and popping out babies by no later than twenty-five. And that may have worked for them, but times are different now. Dating is a whole lot more complicated than it was fifty years ago.”

“Those little old ladies gripe and complain about everything. And I get it. My aunty Jill spent two hours walking around my house and harping about my lack of old century décor. Do I know what that is? No. Do I care? Also, no. Maybe you should start focusing more on what *you* want and worry less about what your family thinks.”

“I’m not as tough as you,” I answer, feeling guilty. “Sometimes, it’s just hard living in Aurora’s shadow. She’s literally the golden child who followed the path laid out for her without questioning it. And this wedding has just amplified the fact that I’m going to be forever alone. I mean, not like that’s the worst thing, but—”

“You’re not going to be forever alone, Addy.” She laughs. “You have me. And Blaze.”

“You know what I mean.” I sigh. “I just want my family to leave me alone for a while. It’s exhausting being constantly chided and whispered about. Maybe having a wedding date will finally shut them up.”

“So, are you going to take Blaze as your date, then?” Penny asks, her voice expectant.

“I don’t know.” I hesitate. “I don’t want to make him angry.”

“Why would he be angry?”

“Because it might make things weird between us. I don’t want to make anything weird. I just want things to be ... well, the way they’ve always been.”

“Sometimes, things need to change,” Penny says, a hint of something I don’t understand in her voice. “But also, nothing will change so long as you both work to ensure it doesn’t.”

“Contradictory advice.”

“Let’s not forget that *you’re* the one who’s trying to nab a boyfriend because you think you need to fit into some narrative your snobby grandmothers have.” She chuckles. “But I think you should just go talk to Blaze and settle your mind. I’m sure it’ll go fine. Like I said, that man would do anything for you. It’s admirable, really. Sam could take a few lessons.”

I laugh. “Oh, stop. Sam treats you like a queen.”

“As he should.”

Penny and I spend the next thirty minutes talking about her life, her three kids, and events in New York City. It’s our usual conversation, one we seem to have every few days or so, but I can hardly focus. All I can think about is what Blaze is going to say when I show up at his door...

Asking him to be my fake boyfriend.

Chapter Six

Blaze

“Dude, I got a girl’s number from the ice skating rink,” Dylan brags as he wipes the sweat from his face. “She’s a figure skater.”

“Wow. Another girl for you to make cry?” I bench press my final six reps and set the bar on the rack.

He huffs, peering down at me with a perplexed expression on his face. “I don’t *always* make them cry. I just don’t keep them around long if they’re not *the one*. I mean, I’m looking to settle down now.”

I explode in laughter as I push myself up into a sitting position on the exercise bench. The sound of clinking weights fills the room as our teammates continue their workouts. “You’re kidding, right? Because the only thing I ever see you *settling* is scores with angry boyfriends.”

“No,” he insists. “Not true. Also, how is it my fault if some girl’s boyfriend gets mad that she flirted with me? It’s not like I can tell if a girl has a boyfriend just by looking at her. You don’t even know the struggle. You don’t date.”

I frown as I grab my towel from where it hangs and wipe the sweat from my face.

“I mean, when’s the last time you even took a girl out?” Dylan hovers as I stand to my feet.

“I don’t know. I haven’t really dated anyone since college.” I hate to admit it, but it’s the truth. I just haven’t had the time, and the few dates I’ve gone on have been total train wrecks.

“Which I don’t even get,” Dylan continues. “Don’t you want a family?”

“I have Addy,” I tell him with a shrug. “I don’t really need anyone else.”

Dylan’s dark brows raise. “You might. Because one of these days, Addy’s going to end up finding someone to settle down with.”

“Nothing—and *no one*—is going to come between us.”

“Are you sure about that? Because I doubt her significant other will be hunky-dory with a buff NHL player hanging around his woman all the time—and you won’t be running her errands anymore for her, either. There’ll be no more showing up and being her hero.”

I shake my head. “Addy’s been my best friend for over ten years, and she’s the closest thing I have to family. You know how I grew up.”

“Sure.” Dylan places a hand on my shoulder. “But don’t you eventually want a wife and kids of your own and stuff?”

I make a face at him. “No offense, but this seems a little off-kilter coming from you. Talking about marriage and kids and stuff. You’re usually only concerned if a woman is blonde or brunette.”

Dylan lets out a ragged sigh. “Yeah, I know. I don’t know what’s up with me lately. I guess I’m just tired of playing the field.”

“So, then stop?” I head toward the locker room and check my watch. It’s nearly seven o’clock.

“Are Kade and Cam around?” Dylan asks as he follows me.

“I’m not sure. Why?”

“I don’t know. I just need to vent.”

“About wanting to settle down?” I peer back at him.

He shakes his head. “I just ... I have someone in my head that I can’t get out—and she *shouldn’t* be there. I hate it.”

“Who is it?”

“Not telling,” he says quickly. “But it’s not good.”

I spin around to face him as I bristle. “It’s not Addy, is it?”

“Woah, calm your jets, bud.” Dylan breaks into a massive, cocky grin. “So what if it *is* Addy? Huh? What would you do?”

He challenges me in his usual way, and I can’t tell if he’s messing with me—or if he’s actually into Addy.

But either way, it’s a *no* from me.

“I’ll kill you,” I tell him, my voice growing defensive.

His eyes narrow. “Maybe *this* is why you can’t find a girl to settle down with. You’re too worried about the one you already have. Why don’t you just wife her up already?”

“Shut up,” I snap, rolling my eyes. It’s not the first time that someone has tried to say that Addy and I should be together. It comes with the territory of being best friends, especially given that neither of us has ever had a long-term or serious relationship.

“You run off every single one of her boyfriends,” Dylan adds, grating my nerves even further. He’s on a roll today, and I’m not enjoying it.

“I don’t.”

“You do. Come on, none of the guys she’s dated have lasted more than what? A few months? And can you blame them? I mean, who *wouldn’t* be threatened by you? You’re a rough and tough self-made hockey player. And you don’t even date because of her.”

“What do you mean, because of her?” I demand, once again growing defensive.

“Oh, come on.” Dylan shakes his head and walks past me. “It’s not hard to see that you’re *so* focused on her that you can’t focus on anyone else. But also, *no*, Addy isn’t the one stuck in my head. She’s cute, though—just not my type.”

“Good to know,” I mutter under my breath as I enter the locker room behind Dylan. “I was worried I might have to punch you in the face.”

He bursts into laughter. “Exactly my point.”

“About what?” Kade pops out from the showers, dressed in a pair of sweats with no shirt, towel-drying his hair. “What could Dylan possibly be making a good point about?”

“The fact that Blaze doesn’t date anyone because of Addy,” Dylan answers before I can.

Kade shrugs. “Oh, yeah, duh.”

My jaw drops. “What? That’s not true.”

“Yeah, yeah cause she’s your family or whatever.” Dylan waves me off.

Kade tilts his head, the droplets of water dripping from his hair glistening across his olive skin. “So, you look at her like a sister?”

I hesitate. “No.”

Dylan chuckles. “That’s what I thought. See? You have the hots for her.”

“Addy’s been around forever,” I huff. “Why are you so fixated on this all of the sudden?”

“Because you literally dropped everything at the gym the other day just to go to her house and get her a fresh pair of clothes,” Dylan retorts. “Who does that?”

“A husband,” Kade answers, shooting me a wicked grin. “That’s who does it.”

“No way,” I object. *I mean ... maybe that is what husbands do... But I wouldn’t know, I’ve never had that kind of insight into a marriage.* “She needed to change. I was just being a good friend.”

“Uh-huh.” Kade laughs. “It’s all good if you like her, too. She’s awesome.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ve never looked at her like that.”

Well, that’s a lie.

She was all I thought about in college. But ... I buried those feelings a long time ago. And I’m not about to bring up that fact right now.

“Yeah, right,” Dylan huffs, peeling his shirt over the top of his head. “But I guess I’ll let it go. It’s not like you’re gonna *do* anything about it anytime soon.”

I ignore the comment.

“Just leave him alone,” Kade says as I gather up my gym bag, choosing to shower at home instead of here.

“Dude, I was just giving him a hard time.” Dylan holds up his hands in surrender.

“It’s just typical Dylan antics.” I wave him off.

“Are you coming with us to Florida next weekend?” Kade changes the subject, his eyes on me. “I figured since Addy will be at her sister’s wedding, you could use some bro time.”

I shrug. “Sure, why not?”

“Great!” Dylan wiggles his eyebrows. “We’re gonna snag the ladies left and right with these muscles.” He flexes.

I shake my head. I have no desire to *snag the ladies*. I have enough on my plate as it is with hockey.

“I’ll see y’all tomorrow,” I tell them as I slip out of the exit, heading toward the parking lot. The sound of laughter catches my attention, and I tilt my head in the direction, spotting Cam and Nila in the parking lot.

The newly engaged couple doesn’t notice me because they’re so wrapped up in each other. I’m happy for them. And in a way, I’m partly responsible for bringing them together—because they never would’ve met if Cam hadn’t stupidly punched that fan in *my* defense. Nila was the social media manager who cleaned up the mess, and those two have been inseparable ever since.

But I don’t know why I have this little pang of jealousy in my chest every time I see them fawning over each other.

I wouldn’t even know how to make a relationship work.

I frown at the thought and climb into my Jeep, the black leather sticking to my sweat-drenched skin. It’s moments like this that make me miss my motorcycle ... but I had to sell it when I joined the NHL because my body is “too valuable to risk the injury.” It’s against my contract to even ride one.

I sigh and start the engine, startling at the radio that’s suddenly blaring classic rock.

The me three hours ago was harder of hearing, apparently.

I begin the short drive home, which is just a few blocks away, in the same neighborhood as Cam and Kade.

Ten minutes later, I’m climbing out of the car and making my way through the interior garage door. My phone buzzes from somewhere inside my gym bag, but I ignore it.

Whatever it is can wait until I’m done showering.

I clamber up the spiral stairs, ignoring my sparse home decor. Addy has been on me since the day I moved in to make it *homier*. But I don’t know how to do that. I’ve never stayed in one place long enough to get attached to it. Not since my parents chose drugs over me when I was four years old.

I ended up in foster care because there were no other family members to take me in. And I guess I just drew the unlucky number, because nobody in the system ever took me home and kept me there either.

The concept of creating a cozy home seems foreign to me.

But Addy insists that this house is *mine* now, that I should make it a home instead of just a place to sleep.

Some habits die hard...

I slip into the master bedroom—which is about as bare as the rest of the house—and toss my bag onto the black quilted king-sized bed. I leave it there while I take a quick ten-minute shower. When I step out, I tie the towel around my waist and pause in front of the mirror.

I probably should've shaved.

I take in the thick, dark stubble casting across my jaw.

“Oh well.” I shrug before running a brush through my disheveled, but clean, jet-black hair.

Just as I step out of the bathroom to get dressed, my doorbell rings.

“What the heck?” I furrow my brow as the security app pings my phone. I dig into my gym bag and grab my phone, opening up the app as I head downstairs. I see the live video recording of Addy standing on my porch, her arms folded across her chest.

I narrow my gaze, squinting down at her oversized T-shirt and...

Wait, does she even have pants on?

My eyes grow wide, and I pick up my pace, hoping like heck nothing is seriously wrong. I set my phone on the counter on the way to the door and rip it open, a burst of warm air hitting my exposed abdomen.

“Oh my... Oh my gosh! Put some clothes on!” Addy screeches, her hands flying up to cover her face.

“What?” I glance down, realizing all I have on is my bath towel. “You can’t see anything.”

“Uh, it’s the principle,” Addy says, still looking away. However, I don’t miss the redness tinging her cheeks... And something about that makes me feel... *weird*.

“It’s not like you’re wearing much yourself,” I joke awkwardly.

She glances down at her outfit and then laughs, raising her baggy t-shirt to reveal her running shorts. “Typical man.”

Now *my* face is red. “That’s... not...” *Ugh*. I step to the side to let her in. “Just get in here.”

Addy steps inside and immediately starts doing that thing she does when she’s nervous—wringing her hands and staring at her feet. “Um... so...”

“So...?” I tighten the towel around my waist, suddenly feeling *very* self-conscious. “What’s up? Is there an emergency? Or are you just here to hang out?”

The last time she acted like this, she had accidentally scraped a pole while driving my car. Thankfully, I know my car has nothing to do with whatever *this* is.

She lets out a sharp breath and meets my gaze. “Will you be my boyfriend?”

Chapter Seven

Addy

Blaze looks totally shocked.

I think he's actually vacated his body and left planet Earth right now—and that's not making me feel any better about this situation.

In fact, my head is starting to feel light, and I think I might pass out.

"Blaze?" I croak, waving my hand in front of his face. "Will you be my *fake* boyfriend?" I repeat.

"What did you say?" He sounds like he can't breathe either.

"Ugh, don't make me ask a third time. This is already embarrassing enough as it is..." My voice trails off as I inhale a shaky breath. "I did something *so* stupid today, and I really need you to help me out."

"I need to get dressed," he says flatly, spinning on his heels and high-tailing it out of his luxurious modern deco entryway.

"But..."

He holds up a hand as he walks away. "You have so much explaining to do, I guarantee it can wait." With that, I watch him disappear upstairs, trying not to stare too long at his taut shoulder muscles tense beneath his tanned skin.

I shut my eyes and shake my head.

Now is not the time to start checking him out.

I've always thought Blaze was super hot, just like all the other girls. However, I simply choose to not let it affect me. And it doesn't.

Until he opens the door in nothing but a towel.

UGH.

I run my hands over my face, catching some of my tangled blonde hair, before casually strolling into Blaze's bare living room, which consists of two leather couches and a massive TV. There's nothing on the walls. *Nothing.*

He hasn't wanted to decorate, and he still refuses to let me do it. It's like ... it's like he's scared to actually *have* a home. Which, given everything he went through as a child, I try my best to understand. But I'll never truly know what it feels like to grow up without a family or a place to call home, so I can't fully empathize.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I stare at the blank gray wall until I hear his footsteps come storming back down the stairs. Based on the cadence, I'm guessing he's irritated. Maybe angry. And I can only imagine what's running through his head right now.

"Explain," his deep voice says dryly. "Now."

I take a deep breath and turn to see him in a pair of black sweats and a white cut-off, showing off his immense biceps. "I'm just asking you if you'll be my fake boyfriend. That's all."

"Why?" he snaps. "Why do you *need* a fake boyfriend in the first place?"

I groan and then spend the next ten minutes explaining everything that happened today. I don't leave a single detail out—not even the coffee ruining the red dress that he had brought me to change into. At the end of it, I shrug and wait.

He stares at me blankly. “I don't understand you sometimes.”

My shoulders fall. “I know. It's a lot. But ... I *really* need your help. There's no way I'm going to find an *actual* boyfriend in the next week. Especially considering my terrible luck with relationships over the last twenty-nine years.”

Blaze pinches the bridge of his perfect nose. “I don't even know what to say to that right now. Of all the things to go lying about...”

“I...” My mouth remains open, but I don't have anything to say in defense of myself. I *did* lie. “I was stupid.”

He shakes his head. “I didn't say that. I just don't get why it suddenly matters so much to you what your family thinks. Or why you think bringing *me* to the wedding is a good idea. Can you even imagine what they'd think if *I* was your boyfriend? I'm the guy they side-eye *every* Christmas because I don't know proper table etiquette.”

“They only do that because we've been teaching you for almost a decade, and you still can't seem to remember—”

“That's not the point, Addy. And I really don't care that they do that. But can you imagine what they'll think when I'm introduced as your *boyfriend*?” He spits out the word like it disgusts him, and a pang of hurt nails me right in the center of my chest.

My eyes drop to my shoes, and I shrug. “I don't know.”

“Please don't be upset...” His voice softens. “I just... What about us? What'll happen when the trip to Hawaii is over? What will you tell them?”

I shake my head, forcing my eyes up to meet his. “We'll just say it didn't work out for us. We're better just being friends.”

“I'll suddenly be your *ex-boyfriend* to them.”

“We'll go right back to normal, just like we always have been.”

There's hesitancy in his gaze and he rocks back on his heels, folding his arms across his chest. “I don't know... I really don't like this idea. I mean, I love you, Addy, and I'd do anything for you, but this ... this is a lot to ask. And I'm supposed to be going to Florida with the guys.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “If you don't want to do it, then just say so.”

He falls silent, leaving tension to fill the space between us. His eyes study my expression, and I can tell he's mulling it over. Blaze needs time to process things, I know that. But every minute feels like an eternity right now. I look away from him and just so happen to catch sight of the *one* picture he does have in his living room, sitting on an end table.

It's of him and me at Disney World five years ago.

In the photo, I'm wearing my Mickey Mouse ears, holding a slushie, with his arm draped around my shoulder. I've seen the picture a thousand times, but for some reason, at this moment, it hits differently.

We look ... *cute together*.

My heart does a flip-flop in my chest, and I push it away.

I might've had a massive crush on Blaze in college, but it was never mutual—and it never would've worked. That crush has long faded. That ship has sailed.

So why am I even thinking about that right now?

Oh, yeah, because I'm asking him to be my fake boyfriend.

“Addy...” His voice catches my attention.

I look back at him. “Yeah?”

“Let's go for a walk.”

My shoulders fall. “Okay.”

Anytime he asks me to go for a walk, it usually means that we’re going to have a heart-to-heart—and normally, I’m *all* for it. But now? I’m a ball of nerves.

He slips on his tennis shoes and leads the way to the front door. He holds it open for me. I mutter a quick “thanks” and head down the sidewalk of his fancy neighborhood. The only sound between us for the first few minutes is our shoes on the pavement, but finally, he breaks the quiet.

“If I *don’t* say yes, what’re you going to do?”

I gaze up at him. “I don’t know. I guess I hadn’t thought that far ahead. But if it makes you feel better, I didn’t even consider asking you until Penny mentioned it on the phone.”

“Of course, Penny mentioned it,” he grumbles. “She always gives the worst advice.”

I jump to my friend’s defense. “I actually thought it was solid advice.”

“How?” he asks incredulously.

“I don’t know. I mean, I could probably find some random guy to go by offering a free trip to Hawaii, but then I’d have to spend nearly a week with a total stranger—and what if they’re a creep? Or what if they’re mean? Or what if—”

“I could go with you and keep an eye on whoever you find.”

“It’s a plus *one*, not *two*,” I say dryly. “But thanks for that, Mr. Bodyguard.”

He sighs. “Couldn’t we just go as friends? Look, I’m more than happy to ditch the trip to Florida to hang out with you. You know you’re my favorite person, but this ... I don’t know. I don’t want to ruin anything between us.”

I narrow my eyes. “How would we possibly ruin anything? We wouldn’t be *actually* dating. We’d just be pretending to date.”

“Okay, but in order to *fake date*”—he uses his fingers for air quotes—“we’re going to have to put on a show.”

My heart takes an extra beat. “And do what? Hold hands?”

He chuckles. “Uh, yeah. And whatever else couples do.”

“Well, my family is super reserved, so it’s not like you’re going to be kissing me or something. At the most, you can hold my hand. No kissing.”

His lips flatline. “Fine.”

“And we probably won’t be staying in the same room,” I reason. “I can’t see that happening. I mean, we’ll just get to hang out, and then you can hold my hand sometimes or something. It’ll be just like we’re normal us.”

Blaze eyes me and then takes one of his long, deep breaths. “And you really think they’d buy that one day, we woke up and ... just decided that we’re in *love* love?”

“In *love* love?” I burst into a fit of giggles. “I can’t with you.”

“Well, I do love you, Addy,” he says. “We say that to each other all the time, but we don’t mean it like *that*.”

I don’t know why, but something about the way he just said that nearly offends me. “Look, I get that you don’t see me as anything other than a *bro*, but I’m not *gross* or something.”

His brow furrows. “Of course I don’t think you’re gross.”

“I know,” I say quickly, feeling stupid. “I’m sorry.”

“See,” Blaze chimes. “This is exactly the kind of misunderstanding that could come up between us. I don’t want to ruin our friendship. I’d *never* risk our friendship to pursue something romantic. It’s not worth losing you. You’re my family. You’re my *only* family.”

“You have your team, but yeah, okay. I get it.” I start to grow frustrated and make a U-turn, heading back toward Blaze’s house. “I think this conversation is over. I’ll figure something else out. You should go to Florida, and I’ll lie in the bed I made

for myself.”

I pick up my pace, my eyes focused on my maroon SUV in his driveway. I’m choosing to ignore whatever he’s grumbling under his breath behind me. Honestly, I really don’t see what the big deal is. We’re already like an old married couple these days. Why not add a fake relationship into the mix?

“Addy, wait,” Blaze calls after me, jogging to catch up. He grabs my wrist lightly, and I turn around.

“I know it’s dumb, I *know*. I’m just so tired of taking this crap from my family— and I’m going to have to take it for the entire time I’m in Hawaii. I just want to go and have fun and, for once, *not* be the girl everyone whispers about.”

His gaze softens. “I’m sorry.”

I pull my hand away from his warm grip and make the rest of the walk to my car. “It’s okay, Blaze. I’m not going to be mad at you for saying no.”

“Good, because I’m saying yes.”

I turn around, my eyebrows shooting skyward. “What?”

He sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “You heard me. I’m saying yes, Adeline Harper Williams. I’ll be your fake boyfriend.”

Chapter Eight

Blaze

Why did I agree to do this?

I stare at Addy. She's sitting across from me at the small, wrought iron table. We're at our favorite breakfast spot—a charming little cafe with a patio that overlooks the bustling city streets below—but this is *not* our typical breakfast.

“Okay, well,” Addy begins, pulling a notebook out of her purse, “I think we already have a pretty good handle on what’s going to be acceptable and what’s not.”

“Yeah, but I think it’s important that we explicitly define our boundaries. I don’t want anything to ruin—”

“Our friendship,” she cuts me off. “I get it. You’ve made that super clear. Nothing is going to ruin it. I’d never let that happen.”

I grunt, folding my arms across my chest. “You say that now, but if something goes haywire with this fake relationship, well ... I’ve seen the movies—and the celebrities who fake a relationship as some kind of PR stunt. It rarely works out the way they want it to.”

I take in the steaming cups of freshly brewed coffee and warm banana walnut muffins between us, a momentary distraction from the nerves coiling in my stomach.

“That’s because you only hear about the ones that don’t,” Addy reasons. “I’m sure plenty of fake relationships have turned out just fine.” She shrugs like this isn’t a big deal to her before picking up her latte and taking a sip. “Okay, so rule number one...” She laughs, meeting my gaze. “No kissing.”

“No kissing, how?” I ask, my heart thumping strangely in my chest. “Because it’s gonna seem kinda weird to your family if I don’t at least greet you with a kiss on the cheek, don’t you think?”

Addy frowns, clicking her purple pen in her hand. “I guess I didn’t really think about that. Okay. No kissing on the mouth.”

I blow out a sharp breath, my mind going rampant with the ways that rule could be bent. I’ll have to be careful... Or better yet... “How about we just agree to cheek and forehead kisses only?”

She makes a face. “Wait, where was *your* head at? The gutter?”

I chuckle. “I think it’s just better to spell out the rules in detail. The clearer they are, the easier they’ll be to follow.”

“Okay, what about holding hands?” Addy asks, doodling on the corner of the paper.

“I think holding hands is a great way to show affection without crossing any hard lines. I’ve held your hand plenty of times before.” I bring my coffee cup to my lips, my mouth feeling dry at the way Addy responds to my comment, tilting her head and looking at me with curiosity.

“What do you mean? I can’t remember a single time you’ve held my hand.”

“Um, if I need to get your attention, show you something, guide you when you’re blindfolded—like at your surprise twenty-fifth birthday party...” I start to feel heat creep up my neck at the memory of her fingers intertwined in mine, but thankfully,

Addy returns her gaze to the paper and writes something down.

“Okay, so unlimited hand holding. I’d say hugs, arms around each other, and anything else like that is fair game too.” She continues to write.

“As long as it’s middle-school-dance-level appropriate,” I clarify.

“I’m not gonna touch your butt, Blaze.” Addy bursts into laughter, shaking her head. “You seem so worried about this—like I’m going to push the boundaries or something.”

I shrug, keeping my own fears and insecurities under lock and key. Addy has no idea how crazy I was about her in college, too terrified to make a move because of how broke I was at the time. I knew her wealthy family would never approve of me. But I don’t look at her romantically anymore. I buried those feelings so deep down that I often forget they exist.

Regardless, she’s obviously still *very* attractive...

And the thought of my hands on her makes me sweat.

“Okay, so I feel like our physical boundaries are figured out.” Addy sighs in relief. “Is there anything else we should discuss?”

“Pet names? Sleeping arrangements? And what’s our story for why we suddenly became more than friends?”

“You can call me whatever you want. And you’ll have your own room. As for the story...” She bites down on her lower lip, looking up at me. “I don’t know. What do you think?”

“Well, um,” I hesitate, trying to come up with something remotely believable. “Maybe I took you home from a party, you were a little tipsy, and you kissed me. And it was at that moment, we both realized we were more than friends.”

She does *not* look happy with my answer. “That makes me sound desperate.”

I raise my brows. “Coming from the person who needs a fake boyfriend.”

“Seriously?” She glares at me, slamming her notebook shut. “I just want to have a good time in Hawaii without having to worry about what my family thinks about me being forever alone. C’mon Blaze. You’re my best friend. I know we’ll have a good time—we always do. We just need to come up with a more believable story.”

I purse my lips, using my coffee as a diversion from the nerves I’m feeling about going to Hawaii as her *boyfriend*.

Well, *fake* boyfriend.

“What if we went for a walk?” Addy offers. “And you told me you loved me, but you realized it was more than just friend love. That would be *so* romantic.”

“And unrealistic,” I snort, finally setting the cup down. “Like why would I just suddenly think of you as more than a friend? That’s all we’ve been for a decade, Addy. I’m pretty sure I know how I feel about you.” Something flashes in her eyes that’s got me feeling the need to backtrack. “But I guess maybe it could happen.”

Addy’s gaze drops to the table. “Alright. Well, since we can’t seem to agree, we can just wing it, then. One of us will answer it when the time comes—if anyone even asks. I don’t think they will. They’re probably not going to take me seriously, regardless of what I do.”

“You’re being a Debbie Downer,” I grunt.

“Yeah, and you’re just a *bucket* of sunshine,” she shoots back at me, crinkling her nose up in that adorable way she does. “I’m trying to navigate how to survive this wedding, and you’re just worried about me touching your butt.”

I nearly spit out my coffee, choking back laughter. “I’m *not* worried about unsolicited butt touches.”

“Good. Now, how long have we been dating?” She folds her arms across her chest, and for a moment, I take her in. Her messy bun. Her T-shirt covered in dog hair from her early morning walks. And her natural, free-of-makeup face. Honestly, I

don't understand how she doesn't have a boyfriend. I don't know how anyone could see and meet Addy and *not* want to be with her.

I clear my throat. "Maybe a month? I don't think it should be too long, because if so, you would've added me as a plus one when they first started asking a few months ago."

"True," she hums. "A month is fine. We've known each other so long, it would make sense for it to get serious fast."

"I agree." I shift in my chair. I don't know why this conversation is so uncomfortable, but it is. "Anything else?"

She hesitates. "Be nice to me."

Okay, that's confusing. "I'm always nice to you."

"No, I mean, be nice to me in the same way you were the day you dropped everything to bring me a change of clothes—that kind of nice. Most boyfriends don't even do that."

"They're not very good boyfriends."

"No, maybe not." Her eyes drop. "You set the bar pretty high."

"Not really," I blurt, dang near squirming in the seat. We've never talked like this before, and it's making my heart race and my palms sweat—in a weird, warm kind of way. "I haven't even been able to keep a girlfriend."

"You haven't even had a girlfriend since we became friends," Addy snorts, then frowns. "You rarely even go out with anyone. And when you do, you'll take her on like three dates and then give up."

"No," I counter. "I don't give up. I just... they're never the right person for me." I shrug, trying not to let on that being alone bothers me sometimes.

I don't know why I can't find someone.

Maybe Addy is setting the bar too high, too. I mean, she's sweet, attentive, and has a way of making me feel like I'm a real-life superhero. No one else has ever done that—which is why I have to protect what we have at all costs. And I'll do *whatever* it takes to keep our friendship intact.

"Okay. Well, I think we're done here," Addy says. "This trip should be fun, though. I mean, we don't have to spend the entire time with my family. So, I think we'll get plenty of time for normalcy."

"Right, totally," I agree. Although my anxiety is telling me to run for the hills. "It'll be fine."

"It'll be fun." Addy grins, reaching across the table and squeezing my hand.

A burst of heat comes from the minor gesture, but I brush it off.

She's done that before, right?

Surely, she has. So why is this suddenly such a big deal? Am I already getting in my head about it?

I pull my hand away and use it to pick up the muffin I haven't touched, clearing my throat as I unwrap the paper from the bottom. "Are we going to have coordinating outfits?"

Addy eyes me and makes a face. "Um, do you *want* coordinating outfits?"

I shrug. "Yeah, I mean, I kinda like the idea. I can get one of those custom shirts with your face on it. Maybe I could wear it to the wedding. I bet everyone would love that."

Her eyes grow wide. "You're going to get me kicked out of my own family."

"At least then you wouldn't have to have a fake boyfriend just to get through your sister's wedding." I shoot her a wink. "Then we could just be normal friends again."

"We *are* normal friends. And this ruse isn't going to change anything between us. We're just going to go to Hawaii, put on a show, and then stage a breakup. I'm sure my family will be relieved when we break up."

I can't hide my surprise but do my best to swallow the hurt. "Do you really think they'd be *relieved* that we broke up? I mean, I know I'm just a lowlife turned NHL player, but—"

"You're not a lowlife," Addy interjects. "You never were."

"Okay. But do you really think they'd be happy about the breakup? I mean, at the end of the day, I think they want you to be happy—and surely they'd be happy if you were happy with me."

"Yeah, but you know how they are." Addy sighs, picking at her muffin wrapper. "They have this outdated idea of the type of person I should end up with, which always consists of old money, upper-crust circles, politics, and whatever else they have in their heads. They want me to end up with someone who ... fits their mold. Someone who can put on a proper show in front of high society and carry on their legacy that has been meticulously crafted by generations before—"

"Okay." I tense my jaw. "I get it."

"Please don't be offended," Addy says quickly. "I'm not saying their perspective is right. It just is what it is. I mean, you've seen the guys they've tried to set me up with. They've mostly been trust fund babies. But luckily, you're rich. That's going to help a lot."

"The shallowness of this conversation right now," I say incredulously, shaking my head. "I swear, I could *never* be with someone who only looked at me for my wealth."

"I know." Her voice softens. "And I think it's incredible how hard you worked to get to where you are. I've watched you go from playing hockey on a college scholarship that you worked your butt off to get to winning the Stanley Cup in the NHL. You've managed to overcome so many obstacles in your life, and you've never let anything stop you. You're impressive."

"Just not to your family."

She frowns. "It'll be fine."

I nod, but inwardly, I'm a freaking wreck.

What the heck have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Nine

Blaze

Is she as nervous as I am about this?

I can't breathe as I step through the airport doors, where her entire freaking family is waiting for us. I glance down at Addy, who's rolling her carry-on. I have the rest of her luggage weighing me down like a pack mule of sorts.

"Ah, there you are!" her mom calls out, rushing toward us. She's dressed like a typical mom, wearing khaki slacks and a white sweater. Her hair is pulled up in a bun, and while I see Addy in her, it's only in the nose. The rest of her looks like... her dad? I can't tell. I stare at her father, who's looking as unamused as always, his expression in a dull frown.

"Sorry I'm late, the traffic was awful," Addy answers as they hug. "Blaze said we needed to leave sooner, but I was running behind."

"As per usual," someone grumbles from the mix of people—most of whom I don't recognize. Although I can pinpoint both her grandmothers and her aunts, her sister, and well ... yeah, that's where it ends.

But each and every person is staring at us, even the ones I don't recognize.

"It's good to see you, Blaze," Addy's mom says.

My heart thumps nervously. "It's good to see you, too."

I've *never* been nervous around her parents. But suddenly, everything feels different...

"Wait a minute." Her mom's eyes bounce between the two of us, and *now* it must hit her. "Where's your boyfriend?"

Addy elbows me. "Right here."

I swallow hard. "In the flesh."

"Wow." Her brows skyrocket as she takes a step back, as if she's taking us in for the first time. "Okay."

"*Blaze* is your boyfriend?" Her sister pushes through the family. "Really?"

"Yeah," Addy calls back, and I can hear the nerves in her voice. "He is."

I take a step closer to her, my arm brushing hers. The touch sends a tingle up my spine, but I ignore that, blaming it on nerves.

Addy looks up at me, her eyes slightly wider than before. But I just smile at her, because if she was my *real* girlfriend, I'd want to be this close.

Before anyone else can say anything, Addy's dad chimes in. "Alright, we've seen it. It's time to go. We've got a flight to catch. You all can gawk over Addy and Blaze on the flight."

Thank goodness. I always knew I liked her dad.

"Crisis avoided," Addy mutters as we fall in line behind everyone else. I glance ahead of us, noting her two grandmothers whispering to each other and looking back at us. I blow out a sharp breath and glance down at Addy, who doesn't seem to notice.

“Do we have time to grab a coffee before the flight?” I ask her as soon as we’ve made it through security. As if caffeine is going to help the nerves that are currently rattling my ribs, but...

“I guess.” Addy’s breath comes out shaky. She gives me a sheepish smile. “I’m so nervous right now.”

“Ditto.”

She cocks her head at me. “You’re nervous?”

“Yeah, of course, I am.” I chuckle. “I saw the judgmental stares and whispers. I know I’m not up to their standards.”

“Well, for the record, *I* think you’re perfect.” Addy turns her attention to the line outside of the airport coffee shop, and I’m left staring at the back of her head, trying to make sense of how her words just affected me.

She thinks I’m perfect?

Why does that make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside?

What’s wrong with me?

I choose to stay quiet as we wait in line at the coffee stand. When we finally reach the counter, we give the barista our orders, and I swipe my card to pay for the drinks.

And now, Addy’s glaring at me.

Uh oh.

“I was going to pay for that,” she snaps. “I’m the one who dragged you here. It’s only right.”

I make a face. “I always pay...”

“Great, now you make it sound like I never—”

“Addy,” I stop her, holding out her drink. “Don’t make this weird. Just take your coffee.”

She huffs but takes it. “I just don’t want you to see this whole trip as a burden. So, just let me pay for things, okay? Like, I’ve saved up for this.”

I frown. “No.”

“Why?” She throws out a hand as we start heading toward the gate. “Please just let me do this.”

“If I was your boyfriend, I would never let you pay for anything,” I say flatly. “I’m not going to be caught letting my girlfriend pay for things when I’m here.”

“Oh, come on.” Addy rolls her eyes. “No one will know.”

“I will know,” I say with a shrug. “And that’s enough.”

She sighs, raking her fingers through her hair. “Okay, fine. I’m not going to argue with you—but only because I don’t want to make a scene in front of my family.” Her lips purse as we arrive at the gate, and she leads me right into the lion’s den. “Hey, Granny.”

She glares at me. “You’re the boyfriend?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer, trying to hold her cold, icy blue eyes without shivering. “That’s me... The boyfriend.”

“Aren’t you her hockey player friend from college?” She blinks, her nose crinkling as she gives me a once-over.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer, hoping my Levi jeans and white T-shirt don’t put her off. I mean, we’re just riding on a plane...

“Hmm,” she says, and then turns to Addy. “Why?”

“Why what?” Addy sputters.

“Why him?”

Addy looks up at me and then back at her granny. “Why *not* him?” She’s growing defensive. “I love him.”

I’ve heard her say those three words a million times, but it hits differently this time. Because she’s inferring she’s *in* love with me—and despite the fact I know this is completely fake, my heart reacts with palpitations.

Must be the caffeine, right?

Thankfully, the call to board sounds out before Granny can say anything more. I do my best to shake it off and follow Addy onto the plane. Together with her family, we occupy most of the first-class seating, and I let Addy take the window seat.

“Okay, I gotta know,” I begin, keeping my voice low, unable to hold back my curiosity any longer. “Why’d you have to make it sound like things are so serious between us? You were so casual dropping those three words...”

Addy looks over at me, her cheeks reddening. “I’m *so* sorry. I guess I just ... I panicked, and those were the first words to come out. I mean, I *do* love you, so that counts for something, right?”

I sigh, pulling out my phone and putting it on airplane mode. “Yeah, it does. It’s just going to make things a lot harder to explain when we break up right after this trip.”

Addy leans in close, lowering her voice. “Maybe we can just say we realized our love is based on friendship, and that we’re just not romantically compatible. That happens.”

“Yeah, and somehow, we’ll remain best friends as if neither of us got our hearts broken? Totally believable,” I mutter, glancing around at everyone chatting among themselves before turning back to Addy. “Breakups are *never* that easy.”

She laughs and squeezes my arm. “They are when they’re not real.”

I nod, trying to convince myself of that. “Yeah, I guess I’m overthinking this whole thing, huh?” I laugh it off, shaking my head as the nerves still cling to my body like a bad virus.

“It’s just what you do.” Addy nudges me playfully, and I chuckle as she starts digging out a book.

“What’s this one about?” I ask, noting the illustrated people on the cover next to the ocean. “Beach read?”

She angles the cover toward me. “I figured maybe it’d help me know what *not* to do on this trip.”

I read the title and immediately roll my eyes. “*My Fake Hawaiian Date.*”

She giggles. “I mean, it’s a romance, so obviously, these two fictional characters fall in love. I just have to make sure we *don’t* do that.” Her voice loses its confidence, and for a split second, I think she might be unsure...

But the moment is brief.

“Well, I guess just let me know what you learn,” I say, leaning back against the headrest. I shut my eyes as the plane takes off, and that’s when I realize there’s no going back.

This is it.

I’m going to Hawaii with Addy as her fake boyfriend.

There’s no taking it back.

Not that I had that option anyway.

I spend the next hour attempting to fall asleep, which is normally something that comes easy for me whenever I’m on a plane. But apparently, not this time. I haven’t been able to sleep a wink. I can’t stop tuning in to everyone’s chatter around me, even though none of it is discernible.

So, I fish out my headphones and put an earbud in each ear. Maybe if I just block everything and everyone out, I’ll be able to finally get some sleep. I turn on a piano instrumental track, which usually knocks me out—but once again, nothing happens. My nerves just won’t allow me any peace.

I glance over at Addy, her nose deep in her book. She’s got that all-too-familiar look of concentration, but as if she can feel my eyes on her, she looks up and cocks a brow.

“You’re not sleeping?”

I pull out my earbud and shake my head. “Nope. Apparently, I’m not tired.”

“You’re one of the few people I know who can sleep twelve consecutive hours and *still* pass out on a plane, Blaze.” Addy eyes me. “What’s wrong?”

I lean in, whispering in her ear, “Maybe it’s the fact that I’m now under scrutiny from your entire family as your boyfriend.” I breathe in her scent, some sort of coconut goodness, and I lean away, struck that I even noticed.

“You’re going to be fine,” Addy says, reaching out and taking my hand—like *actually* holding it. “See? We’re good. No worries.” She gives me that famous smile, and I leave my fingers interlaced with hers, glancing across the aisle at two of her sister’s bridesmaids, both fast asleep.

Addy goes back to reading her book, but still holds my hand. I’m tempted to pull away, but instead, I just sit here, staring at the way her hand looks in mine. Her skin is pale in comparison to my olive shade, and my hand seems to nearly swallow hers—but also, it feels nice and ... reassuring. It’s honestly bringing me some weird level of comfort.

I shut my eyes, focusing on the sensation of warmth her touch brings. Of course, I’m not thinking of it as some romantic gesture—no way. It’s just Addy being a good friend. Plus, it’s one of our rules. Holding hands at any time is acceptable. Therefore, it’s totally fine for us to be like this.

Totally fine.

Never mind the excitement thumping in my chest or the worry at the back of my mind. Everything is going to go just fine.

As the piano music draws out drowsiness, I finally breathe a little deeper, drifting off.

“I love him,” Addy says, squeezing my hand. “And I mean it.”

“Addy, no...” I shake my head, trying to disagree with her as she talks to her family.

We’re standing at an altar—a wedding altar.

I try to pull my hand from hers, but she won’t let me, squeezing it tighter.

She turns to me, her eyes meeting mine. “It’s in the rules. It’ll be fine, Blaze.”

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“There’s no rule against you marrying me.” She laughs, and I suddenly realize she’s in a white dress.

And I’m just in my boxer shorts.

I’m jarred awake and I groan, rubbing my eyes. But as I do, I feel a warmth against my shoulder. I gaze downward and catch my breath. Addy’s eyes are closed, and both her arms are wrapped around mine. She’s treating my arm like it’s a teddy bear, and even though I no longer can feel my fingers...

I let her sleep.

And try not to think of the mortifying dream I just had—or any of the old more-than-friendship feelings I once had for Addy.

Younger Blaze would’ve been on cloud nine over this entire scenario.

Chapter Ten

Addy

Other than Blaze's nerves, the flight is long and uneventful. Maybe it's because I slept through most of it, not even making it halfway through a book I thought I'd finish before we landed.

When we arrive at our destination, we all grab our bags, pile into shuttles, and head for the resort. Blaze and I get stuck sitting next to the bridesmaids once again, and while their chatter about bar hopping and what they plan to wear isn't even remotely intriguing, it's way better than sitting beside my granny.

I really did *not* handle her interrogation at the airport very well. And I hate that my answer made Blaze uncomfortable. I'll do better next time, though.

My gaze drifts to Blaze, who's staring out the shuttle window, his eyes locked on the clear blue waters.

"It's gorgeous," I say, nudging him slightly.

He looks over at me and nods. "Yeah, it is. I've never been here."

"Well, you're here now." I smile. "Hawaii is one of my favorite places in the world. Maybe after this is all over, we can make plans to come back." He looks over at me, returning a smile, but something flickers in his amber eyes. "Everything is going to be okay, I promise."

"Yeah, I know," he murmurs before turning back to the window.

When our shuttle finally arrives at the resort, we all pile out. The wedding planner begins distributing our room keys right here in the parking lot. Before she gets to us, my mom makes her way over, her lips pursed.

"Since we didn't know in advance that you were bringing your *boyfriend*"—she emphasizes the word as she looks at Blaze—"you two will have to share a room. I know this is not ideal, but the hotel is completely booked, and no one in our party has any extra beds."

I force a smile, doing my best not to panic. "That's fine. It's a suite, right?"

Mom frowns. "Honey, why would you get a suite? When we made the reservations, you were a one-person party. I figured you'd be fine with one of the smaller king rooms. I trust that the two of you will behave."

Blaze nearly chokes, but somehow, he recovers. "You don't have to worry about us, Mrs. Williams. I promise."

Mom gives him this giddy smile that catches me off guard. "Good. I know I can count on you." There's not a single tinge of concern in her voice, and I find that perplexing. But maybe she's just trying to keep her cool since we're here for my sister's wedding.

Before I can say anything, the wedding planner appears and hands me two room keys. "Here you go. Your room is located on the top floor, so you'll at least have a good view."

"Thank you," I say. Mom and the wedding planner walk away. I turn to Blaze. "Shall we?"

"I guess so," he mutters, all our luggage in hand.

I take one of the bags from him, and we enter the resort alongside some other family members. We head straight for the elevator. I smash the up button. When it arrives, Blaze and I pile in alongside my sister.

“Are you excited?” Aurora looks at me, her cheeks rosy and eyes bright. “I can’t believe it’s almost wedding time.”

“Yeah, you’re about to be a wife,” I say stupidly, still trying not to think about sharing a bed with Blaze.

Aurora nods. “Maybe you’ll be next.” She bursts into a fit of giggles, looking up at Blaze. “That would be *so* cute. I overheard you and Granny talking at the airport. That was so brave, just throwing caution to the wind like that and admitting your love for Blaze. *Ugh*.” She places her hand over her heart. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you be so bold before, Addy.”

“Yeah, I guess he just brings out the best in me.”

Blaze snorts, and I elbow him.

“Awww.” Aurora draws out the word as the elevator stops on her floor. She pooches out her lower lip. “Love that for you, Addy. You two are just so sweet.” She steps off with her luggage, and I breathe a sigh of relief as the doors close.

I turn to Blaze. “You’re right. I overstepped by telling Granny that. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” He chuckles. “What’s done is done. You’re in love with me, as far as your whole family is concerned. We’ll just need to try to act like this relationship is more than just casual.”

“Was it ever just casual?” I retort, but my comeback is terrible and awkward.

He shakes his head at me as the doors slide open on our floor. “I’m glad you’re not worried *at all* about this.”

We lapse into silence as we walk to Room 1015. My mind races. Surely, we’re not going to be stuck sharing a bed. There should at least be a couch—or something. We could always order a rollout bed? Right?

I mean, I guess if we had to share the bed, it’s not that big of a big deal, right?

Sure. Totally fine.

Blaze stands behind me as I swipe the key.

Holding my breath, I swing the door in.

Oh no. Mom wasn’t kidding when she said she gave me a smaller room.

I let out a sharp breath, instantly worried. Usually, I prefer the smaller rooms when I’m staying by myself, but now...

“There’s nowhere for me to sleep.” Blaze says exactly what I’m thinking as he tosses our luggage down on the king-sized bed. I watch him as his eyes scan the rest of the room, complete with just a mini fridge area and a desk. There’s not even a couch—there’s no room for it. Which means, there’s no room for a pull-out bed either...

“It’ll be fine,” I say, my voice breathy as I walk toward the balcony. “I mean, look at this amazing view.” I slide the door open and step out on the top-floor balcony, which is nearly the same size as the room itself. “Who needs space when you have this?”

Blaze steps out behind me, the ocean breeze tussling his dark hair. “It’s nice, for sure. I can sleep on the floor, though. Or maybe there’s a bathtub. That’s what Cam did when he and Nila got stuck together in that cabin.”

“No,” I vehemently counter him. “No way. Cam may have slept in the bathtub, but that’s *only* because he and Nila were practically strangers at the time. We’re not them. We’ve been friends for a decade, Blaze. We can share a bed.”

He looks over at me. “Are you sure? Because I don’t know about all this. We’re already touching each other a lot.”

I make a face. “What?”

Blaze lets out a heavy sigh before stepping back into the room. “We held hands for pretty much the entire flight, and then you fell asleep on me.” His voice comes out cautiously as he turns to face me. “I just want us to be careful.”

My brows shoot skyward as I start to grow offended. “Are you implying that I’m gonna try to break the rules or something? Because I can’t help what I do when I sleep, Blaze.”

“Exactly.” His eyes dart toward the bed.

“Oh my... Are you serious right now?” I exasperate. “You act like I have cooties or something! It’s *not* that big of a deal. I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen asleep on you almost *every* time we watch a movie together. I don’t see how it’s any different now than it was then.” I fold my arms across my chest, determined to make my point.

He huffs, raking his hands over his face. “You know what, you’re right. I’m stressing out *way* too much over this. I’m sorry.” He frowns and then heads to the bed, grabbing his suitcase and unzipping it. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me today.”

“It’s just the nerves,” I say softly, placing my hand on his shoulder as I begin unpacking alongside him. “I’m nervous, too, but I really think it’ll be fine. Let’s just get settled in, have dinner, and then we can come back here and be our normal selves. Nothing crazy. Just two best friends.”

“Sharing a bed.” Blaze grunts, grabbing an armful of T-shirts and shoving them into a drawer. “For a whole week.”

“Well, five nights, technically,” I correct him, grabbing one of my dresses from the bag. Blaze stares at it. “What?”

“You brought a little black dress?”

I shrug, feeling my cheeks warm. “Yeah? So? You never know when you might need one. I could ... I could, um, meet someone or something.”

He narrows his eyes. “Really?”

“You could meet someone, too,” I quickly add, playing it off like I’m not rambling just to fill the space. “We won’t *always* be around my family. But anyway, that’s not why I packed it. I didn’t know what we’d be doing in our free time, so I thought I’d come prepared for any scenario. We might go for a nice dinner.”

“Yeah, I guess.” His eyes stay on the dress. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen that one before.”

“You haven’t,” I chime, heading for the closet to hang it up. “I bought it specifically for this trip. I actually bought a lot of new stuff for the trip...” I ignore the look on his face. “But I did that before I knew you were coming.” It’s a partial truth. I bought *some* of the outfits before I knew he was coming, but honestly, the little black dress came after. Maybe I want to impress him as his fake girlfriend...

But in a friendly way. Of course.

“What time is dinner?” Blaze asks, ignoring everything I just said. “I’d like to go get a quick workout in, or at least take a shower—I just need a reset.”

I spin around to meet his gaze. “Is it really that bad?”

“No,” he answers, giving me a smile. “It’s not bad at all. This is just a lot. I’ve never been...” His voice trails off as he runs his fingers through his hair. “Addy, I’ve never been on a family trip before, and I’ve definitely never gone on any sort of vacation with a significant other.”

My mouth falls open, and suddenly I’m racked with guilt. “Oh, Blaze.” I sigh. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think about that. What can I do to help you?”

He grabs my hand and pulls me into one of his signature bear hugs. I burst into a giggle, wrapping my arms around him as far as they’ll go and squeezing.

We’ve hugged forever, just like this...

But my heart skips a beat at the scent of his cologne and the warmth of his body radiating through my T-shirt and leggings. I don’t know why I’m suddenly hyperaware of how his body feels against mine. And I can’t help but scold myself for it.

Don’t make things any weirder for him, Addy.

“Feeling better?” I ask as he releases me. “I sure hope so, because now that my lungs are crushed, I’m gonna need some time to recoup before the next one.”

He laughs, eyeing me as he reaches into his bag, grabbing more of his clothes. “I’m good. I think I’m just gonna shower real quick. Will you need the bathroom to get ready?”

The image of Blaze wearing nothing more than a towel flashes in my mind, and my body starts to feel hot at the thought. “Um, no, I should be able to do my hair and makeup at the desk.”

He grins, his eyes lingering on my face for a moment longer than normal. “Great. Then let the festivities commence.”

Chapter Eleven

Blaze

I stare at myself in the full-length mirror, taking in my khakis and gray floral Hawaiian-style shirt. In comparison to my usual jeans and Converse, I look like a total doofus—and usually, I wouldn’t even care. But right now? I’m trying to play the role of a perfect boyfriend in front of Addy’s family, and I don’t know if this outfit will make the cut.

Double-checking my freshly styled hair, I fold my arms across my chest and wait for Addy to reappear from changing. I don’t know why I’m nervous. I’m suddenly thinking I should’ve had her help me with my wardrobe.

“Are you ready?” Addy calls as the bathroom door swings open. She steps into the main room, and I’m at a loss. She looks *incredible* in a red halter top dress, cinched at the waist and hitting her mid-thigh. Her blonde hair falls in beach waves past her shoulders, and her red lips look...

Kissable.

“Blaze?” She waves her hand in front of my face.

“Sorry.” I clear my throat. “I dig the dress.”

She narrows her eyes. “Uh-huh. I dig the floral shirt. Very vacation-y. Very handsome.”

“Really? You think it looks okay?” I check myself out again in the mirror, noting the sleeves are fitted tight around my biceps. “You don’t think I look like a douche?”

She bursts into a giggle. “I didn’t, but now that you say that—”

“Oh stop.” I shake my head, offering my arm to her. “Shall we, *girlfriend*?”

She crinkles her nose. “Ew, that sounds weird. Don’t say that, but yes. I’m freaking starving.” She links her arm with mine, and I lead her to the hotel door, opening it and letting her go first.

I feel lightheaded.

I try to reason with myself as we make our way to the elevator. *Maybe I haven’t eaten enough today.*

“What are we eating?” I ask.

“No clue.” Addy laughs. “I just know that dinner is at the beachside restaurant on the first floor. I think Robert and his family are finally here, according to the wedding group text.” She makes a face. “Which has been going off nonstop with memes ever since we got here. It’s so annoying.”

“They’re just excited,” I reason with a shrug. “I mean, getting married is a big deal. I’d probably be excited, too.”

“Probably?” She glances up at me as we step into the elevator.

“I don’t know,” I muse. “Maybe I’d be nervous. It’s not like I’ve ever even gotten close to marrying someone. So, I don’t really know what it feels like. But I’d assume I’d be excited...”

Addy tilts her head, quiet for a moment as I press the ground-level button. “Have you never been in love? I thought you had a serious girlfriend back in high school?”

As close as Addy and I are, I never really discuss that part of my life with her. Mostly because it doesn't exist, and honestly, I was so lost jumping from foster home to foster home that I didn't ever really have a chance to have any meaningful relationships—and the one I did fell victim to my situation. "I only dated her for a few months my junior year, but then I moved schools, and she decided she'd rather be with someone else."

"Oh?" Addy's eyes grow wide. "Did she cheat on you?"

I laugh. "Honestly, I don't even know. I was so lost in the transition into another foster home that I didn't think much about it. I just let it go. I wasn't in a great headspace back then, anyway."

She nods, a sympathetic look on her face. "Well, I thought *I* was in love once." There's a distant look on her face as we make the descent.

"Yeah? With who?"

Her gaze flickers to mine. "You wouldn't know him."

"Oh." But for some reason, I feel a tinge of jealousy in my chest. "Lucky guy."

She opens her mouth to say something else, but the doors chime, and we're left to stare into a crowded lobby. Addy takes an audible breath and grabs my hand, interlacing our fingers. "Here we go."

"Yep." I pop the *p* sound.

She guides me through the sea of tourists, and I try to think about anything other than the feeling of her hand in mine—or the way she looks in her red dress. She's always been so pretty, but deep down, something in me stirs at the thought of *her* being known as *mine*, even if it's just make-believe.

They don't know that.

We head into a nice restaurant, which is set facing the beach. Addy gives the hostess her family name, and she guides us out to a private deck with tables, a dance floor, and a DJ booth.

This family goes all out.

All the time.

"Hey, come sit with us!" Addy's sister calls from one of the corner tables. She's seated next to her fiancé. Robert's got a few gray hairs mixed in with his dark locks, and he looks shockingly opposite of Aurora. She wears her wealth on her sleeve, and Robert could probably pass as homeless.

I pull out Addy's chair for her, and she gives me a funny look but takes a seat anyway. "Hey." I clear my throat as I greet Robert and Aurora, already sweating bullets. I've seen Addy's sister a million times...

But *not* as her sister's "boyfriend." And that makes all the difference, apparently.

"You look gorgeous," Aurora says to Addy. "Don't you think so, Blaze?" She looks me dead in the eye, putting me on the spot.

"Don't do that to him," Addy warns her, shaking her head. "You don't have to interrogate Blaze. You've known him for forever."

"It's okay," I say coolly. "And for the record, yeah, she *does* look gorgeous. I'm pretty sure she's the prettiest girl on this island."

Addy whips her head around to look at me, her cheeks tinged the same shade as her dress. "Thanks." Her tone sounds surprised. "That's really sweet of you to say."

"It's the truth," I tell her with a smile.

Really, it is the truth.

“Well, I like this already,” Aurora coos, leaning her head against her hand. “You deserve someone who dotes on you like that.”

“Yeah,” Robert echoes, and then waves down the waitress dressed in a bathing suit with a grass skirt. When she arrives, we all order fruity drinks and some kind of appetizer I’ve never even heard of. I might be making money playing hockey now, but I still don’t really know how these fancy places work.

I lean back in the chair, and as I do, Addy’s hand lands on my knee. A jolt of electricity follows, and I have to swallow the urge to tell her to move her hand. It almost feels like I’m breaking the rules ... even though I’m not.

This is gonna be a long vacation.

“So, we rented the whole back patio,” Aurora says. “I thought it would be fun if we let loose on this first night. Since the next few days will probably be a little crazy. I mean, for us, anyway. The wedding is in three days, but you know, while we jet off on our honeymoon, y’all will still be here for a couple days enjoying Hawaii.”

“Yeah, it’ll be a nice little vacay,” Addy says, her hand *still* on my freaking knee. “It’s a great escape from reality.”

“You walk dogs, right?” Robert asks Addy just as the waitress returns with our drinks and sets them down.

“Yeah, it’s fun,” she says, eyeing me as I swoop my drink up and start downing it. “You thirsty, honey?” Her tone is terse.

“Long flight?” I shrug. Everyone at the table laughs, and I continue to finish the heavily liquored-up drink. I’m not one to really throw it back, but my nerves are fried, and Addy’s completely rule-abiding touches are doing weird things to my body.

And it’s only the first night.

“So, Blaze.” Aurora begins sipping on her blue umbrella straw. “I have to know. When did you realize your feelings for Addy had changed? I mean, the two of you have been friends for *so* long, and now you’re together. I feel like something had to have happened to trigger that.”

I set my empty drink down and nod to the waitress for a second, ignoring Addy’s penetrative glare. “Well,” I begin, feeling warm from the alcohol. “Honestly, um...” My voice trails off.

“It just happened—”

“No,” I cut Addy off, shaking my head. “It didn’t just *happen*. I met Addy when I was a sophomore in college and she was a freshman. She spilled coffee all over herself and her books. I think—” I pause, smiling as I reflect on that memory. “I think I fell in love with her right then and there.”

“What?” Aurora and Addy both gasp in unison.

But I just keep rolling with it. “Yeah, but just because you fall in love with someone doesn’t mean that you *do* something about it. Addy immediately became like family to me, and while I had the biggest crush on her in college, I just kept showing up in whatever capacity she’d let me. I got comfortable being her friend, and to have her in my life like that was enough, until...” My voice trails off as I catch her blue eyes. “Until it just wasn’t anymore.”

“Really?” Addy’s voice has a mix of *very* well-acted emotions. “I thought you just woke up one day and started to like me as more than best friends.”

I shake my head, thankful for my new drink on the table. “Nah. It’s always been you, Addy.” I rip my gaze away and grab the fruity glass up, downing the liquor as Aurora and Robert talk about how sweet I am.

I’m just a good liar.

Except the only person I’m lying to is me. I mean, mostly.

It’s still enough to *just* be Addy’s friend ... but the rest of it is true.

I thought I was in love with her in college. And I almost told her. Multiple times. It just never seemed like a good idea.

“Heavy talks.” Addy takes a sip of her drink, finally removing her hand from my leg. We spend the rest of the time talking about Robert’s new business deals and Aurora’s new fashion designs, and their plans to relocate to New York City after the wedding. I focus on eating enough carbs to soak up the alcohol.

After the sun sets, Addy nudges me. “Let’s go dance.”

I glance over at the crowded dance floor. “Are you sure? You know I don’t really dance.”

She grins. “That’s exactly why we should.”

“Fine,” I huff, pushing back the wicker chair and standing to my feet unsteadily. I’ve had too much to drink, the buzz in my head apparent. It’s definitely time to cut myself off.

Addy grabs my hand and leads me to the dance floor, kicking off her sandals and leaving them behind at the table.

“Close to You” by Gracie Abrams begins playing over the speakers, and Addy starts singing along, dancing like a goober. I can’t help but laugh at her, reminded of all the times we were in college and she’d drag me out dancing with her friends.

I wasn’t great at dancing then, either.

With a sigh, I fall into rhythm with her, pretending like I know what I’m doing. She tips her head back and laughs, and I grab her hand, spinning her around. As the song comes to an end, I pull her into my chest, and she stills, meeting my eyes.

I thread my fingers through her hair, my other arm wrapping around her waist as a strong, primal urge floods my body. My nose brushes hers, and she sucks in a sharp breath, shocking me. My heart pounds in my ears as the alarm bells ring, and I snap out of it.

“Gotcha,” I joke, releasing her like it was all a show. “I think it’s time for me to call it a night.”

Chapter Twelve

Addy

I can't breathe as Blaze drops his hands from my body. He heads off toward the room, bidding everyone a good night on his way. I jog to catch up with him, grabbing my sandals on my way. Irritation, excitement, and emotions I can't label fill my chest.

I focus on the irritation.

"What was that?" I demand as I follow him into the elevator, out of earshot from anyone who might know us. "You almost—"

"No, I didn't," he cuts me off, shaking his head. "I was just trying to appear like we're an actual couple, and if we were, that's how I'd treat you. Though, I definitely would've taken it a step further."

A pang of longing hits me from nowhere.

How freaking lucky would a girl be to have someone treat her like that on the regular?

I brush off the thought. "You shouldn't have gotten so close to me."

"I didn't break any rules," Blaze quips, staring at the wall of elevator buttons instead of looking at me. The rose-colored flush on his cheeks gives away the fact that he had a bit too much to drink. "If you want your family to think we're together, we have to act like we're together." His tone is flat, unemotional, and all business.

"It just caught me off guard," I reason, saying it just as much to myself as I am to him. "I wasn't ready for all that."

"Sorry." He's still not looking at me. "I may have had a little too much to drink. So, that's *my* bad. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." My voice comes out soft as the doors open on our floor. "I don't know what I was... I just... I don't know."

"You don't have to say anything more about it." He finally gazes down at me, his hazel eyes so warm and welcoming. "Maybe that should be a rule—that we don't talk about these things? I mean, it's only natural to react to someone when they're close to you like that."

I furrow my brow, wondering what he means. We've danced together before. "I..." My voice trails off, but he's already ten feet away, striding quickly toward the room.

I jog to catch up with him, my mind running wild with questions.

Did he feel something being close to me?

Is that what he means?

Was there any truth to the story he told about him having a crush on me in college?

I mean, for a while, I *thought* he might like me. But I was never able to conjure up enough courage to ask him. I chew on the inside of my cheek.

Blaze opens the door for me, and I step inside, eyeing him. He heads straight for the dresser, pulling out some fresh clothes and then disappearing into the bathroom. I stand there for a few minutes before letting out a sigh and digging out some pajamas. I quickly change into the shorts and T-shirt and then climb into the bed, ensuring I stay on the far side.

It seems like *hours* pass by, and Blaze is still in the bathroom. I start thinking back to our conversation earlier about how Cam slept in the bathtub to avoid Nila, and just as I get ready to flip the covers back to go check if he's sleeping in there, the bathroom door opens.

I lay incredibly still as the weight of his body lands on the other side of the mattress. My heart pounds in my chest, and as he shifts, I catch a whiff of his cologne.

"Goodnight, Addy," he says, his voice soft.

"Night," I choke out, rolling over onto my side to face away from him. It takes me forever to fall asleep, and when I finally do, it's to the sound of his deep breathing.



My eyes flutter open, just as the glow of the sun starts peeking out from the horizon. I take a deep breath and slip out from under the covers. I glance over at Blaze, my chest tightening at the sight of him sleeping only inches from where I was. I swallow hard and quickly put on a tank top and running shorts. I pull my hair up into a messy ponytail, brush my teeth, and slide on some sandals.

I need air.

The resort is fairly quiet as I make my way out the double doors and down to the beach. As soon as my feet hit the white sand, I kick off my sandals, feeling the cool grains between my toes.

The sky, painted with soft purples, pinks, and oranges as the sun starts to rise, is a beautiful backdrop to the rippling ocean waves. The palm trees rustle in the gentle ocean breeze.

I take a deep breath, trying to process the weird feelings I suddenly have for Blaze.

I genuinely thought my college crush on him was over.

But apparently not. Because all it took was *one* freaking dance and a lie about how he's loved me since the day he met me—and here I am, battling those old feelings all over again.

"Hey!" A voice breaks my thoughts, and I spin around to see my sister jogging toward me in a sports bra and a pair of matching running shorts. "Nice outfit. I didn't know you were into running." She stops and wipes the sweat from her dainty forehead.

"I'm definitely *not* into running." I laugh, looking down at my running attire that I wear for comfort. "I was just thinking I'd go for a walk this morning. Seems like the right thing to do when you're at the beach. Plus, I like the sunrise."

"Well, you look stressed." Aurora tilts her head. "Why?"

I fall in step beside her, struggling to come up with an answer. "I guess I'm just thinking about your wedding and having to deal with the family and all that."

She furrows her brow. "You sure that's it? Because I saw Blaze leave in a bit of a rush last night. He seemed frazzled after he almost kissed you... I think I know what was on his mind..."

I laugh it off, trying to ignore my heart's reaction. "Um, no. He just knows that I don't like PDA and all that. It's not appropriate."

She giggles. "Well, it's clear he can't keep his hands off you. It's *so* freaking cute. I always knew the two of you were bound to happen. It was just a matter of time. And it makes so much sense, you know? Because he's *always* looked at you like you're

the only woman who exists. And now, I realize it's because he's been madly in love with you this entire time."

"Yeah," I squeak, wiping my hands on my shirt. "I guess maybe I should've told him how I felt about him in college." I keep my eyes out on the ocean waves, staring at the boats on the horizon. Looking at anything other than my sister.

"You totally should've. Just think, the two of you would probably be married with two kids by now. *Ugh*. That's literally the sweetest thing to think about."

"Yeah." I half-smile but can't bring myself to lift my lips all the way. Something about the thought of Blaze and me being together like that makes me ... sad. I mean, he didn't even want to be my *fake* boyfriend. I basically had to beg him to do this. And the show he put on last night on the dance floor was only because he drank too much.

I wring my hands and decide to change the subject. "How did you know that Robert was the right one?"

She breaks into a grin. "Well, it's hard to say when I knew exactly. He likes to say he knew the moment we met, but it didn't come that quickly for me. I mean, I always thought he was sweet, and he treats me like a queen, but we started off as friends. I was actually dating someone else when we met."

I nod, remembering a little of that. "Weren't you with Chad? He was the one who had a complex about his sports car, right?"

She rolls her eyes. "He seriously loved that car more than anything else. But yeah, I met Robert at one of Chad's tech meetings, and we became friends. Then when Chad and I broke up just a couple weeks later, Robert offered to bring me ice cream and whatever else I needed." She laughs and shakes her head. "And I knew when he showed up with all my favorite things that he was special. He put so much thought into it." She meets my eyes. "No one had ever put that much thought into me."

"I'm glad you're getting your happy ending," I say, reaching out and squeezing her arm. "I can't wait to see where things go between you two."

"Me either." She pauses, glancing down at her watch. "But it's about time for me to get to my facial appointment. I need to look my best for this wedding." Aurora shoots me a wink and then jogs off toward the resort.

I'm left alone again, standing in the sand and staring at the waves. And if I'm honest, all this wedding talk has me wishing I had someone ... for real. Part of me wants to just jump into the ocean and let it swallow me for a little while. Maybe I could turn into a mermaid. Maybe my soulmate is somewhere in the sea.

Laughing out loud at the thought, I plop down on the sand, right at the edge of the shoreline. The warm ocean water crashes all around me, soaking my shorts. I sit quietly, thinking about Blaze and how hard it'll be to break it to everyone that he's nothing more than a friend—and that we didn't work out.

As I sit here, with my toes buried in the sand, listening to the sounds of the waves, my mind falls back to the first time we met—the same moment he described to everyone last night.

"I'm so late," I mumble under my breath as I try to juggle my coffee and my books, jogging down the sidewalk with my backpack slapping my backside.

I need to tighten the straps, but I'll have to wait until I make it to biology.

Suddenly, my Chacos catch on a jut in the sidewalk, and I trip. My iced drink spills down my white T-shirt as my books slip from my hands and hit the ground with a thud. I fall right behind them, pain searing through my tailbone.

"Whoa, are you okay?" a deep voice calls from behind me.

I whip my head around to see a tall, muscular hottie with dark hair and amber eyes holding a hockey jersey.

"I'm fine," I choke out, pushing myself up off the ground, ignoring the pain.

"Your shirt..." he says softly, reaching down and gathering my books before offering me a hand.

My shoulders fall with defeat as I glance down at my ruined T-shirt. “Ugh. I might as well just go back to my dorm and miss class. This has been a horrible morning.”

“It’s not too late to turn it around.” He smiles and checks his watch. “You might be a little late, but you can still make it.”

“But look at my shirt.” I groan, holding it away from my body. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t go to class like this.”

“You can wear my jersey.” He holds it out, his eyes latching onto mine. “I don’t mind. Gives me a reason to get your name and see you again later.”

And that’s how it all started.

Chapter Thirteen

Blaze

Where is she?

I search the lobby for Addy and try to ignore the worry tugging at my heart. All I can think about is how I *almost* kissed her last night.

What the heck was I thinking? Sure, I blew it off as a joke, but that wasn't fair—and I owe her an apology. A real apology. I shouldn't have pushed the boundaries like that.

But ugh, if only I didn't want to.

Everything that happened between us last night reminded me *so* much of how I felt about her in college. The way I pined so hard after her, letting her wear my jersey and hoping she would show some interest in wearing it for the rest of her life.

But now, I *can't* risk losing what we have for a pipe dream like that. Especially given that I have limited experience with romantic relationships.

As I walk toward the double doors, I catch sight of Aurora jogging inside.

"Hey, have you seen Addy?" I ask, straightening out my Rolling Stones T-shirt like she might judge me for it.

She nods. "Yeah, she's out by the water. She seems a little stressed out. I don't know what's up with her."

"Oh," I say, my brow furrowing. "Okay, thanks." I walk past her, pushing the doors open.

"Wait, Blaze," Aurora calls after me.

"Yeah?" I turn back to her.

"You should've just kissed her last night. It was so cute. Everyone thought so. No one cares about PDA. It's all good."

"Right," I force out. "Noted." I spin back around, my face feeling hot as her words echo in my mind.

Wait ... did she say everyone thought we were cute last night?

I drop the thought as I catch sight of Addy in the distance, sitting on the sand with her legs partially in the water.

Only she would sit like a toddler in the water.

It's adorable.

And so is Addy.

I pick up my pace because I made some plans for us this morning, and we've got to get going. After everything that happened last night, my goal today is to make it up to her—and prove that I won't push the boundaries anymore.

We're *just* friends. I'm not obsessed with touching her.

Nope. Not even a little.

"Hey," I breathe out as I reach her.

She startles and peers up at me. "Hey."

"Whatcha doing?" I can't hide my grin as she splashes in the water with her hands.

“The water’s warm.” Her short reply is abnormal, and I don’t like it. Not one bit.

I have to fix this.

“I made plans for us today,” I say quickly, offering her a hand. “And we need to get going. It was kind of last minute, and I had to pull some strings.” A lot of strings, actually. But she doesn’t have to know that.

“Hmm,” she says, taking my hand and letting me pull her to her feet. “What am I supposed to wear?”

I glance at her T-shirt and shorts. “You look perfect to me.” *Gorgeous, actually.*

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t have to keep that up. No one can hear you.”

Shaking my head, I grab her hand. “Come on.”

She pulls her hand away from mine. “No one can see us. You don’t have to hold my hand.”

I raise my brows and then motion to the resort. “Anyone could see us, Addy. I’m just trying to stick to the story. Once I get you away from here, I won’t touch you. I promise.”

She nods slowly, taking my hand again. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me today.”

“I messed up last night,” I admit readily. “I drank a little too much, and I just... I thought... I don’t know.”

“You thought you were being funny,” she fills in. That’s not even remotely the truth.

“No, but it’s fine,” I say quickly, tugging her toward the car waiting for us. “I just pushed the rules. That’s it.”

She gives me a weird look but doesn’t say anything. I almost want to blame it on the fact that I’m just a guy, and she’s freaking beautiful—but that sounds horrible, and I don’t even know if it’s the truth. I’ve just never felt such a rush with someone, and I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

The driver greets us with a smile and opens the back door. “Good morning.”

Addy eyes him. “Morning...”

I chuckle, gesturing for her to hurry. “Come on.”

She slides into the backseat, and I join her, relaxing against the headrest. I breathe a sigh of relief. We can finally be the normal Addy and Blaze now. No more weird touching or rules. But as I glance over to her, sitting there in her T-shirt and shorts, I can’t help but stare.

Why did I have to pick a best friend who’s so perfect?

“What?” Addy asks. “Do I look bad? Is my hair crazy?”

I blink to clear my vision. “No, uh, I don’t know.” I rip my gaze away and look out the window, feeling overwhelmed.

Get it together.



“Welcome to Surfing 101.” Aaron, a guy with tan skin and blond hair, claps his hands together. I stand beside Addy on the beach, both of us now wearing surf shirts and board shorts. “We’re going to get you two surfing before the day is over.”

Addy looks over at me with a wild expression on her face. “What?!”

“Yeah.” I burst into laughter. “It’ll be fun.”

She turns back to Aaron, a funny look on her face. “Aren’t you Cam’s old friend from high school?”

He nods. “Yeah, he called me this morning and told me y’all were here.”

Addy looks at me. “Look at you, pulling all these strings. Very smooth.”

I shrug. “What can I say, I can have some game.”

She giggles as Aaron heads over to grab a couple of surfboards from a shop that’s located right on the beach. “I’ve never surfed before, so this is probably gonna be a mess.”

“Well, I have. But I already know I’ll be wiping out more than I’ll be hanging ten—or whatever the surfer guys say.” I laugh.

Aaron returns with our boards and starts giving Addy a quick lesson. She listens and laughs, practicing her stance on the board. He helps her position her feet, showing her how to lean.

I watch Addy in admiration, just happy to see her spark back.

Maybe I haven’t messed everything up.

I mean, it’s only our first full day here in Hawaii. We have several more to go before we’re on a plane back home. If I can fill the days with things like this, we’ll be so busy just being us that maybe the rules and pressure won’t be so bothersome.

“You’re gonna be great at this,” Aaron says, meeting Addy’s gaze. “I can already tell. You know how to move your hips.” I narrow my gaze at him as he gives her the flirtiest freaking look. “So, you’re here for a wedding?” he asks her.

“Yeah.” Her blonde hair blows in the ocean breeze as she steps off the surfboard. “My sister is getting married.”

“Ah, so it’s not *your* wedding.” He looks at me, then winks at her.

Oh no. I don’t like that.

“No.” Addy smiles. “It’s definitely not *my* wedding.”

“We’re not engaged ... *yet*,” I blurt out. “But it’ll happen one of these days.”

She whips her head around, glaring at me. “Oh? Will it?”

“Yep.” I pop the *p* and sweep up my surfboard, tucking it under my arm. “Let’s go surf, *baby*.”

She blinks a few times in shock, and Aaron laughs, grabbing his board and catching up with me.

“Dude, I’m sorry. Cam said you two were just friends. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

“All good,” I tell him coolly, internally stressing over why the heck I just ran my mouth like that.

“Your girl is beautiful, though. You’re a lucky guy.”

“I know,” I say, crashing into the water just as Addy joins me. She grabs my arm, and I spin around, smiling at her while she shakes her head at me.

“You’re a brat.” She laughs, and I’m relieved she’s not mad as she nudges me. “I wasn’t into him anyway.”

We paddle out and help Addy along when she struggles to keep up, reminding us that she’s “just a dog walker.” We laugh it off, though, and spend the afternoon surfing and playing wipeout in the ocean. Aaron eventually goes back to giving surfing lessons to other patrons and running his board rental shack, so I get Addy all to myself.

“This was an amazing day,” Addy says as I shove our boards into the sand to take a break. We plop down on the sand. “Thank you for planning this.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her ponytail has long fallen out, her hair falling in natural unkempt waves past her shoulders. “You always know how to make my day better.”

“Not really,” I admit, leaning back and resting against my hands. “Honestly, I’m usually just taking a stab in the dark, hoping you’ll like it.”

She tilts her head at me. “You always seem to have it together.”

“Ha.” I snort, shaking my head. “I don’t think I’ve *ever* had it together. I’ve always just had to rely on myself to figure things out, you know? I’ve never had a dad or mom to call or rely on to help me work through things. I’ve always had to do everything myself—well, until you.”

She smiles softly. “I’ll always be here.”

“I know,” I say with confidence. “And that’s why I’m here, playing fake boyfriend for you.”

“And ruining my chances of hitting it off with some hot surfer dude,” she teases, poking my arm.

I raise a brow. “I thought you said you weren’t into him. Do I need to go tell him the truth? Set you up on a dinner date?” I say it as a joke, but my chest aches with what I recognize as jealousy.

Which is nuts.

I’ve seen Addy with plenty of guys over the years. I’ve even seen her kiss them or whatever, but now...

Now that I’ve threaded my fingers through her hair...

And danced with her like she’s *mine*...

I don’t like the idea of someone else doing it.

“I don’t want to go on a date,” Addy muses. “I think I’d rather go back to our room, order pizza, and watch a movie.”

“You want me to invite him?”

She rolls her eyes. “No. Just invite yourself. I like our movie nights to just be the two of us. No need to have him crash the party.”

“Three *is* a crowd,” I reason, smiling. “But isn’t four a party? I think that’s how it goes. I don’t know.”

Addy laughs. “Why are you so weird sometimes?”

I shrug, tipping my head back and looking at her. “I have no idea, but in my defense, I think I learned half my weirdness from you.”

“Ah, yes,” Addy hums, standing to her feet. “I suppose that makes a lot of sense. I do have a tendency to rub off on people.”

She extends her hand to me, and I take it, letting her work to pull me up and off the sand. “You know, we really should try to enjoy tonight. Tomorrow we’ll both be busy.”

I freeze as I stand to my feet, instantly concerned by the tone in her voice. “What do you mean by that? Do we have another one of those dinner parties?”

She gives me a wicked, ornery grin. “No, it’s much, *much* worse.”

“What is it?”

Addy laughs. “Robert wants you to go to his bachelor party while I’m with Aurora for her bachelorette.”

I huff.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Chapter Fourteen

Addy

I readjust my little black dress at the shoulders—its one-strap design and cut-outs at my midriff have me feeling a little self-conscious. The style is totally out of my wheelhouse, but... it's the beach.

And I want to look stunning.

I double-check my red lips, smokey eyes, and blonde waves before finally calling it good. High heels definitely would've paired better with this outfit over the strappy sandals I'm wearing, but high heels and sand? Yeah, that sounds like a good way for me to break something.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I glance around.

Where's Blaze?

"I'm leaving," I call out, a strange sense of disappointment thrumming in my chest. He's yet to see this dress on my body, and for some reason...

I *really* want him to.

As I linger in the main part of the hotel room, I finally catch sight of him standing out on the balcony and talking on the phone. I check the time on my smartwatch. I don't like being late, and even though my family seems to disagree, I'm actually punctual.

Blaze's back is to me as I approach the door, sliding it open to the fresh ocean breeze. He doesn't hear me as he laughs about something on the phone. I swallow hard, half-tempted to eavesdrop, but seriously. I've got to go.

"Hey." I tap him on the shoulder, and he spins around, meeting my gaze—and then rakes his eyes over my body.

My face starts to grow hot, and I realize this might be the first time he's *ever* looked at me like that.

"I'll call you back in just a second, Kade." Blaze pulls his phone from his ear and hangs up before shoving it into his pocket. "You look... Um... You look *great*. This outfit is very fitting for the bachelorette thing."

I blink a couple of times. "Thanks. That's what I was going for, I guess." I furrow my brow as I run my red nails over my dress, suddenly feeling like this outfit didn't have the impact I was hoping for. I look *great*? I was hoping to hear something more like beautiful or stunning or anything but ... great.

I shake my head and internally scold myself. *What else is he supposed to say?* I can't be weird about this. Why am I being weird about this?

We're just friends.

"Addy?" Blaze waves his hand in front of my face. "Are you okay?"

I snap right back to it. "Uh-huh. Yeah, totally fine."

"Okay..." He frowns. He maintains eye contact as I just stand here staring at him like an idiot. "Well, I hope you have a nice time... I'm gonna hop in the shower now. I guess Robert wants to go to some fancy Tiki bar or something."

"Better than a strip club," I say awkwardly, teetering back on my heels.

He makes a face. “Yeah, for sure. I probably wouldn’t go if he was going to a strip club. That’s not really my style.”

“Look at you, being a respectful gentleman.” I laugh, wrapping my arms around myself to hide the cut-outs that reveal my abdomen. When I originally tried on this dress, I thought it looked killer, but now, I’m questioning myself.

“You need to get going,” Blaze hums and then does something *completely* out of character. As he heads toward the sliding door, he wraps his arm around my waist, leading me toward it. He opens the door for us and then gently guides me back into the hotel room before dropping his arm.

It’s such a small gesture, but it leaves me feeling weak in the knees.

There must be something in the water.

I cannot be falling for him. Again.

“Have a really nice time tonight, Addy,” he says as I make my way to the front door of the hotel room. “If you need anything, let me know.”

“Okay, well, you’re going to be busy at the Tiki bar, so…”

He cocks a brow. “So? If you need something, I’ll be there. I just want you to be safe—you know, all that stuff.”

“Yeah, all that stuff.” I can’t help but smile. “Don’t forget, we may be apart tonight, but in the eyes of everyone we’re with, you and I are still together.”

He smiles at me, his eyes softening. “I know. I’m not going to forget. I promise.”

“Just don’t talk bad about me,” I say quickly, pausing at the door and taking a step toward him. He lingers a few feet away, standing in front of the bathroom door, suddenly looking really confused.

“Why would I say anything bad about you?”

“Well, you know how when a group of men or women get together, they tend to complain about their significant others.”

He chuckles. “I’m aware. I may not have dated much, but I *do* understand how it works. I’m just saying, I have *nothing* bad to say about you. You’re perfect, honey.” He shoots me a wink that causes my heart to skip a few beats and then pushes the bathroom door open.

“I hope you have a good time tonight, too.” I stop him, still covering the slits in my dress. “Hopefully, they don’t bore you.”

He nods, eyeing me as I continue to rock back and forth. “What do you need from me right now? Are you nervous or something?” He takes a step toward me, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“I think this dress may have been too much for me,” I say, tipping my head back and trying to ignore the warmth of his touch.

He smiles. “I don’t think so. I mean, sure, it’s definitely not your normal attire, but … I like it on you.” His amber eyes search mine, and I find myself holding my breath. “You’re beautiful. Now go have fun, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper, but smile at the same time.

He lifts his hands away from my shoulders, and I do something stupid. I hug him, wrapping my hands around his torso.

Blaze stiffens at first but then returns the hug, giving me a tight squeeze.

“Thank you,” I tell him, breathing in the comforting scent of his cologne. “For doing all this for me.”

“Yeah, of course.” His voice sounds slightly strained. “But you better go. They might think we’re … *misbehaving*.”

My jaw drops at his comment, and I burst into laughter as he releases his arms from around my waist. “Oh my gosh.”

He chuckles, amusement dancing in his gaze, and then finally disappears into the bathroom.

I spin on my heels and rush for the door, now knowing I really *am* late.

But as I close the door, it hits me that the only thing misbehaving … is my heart.



“Oh my goodness,” Aurora drawls as she sips her drink. “I’m *so* excited for this. I used to *love* Hula dancers as a kid.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s because you were *obsessed* with *Lilo & Stitch*,” I tell her, laughing to myself. I sip on my drink and eye her three other bridesmaids, all of whom have their eyes on the stage.

“Yeah, well, it is what it is.” She giggles.

“I think it’s cute,” Gabby, her maid of honor, says, looking back at the two of us. “And you know what else I think is cute, Addy?” She meets my gaze with a sly grin. “Your boyfriend.” The other two immediately turn and nod in agreement.

“He is pretty cute,” I admit, feeling like I’m breaking the rules but knowing that I’m not. I mean, I’ve always thought Blaze was smokin’ hot.

But you know, that’s not really something you should be telling said *friend*.

“I love the two of you together,” Gabby says, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. “Like seriously. I mean, I’ve seen the two of you before, and even then, I just knew you’d end up together.”

“Right?” Aurora jumps in. “I never understood why they weren’t together. I mean, have you *seen* how he looks at her? *Ugh*.”

I force a smile, one that I’m trying hard not to freak out behind. “I don’t think he looks at me any differently than anyone else...”

“Look at her.” Another bridesmaid, Vera, giggles. “Being all modest about her sexy NHL boyfriend, who literally *gawks* at her twenty-four seven. I mean, the way he was looking at you on the dance floor last night—it was like there was no one else in the room. I was *so* jealous. I swear my husband forgets I even exist half the time.”

“He does not.” Gabby swats her arm. “You’re just a few years past the honeymoon phase and three kids deep. He still loves you just as much—probably *more* than he used to. You guys are just in a different place in life.”

“I’d love to be at that place,” I blurt out. “I mean, with Blaze, you know?” I cover for my mishap. “I think once two people make it past the fun part and get into the nitty gritty—going through the ups and downs of life together—that’s when relationships really become beautiful.”

“Look at you.” Aurora smiles and nudges me. “It’s so great to see you be more optimistic about love. I swear, you were becoming such a Debbie Downer, so doom and gloom about love. It was starting to get concerning.”

“That’s what happens when you’re forever alone.” The third bridesmaid, Lilly, sighs. “I can’t even get a guy to look at me longer than two seconds, much less go out on a date with me. So I can definitely relate to how Addy used to feel...”

“You’re gorgeous,” I tell her, giving her a sweet smile. I relate more than she even realizes. “And I know you’ll find the right person. You just have to be patient.”

“Yeah.” Gabby gives an enthusiastic nod. “I mean, just look at Addy. It took her a whole decade to finally figure out that Blaze was the right one.”

“Yeah, but *I* always knew,” Aurora hums, meeting my gaze.

I raise my eyebrow, genuinely shocked. “What? How could you have known? When did you know?”

“Oh, come on.” Aurora laughs, then sips her drink. “He’s always gone out of his way for you. I mean, just look at how he was there for you through all your bad relationships. I remember when Nate broke it off with you at that dinner party, and Blaze was right there. You cried and he babied you for the rest of the night, doing whatever you needed.”

“That’s *so* sweet. He didn’t even care that you were upset over someone else. All he saw was you.” Vera clasps her hands together. “*Ugh*. To be loved like that.”

“Yeah,” I choke out. “He’s definitely amazing.”

“Amazing enough to agree to join Robert on his bachelor party escapade.” Aurora groans, rolling her eyes. “I swear, Robert is such a nerd.”

Just as she says the words, a heavy drumbeat fills the air around us, and the audience breaks into applause. The lights dim to just the tiki torches, and I turn my attention to the stage, where dancers in grass skirts waltz out. I cheer for them, joining the other girls. However, as they dance, I *can’t* stop my mind from running rampantly back to Blaze.

I wonder if he’s having fun?

Or if anyone is talking about me to him.

What’s he saying about me?

I know he’s probably saying crazy nice and untrue things. I zone out on the dancers as I get lost in my thoughts. Everyone keeps pointing out how cute we are and the special way he looks at me.

Does he really look at me like that?

The thought brings a lump to my throat, one that I can’t quite swallow back down. I don’t know what about it has me feeling light in my head, but part of me just wants to know if it’s true, or if everyone just *thinks* he looks at me a certain way now because we’re suddenly a couple. He did look at me tonight, though, in a way I’ve never noticed—and *that* wasn’t for show. There was nobody else around.

I run my fingers through my hair as my phone buzzes in my purse. I pull it out, and my face instantly grows hot.

Blaze: *Hope you’re having fun in your little black dress ;)*

Chapter Fifteen

Blaze

I stare at my phone, watching the three dots pop up while I wait for my second beer. This tiki bar is obnoxious, and everyone I came with is already wasted, so it's a really good thing that the bar is attached to the resort.

Addy: *I think I should've worn a grass skirt like these dancers, lol.*

I laugh, then sober. My brain brings up the image of her in the hotel room. I've *never* been more attracted to someone before. It's got to just be the fact that we're in this fake dating mindset, but *jeez*, I wanted to touch her. I wanted to *kiss* her.

It's plaguing my mind with worry.

I mean, I've always had a slight urge to kiss Addy. There was a time I thought about kissing her *constantly* in college, but those feelings faded when I realized that ensuring Addy remained a lifelong friend was much more important. So I chose to practice self-control. If we didn't kiss, or date, or cross any lines, there was a strong chance we could be friends forever. The decision paid off. Because now, a decade later, she's become so much more than a friend. She's family.

Though, as I said, the urge to kiss her never really went away...

And it's at an all-time high right now.

"Hey, big fancy hockey player." Robert claps his hand down on my shoulder. "We're almost finished up here. You wanna go with us to the next bar? It's just right over there." He drunkenly points to another beach bar, this one closer to the ocean. "I think the girls might meet up with us."

"Isn't that against the rules?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing is against the rules, my man. Plus, it's never as much fun without Aurora. She makes everything so much better."

"So does Addy," I blurt out, my mouth moving faster than my brain.

"Yeah, I know. You two are a good match. I can tell. I have that kind of intuition." He slurs the last word, breaking into a chuckle. "I'm gonna text them to meet us."

I pick up my phone again and quickly type out another text to Addy.

Me: *Robert is planning for all of us to meet up at the beach bar next to the tiki bar. Let's ditch them all and go to the pier.*

The read receipt pops up a few minutes later, and I wait for her response, suddenly worried that she might've read into my message more than she should. I've been much more flirty with her than usual, and while it's technically not breaking the rules, it might start breaking something inside of my chest.

Especially when all this is over and we have to go back to normal.

My phone pings with a reply.

Addy: *Deal.*

I smile to myself and ask the bartender for a water. The last thing I need is to get the same kind of buzz I got the first night we got here. It'll lead to me doing something I shouldn't. I can already feel my self-control waning, and the giddy excitement and anticipation building in my chest over meeting Addy at the pier...

Well, it's concerning.

Because I don't want to ruin our friendship.

And that's what I keep telling myself as I slip off the bar stool to find the hottest woman on the island and take her someplace where we can be alone.



"Wow," Addy says the moment she catches sight of me. "You look handsome."

I glance down at my khaki slacks and white button-up. "I feel lame."

She grabs my arm, leading me away from the bar and off toward the beach. "You look the part of a wealthy young man." She says the words with an air of goofiness, and I chuckle, ignoring the warmth of her arm tucked in mine.

We've done this a million and one times.

This time is no different.

"It's dark out here," Addy comments as we hit the sand, heading for a rock-lined pier that juts out into the water. "I'm surprised they don't have many lights."

I flex my muscles, tightening her arm against me. "No worries. I got us. The boogeyman runs the other way when he sees me."

"Does he?" She tips her head back to look at me, the moon casting a glow across her pretty blue eyes.

I swallow hard and look away. "Oh yeah, for sure. I'm way scarier than the boogeyman." I lead her down the pier, not stopping until we reach the very end, where one lone bench sits. "This is way less fancy than I thought it was."

Addy laughs, releasing my arm and plopping down on the bench. "Nah, I think it's perfect. Sometimes things can be too nice, you know? It's nice to just be normal."

"Yeah, I don't know if I know what normal is, though," I reason, resting my arm on the back of the bench. I'm keenly aware that it might look like my arm is around Addy, but it's not. It's on the bench. And I've put my arm behind Addy many times.

Stop being weird.

Addy leans back, the ocean breeze blowing through her hair and creating a picture-perfect moment. "What do you think about Robert and all his friends?"

"I think they're fine. Robert is the better of them, honestly." I shrug, my eyes rolling down the feminine shape of her nose and well-defined lips shaded in red. Her eyes are on the water, and I'm not going to lie, I'm glad she's not looking at me.

Because I'm thoroughly enjoying taking in every small detail of her.

"Do you think you could be friends with them?" She keeps her gaze locked on the water. "Like maybe we could do things with them once we get back from Hawaii."

My heart takes an extra thump. “They might not want me around.”

She looks at me, her dark brows creased. “Why?”

I take a deep breath, my eyes falling to my hands in my lap. “Well, one of us will have to break up with the other after all this—and I doubt they’ll want me around when they think I broke your heart. They all think really highly of you, Addy.”

Her hand lands on mine, squeezing it. “I’ll be the one to call it off. You don’t have to do it. After all, this was all my idea.”

I shake my head. “I can’t let you do that.”

“Why?” she whispers.

I shrug, shaking my head. “I’m not gonna leave you to have to answer their barrage of questions. If *I’m* the one who does it, they won’t do that to you.”

“Oh,” she says, pulling her hand away.

We fall into silence for a while, listening to the ocean waves as they kiss the shore. I rarely ever visited the ocean growing up, but when I did once with a foster family, I remember being taken aback by it—and the peace that it brought to me. Right now, though, it doesn’t bring me peace at all.

It feels like there’s a storm brewing inside of me.

“If you had a bachelor party, what would you want to do?” Addy’s voice draws me out of my thoughts. “You know, like if you were getting married.”

“Well, first, I’d have to be in a position to get married.” I laugh, eyeing her. “And I don’t see that happening any time soon.”

“Yeah, okay, well let’s just say you *had* to marry me,” Addy says with a shrug. “It’s like mandatory or something, so now, you *have* to think about getting married. What would you do for your bachelor party?”

I raise a brow. “Okay, I’ll play along with this. Where is this forced marriage happening?”

“Right here in Hawaii.”

I rack my brain, trying to picture Addy as my fiancée, and it’s borderline terrifying how easily the image comes to life. “Um, honestly, I’d probably want a joint party.”

She makes a face. “Why?”

“Because you’re my best friend, and everything is always better when you’re there,” I say easily. “Maybe that’s weird, but you’re already the person I do *everything* with. You’re my emergency contact, too, so I guess ... I guess I wouldn’t have to change that.”

She bursts into laughter. “Only *you* would somehow twist a bachelor party into a conversation about emergency contacts.”

“Well, you’re missing the point.” I shift my body and angle it toward her. “You’re everything to me, Addy. I have my teammates, and they’re amazing—and like family—but *you* are my family outside of that. I mean, I spend every holiday with you. I don’t know what I would do if I lost that.”

Her face softens, her eyes welling up with fleeting emotion that causes me near panic. But then it disappears. “I guess I’d have a joint bachelorette party with you, too.” She looks away from me. “I’d want the wedding to be beachside, though, not like Aurora’s. It seems silly to come all the way to Hawaii for a wedding just to have it indoors.”

“It could rain.”

“That would be *so* romantic. I’d want it to rain.”

I chuckle. “Only you’d want that, Addy.”

She turns to me. “Would you be mad if it rained?”

I sigh. “No, you’re right. It would be romantic. Maybe it’d make all the guests—and even the officiant—run for cover, and then I’d pull one of those *Notebook*-style kisses.” Even in the moonlight, I can make out her blushing at my comment—and once

again, I feel panicky. “But”—I clear my throat—“obviously that wouldn’t happen because I wouldn’t ever kiss you. It’s against the rules.”

Addy’s smile disappears right off her face. “We were just talking hypothetically.” Her voice is flat. “Obviously, I know that.”

“Yeah, you’re like a sister to me,” I say stupidly.

“Yeah,” she says, turning her gaze back to the ocean. “Duh. Besides, we’ve been best friends for a decade. If something was going to happen, it would’ve happened by now, you know?”

“That’s a strange angle to come at it.” I furrow my brow. “I mean, things sometimes take time. I’m sure there are people out there who’ve been friends much longer than we have that ended up together. Maybe they just hide their feelings.” I don’t know why I’m saying any of this, especially when I just made it clear that *we* aren’t like the people I’m talking about.

“Yeah, but I was talking about us.” Addy sighs, raking her fingers through her hair. “I don’t want to talk about other people.” I can tell by her tone that I’ve said something that bothers her—and I hate that.

But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

“You know, what we have is really special,” I say. “I don’t think many people are lucky enough to have a friendship like ours. We’re like the best of everything.”

She nods, albeit slowly. “Yeah, of course.” Addy pushes herself up off the bench. “I think I’m ready to call it a night. Are you tired?”

I’m not. I’m pretty sure I could sit here with her all night, but I nod anyway. “Yeah, I guess so. I probably need another shower, too.”

She laughs softly, but her smile doesn’t reach her eyes like normal. “Yeah, same here. I have so much makeup on my face, I’m pretty sure I could peel it off in one-inch layers.”

“Let me see.” I lean toward her, my finger heading toward her cheek.

She dodges me and swats at my hand. “Don’t even think about it. I’ll cut your finger off.”

“For *touching* your face?” I laugh, shaking my head. “You’re dangerous, Adeline Harper Williams.” I say it in the same snooty tone her granny does.

Addy bursts into laughter, and finally, her smile reaches those pretty blue eyes of hers. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Night saved.

Chapter Sixteen

Addy

My eyes flutter open to the light from the window streaming across the bed, and I take a deep breath, catching Blaze's scent.

And that's when I feel the warmth against my back.

Oh. My. Goodness.

As my eyes adjust, I see his hand jutting out from beneath me on the mattress. His other arm is gently wrapped around my torso. He's taking slow and steady breaths, still fast asleep. My heart starts to pound in my chest.

Does he know what he's doing?

Or did this happen while we were sleeping?

I can barely breathe as I feel him stir against me, his face buried in my hair.

I try not to panic.

I try to ignore the way his hand is tucked up against my upper stomach.

He's *holding* me.

And there's a part of me that wants to shout and wake him up. But there's this other part—the one that's been rearing its ugly head since we got here—that wants to just lie here and soak up the moment. But I'm scared I might like it too much. And he made it so clear last night that he'd *never* cross that line.

He apparently looks at me like I'm his ... sister.

But I'm pretty sure brothers and sisters don't cuddle like this.

For all I know, he isn't even aware of what he's doing...

I rub my eyes, and that's when I notice my hands are ice cubes from the air conditioning blasting in the room.

He was probably just cold and subconsciously sought out warmth in his sleep.

Blaze stirs again, this time letting out the sweetest groan, and for a moment, his grip tightens around me, sending chills down my torso and a flutter through my stomach.

I close my eyes and try to steady my breathing, the conflicting emotions swirling inside me. His touch is both comforting and electrifying, and I struggle to make sense of it all.

But then, his arms and torso go absolutely *rigid* before freeing me from his grip in the most swift and violent way ever.

"I am *so* sorry," he drawls, his voice groggy as I roll over.

He's absolutely mortified. It's etched in every line on his face, which is now reddened beneath his olive skin. He shakes his head adamantly as I try to conjure up the words to say.

"It's okay," I reply, my own voice tinged with sleep. "It's not that big of a deal."

"It was completely inappropriate, Addy." He huffs. "I'm so sorry. I'll put pillows down the center of the bed next time. I swear, I had no idea I was—"

“A cuddler?” I raise a brow.

“I’ve never shared a bed with a girl before,” he says, his voice quiet. “I…”

“Blaze.” I reach out and squeeze his forearm. “It’s *totally* fine. The air conditioning has been blasting all night. You were probably just cold. Let’s not make it into something it’s not.”

He watches me flip the covers back and climb out of the bed. My face feels hot as I make my way toward the dresser, pulling it open and grabbing a pair of running shorts and a tank top. I can feel his eyes on me in my thin pajama shorts, so I intentionally don’t face him as I walk to the bathroom.

I don’t want him to see how flustered I am.

That would be so embarrassing, and then… I might have to admit that I actually *liked* having his hands around my body. Or something. I don’t know.

When I finish up in the bathroom and step out, Blaze is in the exact same spot, staring at the wall.

“I’m going for a run,” I say. Well, a *walk*, but still.

He whips his head around, his expression difficult to read. “Yeah, okay. You want me to go with you?”

I wave him off. “It’s okay. You look tired. Plus, we have the rehearsal dinner tonight. I should probably check in with Aurora to see if she needs me for anything.”

He nods, his lips turning slightly upward. “Sounds good. I think I’m gonna hit the gym for a while. My head feels messed up.”

I don’t know how to take what he says, so I just smile. “I’ll let you get to it, then.” And with that, I bail right out of the room, desperate to calm my racing heart.



I spend the rest of the day helping Aurora, and every time I pass the resort gym, I spot Blaze, sweaty and pumped, working out. His biceps glisten as he focuses on lifting weights, his jaw set in determination. The man is *ripped*, and I can’t help but admire the way his muscles flex and bulge with each movement. So, by the time we’re at the rehearsal dinner, I’m left trying to get *that* image out of my head—as if I’ve never seen him work out before.

“You good?” Blaze leans over and asks me in a low voice.

I nod. “Of course. Are you?” I eye him in his slacks and dark button-up, which perfectly complements his eyes. Meanwhile, I’m wearing a light purple dress, which matches the wedding colors.

“Yeah, I’m good.” He smiles genuinely and takes a small sip of wine.

The rehearsal dinner is a lavish affair, the tables adorned with elegant centerpieces and soft candlelight casting a warm glow over the room. The ocean can be seen through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the waves crashing gently against the shore in the distance.

Blaze grabs my hand, sending a jolt of electricity up my arm. My heart leaps into my throat as he intertwines his fingers with mine on my upper thigh. I try not to show how it affects me.

I look across the table to my sister, who’s grinning at us.

So *that’s* why he grabbed my hand. *Got it.*

“How’s your time here been?” my mom chimes, looking over at Blaze. “We haven’t seen much of the two of you.”

“Aurora said you two went surfing?” My dad asks, his gaze bouncing between Blaze and me.

“Yes. Blaze surprised me with surfing lessons. I was terrible,” I say. “Really. But it was a blast.”

“Sounds like it. Did you catch any waves?”

“I definitely crashed in some waves.” I laugh and look over to Blaze, who’s looking right at me.

He smiles and squeezes my hand, sending my heart into overdrive. “She did great.”

But does he really think that or is this part of the act, too?

He looks over to my parents, still smiling. “I’m really enjoying my time here.”

Dad returns the smile, which is shocking to me. He *never* smiles at my boyfriends. “Good, I’m glad. The two of you seem very happy together.”

“I can’t believe I’m getting married tomorrow,” Aurora cuts in. “It just seems like time flew by.”

“It’ll be okay,” Robert reassures her. “I think it’ll be perfect.”

“Oh, given all the effort we’ve put into it, it most certainly will be,” Mom chimes, clearly proud of herself. “It’ll be wonderful.”

I exchange a glance with Blaze, who’s staring at his glass of wine. I can’t read his expression right now, but I do wonder what he’s thinking. I know he thinks my family is a lot.

One more reason he’d never want to be more than friends with me.

I start downing my wine at the thought. Maybe it’ll chase away the memory of Blaze’s hands on me in bed this morning. And these confusing feelings.

The meal arrives, and we all finish eating as the DJ jumps up and the party commences. One thing about my sister is that *everything* has to be a party with dancing and all that. She lives for it.

The waiter tops off my wine glass and I take another sip.

“You might want to slow down,” Blaze leans in and whispers as everyone stands from the table to start dancing. “You’re on your fourth glass, Addy.”

I swat at him, my head spinning as I feel the urge to giggle. “I’m fine, *honey*.”

He raises his brows. “Honey?”

“Yeah, would you prefer *baby*?” My head spins again.

Okay, maybe I do need to slow down.

“Oh my gosh, you’re drunk.”

I burst into laughter and push back from the table, my knee-length purple dress feeling swishy—like I need to dance. I lean down and bop him on the nose. “I’m going to go dance with my sister.”

Blaze grabs my hand as my finger rests against his nose. “Three songs, and then you need to get to bed. You don’t wanna be hungover for the wedding tomorrow.”

“Okay, Mr. Scrooge.” I giggle, breaking free from his hand. I kick my sandals off and head for the dance floor, skipping the whole way there. I jump in line next to my sister, finishing the macarena.

“Girl, you’ve had too much wine.” Aurora nudges me. “I’ve seriously never seen you so happy, though. It’s *so* cute.”

“Thank you,” I say, falling in rhythm to the music. “Blaze says I can only have three songs, and then I have to go to bed.” I giggle. “He’s always been like that, taking care of me and stuff.”

“It’s so sweet,” Aurora says. “You should tell the DJ a song you want him to play for the third one and make Blaze dance with you!”

“We don’t have a song,” I say, nearly having to shout over the music. “I don’t think so anyway.”

“Hmm,” Aurora hums. “I bet I can come up with one. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out. You just wait.”

“Okay...” I watch her as she jogs away, but she doesn’t go to the DJ like I expect her to. Instead, she runs to Blaze. My heart jumps to my throat as he glances at me as she explains something to him.

Then he gets up. But he doesn’t come to me. He heads to the DJ booth.

Aurora comes back to me, a giddy smile plastered on her face.

“He says he knows what song he wants to play for your dance,” she squeals, clapping her hands together.

I stand there, heart rattling my ribcage as Blaze chats with the DJ. Tingles roll through my body as the DJ fades out the song.

“This next song was a special request from this NHL player to his lady,” the DJ says into the mic. “Enjoy ‘Somebody to You - Reimagined’.”

The electric guitar intro starts, and I legit think I might pass out as Blaze makes his way over to me, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me into him. I can’t look at him as we start to dance.

I’m *dying* inside.

Even as he spins me around the dance floor, I can hardly cope with the feeling in my chest.

It has to be the wine.

“This song came out the year we met in college,” Blaze says against my ear. “But this version came out this year. Seems fitting.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as the side of his head presses to mine, and all I can feel is *him*. “I had the biggest crush on you in college,” I blurt out.

He stills and then leans back. “What’d you say?”

I meet his gaze, seeing something in his eyes that I don’t recognize. I quickly shake my head, remembering our conversation at the pier. “I don’t know.”

He furrows his brow as the song comes to a close and everyone cheers. “About ready to call it a night?” He lets me go but hangs onto my hand.

Still, I can’t breathe. The song replays in my head over and over.

It’s just a song. He picked it because it lines up with the ruse.

But I can’t help it. As we reach the elevator, I stop him. “Why did you pick that song? How did you know it came out when we first met in college?”

He tugs me gently into the elevator, not offering an answer. “Conversation for another night, Addy. You’re kind of drunk.”

I nod as the doors close. “Thanks for dancing with me.”

“I’ll always dance with you.”

“Even when we have walkers and wheelchairs?” I look over at him, his amber eyes focused on me.

“Especially when we have walkers and wheelchairs.” He chuckles. “By then, we’ll have perfected our dance moves. We’ll be the best there is.”

“Yeah?” I say, tilting my head. “But by then, you’ll probably be married to some exotic model, and she probably won’t like you dancing with me. You’ll be too busy dancing with her.”

He frowns. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you and I both know that we can’t be friends like this forever. That’s just not how life works.” I pull my gaze away from him, staring at the rows of buttons on the elevator wall. When the doors slide open, he steps forward, his body pressing against my back.

“Come on, Addy. Let’s get you into bed.”

I nod, and as I take the step forward into the hallway, I glance down, suddenly realizing his fingers are *still* interlaced with mine...

And not a soul is watching us.

Chapter Seventeen

Blaze

I'm staring at the ceiling as I lay here in bed. Addy's breathing deeply and steadily beside me—well, on the other side of the pillow wall that I put dead center on the bed. The last thing I needed was to wake up holding her like I did before. I mean, she insisted it was nothing, but it felt like a lot more than nothing to *me*.

Taking a breath, I run my hands over my face. The wedding activities will be over after today. I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing.

Just one more night playing pretend in front of her family.

Then we'll fly home in a couple days, and everything will be back to normal.

My stomach knots up for whatever reason, and I wonder if I should've ever agreed to do this. I can't blame Addy for any of the things that've happened between us since we got here, either.

It's been all *me*.

I mean, I almost kissed her the *first* night.

I guess my obsession with her in college never really went away.

"Oh my gosh," Addy groans from beside me. "I hate my life."

I chuckle, turning my head to look at her, but all I see are ... *pillows*. I frown and grab the one closest to my face and toss it across the room so I can see Addy. She's face down, her blonde hair messy and cascading across the white sheets.

"You had a lot of wine last night," I say, reaching out and poking her shoulder. All the thoughts of regret disappear as I gaze down at her, and my worries trickle away.

She lifts her head, narrowing her eyes at me. "Why did you let me drink so much?"

"I tried to cut you off." I brush the silky strands of hair away from her flawless, bare face. As my skin grazes hers, a surge of electricity sizzles through me, igniting every nerve ending in my body. But I ignore it. Just like I did in college. It's about priorities—and Addy is everything to me. As a friend.

"Well." She sighs. "I guess I can't be mad at you, then."

"I'd prefer you not be mad." I chuckle, pushing myself up to a sitting position. I hate sleeping in a T-shirt, but I've done it every night since we got here. It seems wrong to go to bed in just my boxers. So, I've been sleeping in shorts and a T-shirt every night. It sucks.

"I'm gonna have to spend pretty much the entire afternoon getting ready for the wedding," Addy tells me, propping herself up on her elbow.

I flip the covers off myself and slide out of bed. "Yeah, well, we can hang out until you have to go. Then, I'll probably just hit the gym before the wedding."

"I wish you were walking me down the aisle."

I nearly choke on air, spinning around to look at her with wide eyes. “What?”

“Yeah.” She looks confused by my reaction. “Instead, Robert’s friend Brandon is walking me down the aisle today.” She crinkles her nose. “And I don’t even know him.”

I peel my shirt over my head. “You’ll be okay. He seemed nice when we were all hanging out at the bachelor party.” I toss my T-shirt into my bag across the room and head for the dresser to grab a fresh one. I can feel Addy’s eyes on me—and the stupid boy inside of me *hopes* she likes what she sees. In a friendly way?

“You know, my sister intentionally set me up to walk with him because he’s the only single guy in the wedding party. She was worried that if she let Lilly—her only other single bridesmaid—walk with him, she might try to jump his bones later.”

I burst into laughter, turning to look at her with my new black T-shirt in hand. “I don’t know what to do with you sometimes.”

“Yeah, well, that one’s on my sister.”

“Yeah, but I doubt she used those exact words...” I pull my shirt over my head, and tug it down over my torso. Addy’s still watching me.

“I think she used the word *courting*.” She rolls her eyes and then drops her head down to the pillow again, letting out a groan. “My head *hurts*.”

I smile at her as I strip out of my gym shorts and pull on a pair of khaki shorts. “I’m going to go pick you up a few things to help with that.”

She eyes me. “Can I come?”

“You don’t wanna lay in bed a little longer?”

She shakes her head and kicks off the covers. For a split second, I get a view of *all* of her legs, her pajama shorts crinkled up from sleeping. I try not to stare. I try not to check her out and count the freckles I haven’t ever seen before. She’s always been modest, and I love that, but man... When I catch a glimpse of her freckled skin, it awakens parts of me I didn’t know existed.

And then Addy clears her throat.

I rip my gaze away and turn toward the door. “Sorry.” I slip inside the bathroom to brush my teeth—and get away from her. She totally caught me staring, and I’m pretty sure that if embarrassment was an ocean, I’d be drowning in it.

A few minutes later, Addy knocks on the door. “Can I come in?”

I hesitate. “Sure,” I say, my toothbrush jammed inside my mouth. My words come out muffled, but she obviously understands because she opens the bathroom door and steps in, now dressed in a pair of jean shorts and a pale blue T-shirt... It matches her eyes.

She grabs her toothbrush and begins the process of brushing her teeth. I don’t look at her. I don’t notice the way her messy blonde hair pulled up on the top of her head complements her feminine jawline, dotted with more natural freckles that I happen to find *very* cute.

I know I need to get hold of myself ... but we’ve been faking a relationship for days, which is probably why I’m feeling like I’m her boyfriend right now. Surely this feeling will pass once we get back home.

But still ... I owe her an apology for checking her out this morning.

I rinse my mouth out and then spit in the sink. “Listen... Addy...” I begin, and she cocks her head in my direction. “I’m really sorry. I just zoned out ... *or something*.”

Her brows furrow and she shakes her head. I have no idea what she means by that, so I stand and wait as she finishes brushing her teeth. She finally wipes her mouth on a towel and gives me a look.

“I don’t understand what you’re apologizing for.”

“For checking you out,” I blurt, meeting her gaze.

She holds my gaze ... and then *laughs*. “Oh, Blaze.”

“What?” I fold my arms across my chest. “What’s so funny?”

“I check you out all the time. It’s *fine*.” With that, she spins on her heels, exiting the bathroom to answer her phone—which I didn’t even hear ringing. I stand frozen like an idiot, my face feeling hot.

Addy checks me out.

“Hey.” She appears in the doorway of the bathroom before I can leave. “Apparently, my sister booked mani-pedis for the bridal party this morning, so I’ll just have to grab a Tylenol and some orange juice on the way over to her.”

“Oh.” I can’t hide my disappointment. “So, does that mean you’ll be gone all day?” Not that it matters. I’ll just miss her.

Okay, that’s a little much.

“Yeah, we’ll be doing our hair and makeup afterwards. But I’ll see you at the wedding tonight. Do you know where to go and all that?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Okay, great. Also, Mom will probably want you to sit with the family, okay? Just don’t make it weird. She doesn’t know that this relationship will be over for us in a day or so.”

I frown. “You should probably wait a couple weeks before you tell her we broke up. Otherwise, it’ll be really suspicious.”

“Well, yeah, I know that,” she says, sighing. “I just meant for *us*, this whole ruse will be over in a couple of days.” Addy pats my chest as she slips past me for the door and makes her way out into the hallway.

I stare at the door long after she’s gone, zoning out again. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but part of me is *not* looking forward to going home—and I realize just how contradictory my feelings are.



After spending most of my day at the gym, I finally roll into the wedding right on time, dressed in a light gray suit. There’s a legit dress code, and while I think it’s crazy, I’d never buck the rules, for Addy’s sake.

“What party?” an usher asks me, and I just stare at him, having no clue what he’s talking about.

“Uh...”

“That’s Addy’s boyfriend,” someone says from behind me. I turn and make eye contact with a person I *don’t* know, but it’s clear they know me. This goes to show just how far this whole scheme is reaching—and suddenly, I feel weird...

“Oh, I’ve saved your seat,” the usher says, leading me up to the front of the church, or whatever this place is. It’s a wedding chapel with pews, so I assume it’s fine to call it a church. My heart thumps in my chest as I take my seat in the third row and stare at the program the usher hands me.

I read through it, noticing that, according to the schedule, the pictures are already done. I breathe out a sigh of relief. Addy must’ve been able to weasel me out of being in any of the family pictures. Which is a relief, considering I’ve never taken family photos in my life. It’s hard to take family photos when you don’t have an actual family...

But with Addy I could.

I startle at the intrusive thought. But before I can analyze it, I feel a hand on my shoulder. I look up to see Addy’s mom and stand up immediately, as if she’s a drill sergeant or something.

“Mrs. Williams,” I choke out, feeling way more intimidated by her presence than I’ve ever felt around Addy’s dad. This woman is the one who runs the roost, of that I’m certain.

But she smiles up at me. “I’m glad you were put in the right seat.”

“I’m just glad I didn’t mess anything up.” I rub the sweat from my palms onto my pant legs, hoping she doesn’t notice.

She chuckles and pats my arm gently. “It’s been a pleasant surprise having you here in Hawaii. You and Addy look really great together.”

“It helps that she’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.” I just admitted one of my deepest secrets out loud, and I think it shows on my face.

“I know I don’t always show it, but I like you, Blaze.” She grins.

“Thank you.” I gulp.

“And I’ve always known you liked Addy,” she adds, “I just wondered how long it would take for you to finally make your move. Seeing you two together these past few days has illuminated just how well you complement one another. I’m glad you two found each other.”

I try to compose myself as she pats my arm once more. I haven’t seen this side of Addy’s mom. And she just uttered words that I never thought I’d hear from her, words that the younger version of me would’ve been overjoyed to hear.

She’s gonna be crushed when I have to stage a breakup with her daughter after all this.

“Anyway,” she says, “I’ll let Addy know you made it.”

I nod, and as soon as she leaves, I take my seat again and stare at the pamphlet to distract myself. Because if I’m being honest, this whole situation makes me uncomfortable. Maybe it’s because I feel like I’m a part of their family—and I mean, to some degree, I’ve always felt that way, but now...

Now it hits a little harder.

Fifteen minutes later, the chapel is packed, and the music starts playing. I stare at the large double doors as Addy appears, arm in arm with the tall blond guy, Brandon. She’s wearing a floor-length lavender dress, cinched at her waist and then flowing outward. Her hair is beautifully styled half-up, half-down, with luscious waves cascading down her back. Although I usually prefer her natural look...

Tonight, she looks *incredible*.

As they start down the aisle, I see her scanning the faces of the crowd. My heart ramps up in my chest, and I try not to pass out when her eyes finally meet mine ... and she *smiles*. I return it, and suddenly I can’t help but wonder, is that what she’d look like if it was her wedding day? Would I be okay seeing her walk past me in a white dress?

My chest tightens, but I shake my head at the thought and settle in for the rest of the ceremony. Addy is a long way from getting married to someone, so I don’t have to think about it right now.

But whenever that happens, I’ll be her friend and support her like she deserves.

Because by then, I’ll have had a chance to put some distance between my heart and this fake dating arrangement.

Right?

Chapter Eighteen

Addy

I make it to the reception, relieved that my duties as a bridesmaid have finally come to an end. I straighten out my short purple dress—an outfit Aurora required all the bridesmaids to change into. She changed out of her mermaid-style wedding gown to a flowy knee-length white dress for the reception.

I spot Blaze in a corner and make my way through the crowd toward him. But a hand grabs my arm, stopping me. I spin around to see my great-grandma staring me down.

“Hi,” I choke out, forcing a smile. “Are you enjoying the wedding?”

She huffs. “I don’t know why I had to fly all the way to the beach just to sit in a church.”

I laugh. “It’s what Aurora wanted.”

“I know.” She sighs. “Don’t you do this to me. If we’re flying to the beach, I want to sit at the beach.”

That’s never going to happen for me, but... “Deal,” I tell her with a smile.

“I like your boyfriend.”

My jaw almost drops. “Really?”

“Yeah. He’s worked hard for himself, and that shows that he’s the kind of man who will stay through anything—not to mention, he’s been putting up with your antics for a long time now. I really like you two together.”

I blush as I realize that’s the biggest compliment she’s ever given me...

And it’s all a lie.

My heart sinks deep in my chest. “Um, thank you,” I finally manage to say, and then nod toward him. “I need to get to him, though. I haven’t really seen him all day.”

“Ah, don’t let him slip away.” She grins at me for the first time in forever.

I nod and jet off, swallowing the lump in my throat. My great-grandma *never* approves of anyone—Robert didn’t even make the cut for the first year. Needless to say, I was *not* expecting this type of reaction to dating Blaze from *any* of my family members, much less from her.

I try to breathe as the ocean breeze blows through the outdoor reception. Blaze is no longer wearing his jacket, his sleeves now rolled up to his elbows... And *ugh*, he looks so handsome.

“Hey,” I say, unable to force a smile.

He turns to me, the biggest grin growing across his face. “Hey, I was hoping you’d show up soon. I’ve been stuck talking to everyone, and you know how I feel about socializing.”

I try to laugh, but it comes out forced. “My great-grandma approves of you,” I blurt. “And she’s never approved of *anyone* before.”

His smile fades, and even if he doesn't totally understand the gravity of what I'm saying, I think he gets it. "I've just been around a long time, Addy. That's all. I'm sure..."

I nod as his voice trails off. "You're sure that she'll approve of the real one someday, right? That's what you were going to say." He nods, but there's something in his eyes that causes me to pause. "*Is that what you were going to say?*"

"Yeah," he replies. "I'm sure it'll all work out the way it's supposed to."

"That's a good way to look at it," I reason, grabbing a cup of punch. I'm not drinking any alcohol tonight. I did enough of that last night.

As I sip my punch, the DJ announces the cutting of the cake.

Blaze slides his hand around my waist, and I catch my breath, trying to hide the way it makes me feel weak in the knees. I swallow the feeling and let him guide me to a front-row view of the cake-cutting ceremony. I watch it play out before my eyes like a movie, my sister and Robert shoving cake in each other's faces.

It's adorable, and I can't help but feel jealous.

Everyone around me thinks that I'm closing in on my happily ever after, and it's not even remotely the truth. In fact, it's far from the truth. I'm so freaking far from my happy ending that Blaze being here as my fake boyfriend only serves as a reminder of how *alone* I really am.

"It's time to throw the bouquet!" Aurora yells and pumps her fist. "Come on, ladies!"

"Go ahead." Blaze urges me forward. "Just dodge it if it comes to you."

"Yeah, okay." I roll my eyes at his comment, and he grins. I join the other women, a group of about twenty. I stare down at my sandals for the countdown, and only when she tosses it do I look up.

And it comes straight for me.

Just as I'm about to step back, everything seemingly in slow motion, I realize I can't let those flowers hit the ground... It would upset Aurora... So...

I catch them.

And everyone goes nuts, cheering for me—for *us*. I make my way toward Blaze, whose eyes are on me. I don't even know what I'm supposed to do. I hold the bouquet up in a little *look at this* gesture. But he doesn't smile. His eyes are filled with something else.

Admiration.

I glance over my shoulder to see what he's looking at, but there's no one else there. Taking a deep breath, I make it to him, pressing the pretty white and purple flowers to his chest. "I caught it."

"Yeah, you did." His tone is deep and husky. So much so that I tilt my head up to meet his eyes. "Was that planned?"

I shake my head, butterflies fluttering as his hand lands over mine. "No. It wasn't planned—not by me, anyway." I feel eyes on us, and as I peer past him, I see my whole family watching our exchange. "Everyone is looking at us." He purses his lips and traces his fingers along my jaw, threading them into my hair.

"What're you doing?" I whisper.

He doesn't answer.

Well, not with his voice.

In seconds, his lips are on mine. I don't even process what's happening before my mind goes blank, and I find myself melting into the kiss.

I drop the flowers to wrap my arms around his neck as our kiss deepens, his grip tightening as I part my lips for him. All the dreams, hopes, and desires I had for him in college pour out into our kiss, his tongue slipping into my mouth, igniting a fire

within me that I never knew existed.

I cling to him in disbelief, my heart pounding so hard that I fear it might burst from my chest. I nip at his lower lip, desperate for more. He tastes like citrus and mint, a heady combination that only adds to the intoxication of his touch. His fingers trail down my spine, sending shivers through me as he pulls me closer.

This kiss is charged and explosive, and I forget we're in a room full of people. All I can concentrate on is Blaze. His warmth, his taste, his strong fingers in my hair. His arm around my waist. His entire body pressed against mine. There's no air between us.

It's magical.

And it feels all wrong when he pulls away.

We broke the rules.

My mouth falls open with the realization, and I peer around us, but most of the family is back on the dance floor now. No one's paying us much mind anymore.

"I'm..." Blaze's voice trails off as he picks up the flowers and hands them to me. "I didn't mean... I was just trying to react the way..."

I nod, trying to brush it off—like I didn't just have the best freaking kiss of my entire life. I squeeze the bouquet and stare at him, *waiting* for him to say that he wants this to be real. My heart beats wildly in my chest.

Tell me you're in love with me. Please.

"I shouldn't have broken the rules," he finally says, looking down at his feet. "It just felt like the right thing to do with everyone watching us. Most guys would've given their girl a kiss."

"Like a peck on the lips," I say flatly, disappointment hitting me like a freight train. "You just made out with me."

"I didn't mean for that to happen."

I'm fighting back the urge to cry suddenly. "Kissing was against the rules."

His mouth drops open, and I see regret on his face. "I know ... I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me."

I nod, trying to blow it off. "Right. Okay." I paste the fakest freaking smile I've ever had on my face and make my way through the crowd. As I pass a deep trash can on the edge of the roped-off area, I look around to see if anyone is watching me.

And then I throw the flowers away.

I take off across the sand into the darkness, away from the party. No one will notice if I'm gone, and honestly, I need a break. I need to think over what just happened.

Why would he kiss me?

He was the one who came up with that rule!

Taking a step forward, I let the warm ocean water cover my bare feet. I stare down at them and then look back at the party, wondering what Blaze is thinking. Does he *really* think this is some noble cause?

"*I don't know what came over me.*" His words echo in my head as I reach up and touch my lips, the taste of him still lingering in my mouth.

I *hate* how much I like it.

I hate that I know it's real now.

I have been trying to ignore it, but now I *know* I have feelings for him. And if he would've told me tonight that he wanted me as more than a friend, I would've agreed.

"Hey," a voice cuts through the darkness, and I turn to see my *dad* walking toward me. Not Blaze. "What're you doing out here in the dark?"

I laugh, quickly wiping the tears from my face as he drapes his arms around my shoulders. “Just getting some air. I don’t think I like weddings.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I guess they just remind me of the fact that I might not ever have one.”

He nods, letting out a sigh. “Well, does that have anything to do with whatever happened after you caught that bouquet? I wasn’t too busy to see something went wrong between you and Blaze.”

I peer up at my dad, wishing I could just tell him the truth. “It’s complicated.”

“Ah, do I need to go punch him in the face for you?” He chuckles. “I’m not above starting a fight for my girls.”

“No.” I laugh. “He’s just... He’s not good at this kind of stuff. He didn’t grow up with a family, and maybe it scares him.”

Or maybe he just sees me as a friend—one that he can make out with and then bail on.

“I remember when I first met Blaze years ago when you were in college,” Dad says, his gaze scanning the horizon. “Back then, I thought he was a handful, and a bit of a mess, really. He rode a motorcycle, didn’t have a family, and I don’t think the kid knew anything other than hockey, but...”

“But what?” I furrow my brow.

“But I saw how he treated you. He’s always respected you, long before you two became an item, and I think that shows a lot on his part.”

Oh.

I blink up at him. “Does this mean ... you approve of Blaze? Because I wasn’t so sure what you guys were gonna think about all this.”

“I do.” Dad smiles. “If he treats you right and makes you happy, then that’s all that matters to me.”

I close my eyes, a mixture of shock and guilt pulsing through me. I never expected my parents to be so accepting of Blaze. I always thought they wanted me with someone more traditional, someone who followed all the rules and fit into our socialite family perfectly.

Too bad this relationship with Blaze is fake.

But ... maybe it doesn’t have to be.

Dad reaches for my shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Maybe you should just tell Blaze how you’re feeling. If you’re ready for something more serious than he is, then you need to tell him, honey. Men can’t read minds like women can.”

Even though he’s way off about what’s going on, the basis is still the same.

I need to tell Blaze the truth about my feelings.

Chapter Nineteen

Blaze

I slowly blink my eyes open, the remnants of a restless night still clinging to me. As I shift in bed, my hand instinctively reaches out to the empty space beside me, expecting to feel Addy's presence. But she's not there.

And I know *exactly* why.

I broke the rules. Me. Blaze Harris. The one who set them in the first place.

As I sit up, groggily rubbing my eyes, memories of last night come rushing back. I remember the feeling of Addy's lips against mine. The way her fingers wrapped around my neck, pulling me closer. The way her body molded against my own as if we were made for each other.

She's *all* I can think about.

But when I went after her last night, I saw that her dad beat me to the punch. It's probably for the best, though, because even now, I *still* don't know what to say. Or how to even feel. Kissing her was like a long lost dream coming true. And if I'm being honest, there's a part of me that wants to kiss her again.

Which is bad.

Bad, bad, bad.

Especially considering she's already mad at me.

But we're leaving Hawaii tomorrow, so I need to figure this out fast. I need to find a way to make things right between us.

And so, I come up with yet another plan and make a few phone calls.



"You slept in." Addy appears in the doorway, staring me down as I sit on the edge of the bed, having just gotten dressed for the day.

"I tried waiting up for you, but once it hit two a.m., I got too tired." I shrug.

"Yeah, I was busy making my rounds and seeing everyone. You know how it goes."

I blow out a sharp breath. "You were avoiding me."

Her cheeks flush. "Yeah, well, *you* broke the rules, and I was trying to figure out what to do about it."

I shake my head as I stand to my feet. "Maybe just forgive me?"

She hums and then makes a face. "Not yet."

“Okay, then at least let me make it up to you.” I nod toward the door. “Let’s get out of here, and we can talk about everything. I’ve got a place in mind.”

And if our discussion today involves exploring our relationship beyond friendship, *maybe* I could think about it.

Or maybe I’m just going crazy.

It’s the kiss that did it.

I’ve just never had a kiss like that. Like *her*.

“Where are we going?” Addy asks as she follows me to the elevator.

“You’ll see.”

“I feel like you’re being really weird right now.”

“Well, I mean, I am,” I answer flatly. “I broke the rules.”

Addy diverts her gaze away from me. I can’t tell which part she’s more mad over—the kiss or the rule-breaking.

I take a deep breath and lead the way to the elevator, stepping inside. We stand in silence, and I try to ignore how she’s avoiding my gaze.

This is exactly what I was afraid would happen with the fake dating stuff.

When the elevator reaches the third floor, it stops. The doors slide open, and *of course*, Addy’s parents are standing on the other side. Addy immediately scoots herself into me, her back hitting my lower chest, as they enter the elevator. I place my hand on the small of her waist, like we’re just another happy couple.

“What’re you two up to today?” Mrs. Williams asks us as she steps in, a bright smile on her face. Addy’s father follows closely behind.

“I have no idea,” Addy answers as the elevator doors close. “He says he has something planned.”

“Lunch of sorts,” I answer, forcing myself to smile, even though touching her like this has me dying on the inside. My mind takes me back to the way I was wrapped around her last night, my hands in her hair.

“Well, I hope the two of you have fun,” her father chimes in, giving me a look—one that says *you’d better not screw this up*.

It makes me wonder what he and Addy talked about at the beach last night.

I swallow hard. “It should be fun.”

Addy doesn’t say anything as the elevator hits the ground floor and we step out. We all go our separate ways, and just like before, the car sits there waiting for us. The driver opens the door to the black SUV. A picnic basket is ready and waiting in the third row.

It’s amazing the things a little cash can pull off.

The car pulls away from the curb and takes off toward a private beach that I managed to reserve for us today. Again, it’s incredible what money can buy. I’ve never really been one to throw my wealth around, but I’m *desperate* to fix things with Addy—or maybe make them worse.

I’m a freaking ball of nerves.

“Well, this is fun,” Addy comments flatly after thirty minutes of dead silence in the backseat.

“Sorry.” I wince. I feel horrible and pray that the car will get to the beach already. “I just don’t know what to say. You know I get like this sometimes.”

“It’s okay.” She folds her arms across her chest, and that’s how she stays, even when the car parks and I climb out with the picnic basket.

“Are you coming?” I ask. “I really shouldn’t be drinking this bottle of wine all on my own. I might convince myself I’ll turn into a mermaid and go jump in the ocean.”

She cracks a smile. “I guess I should be there. For safety reasons.”

“Absolutely.” I breathe a sigh of relief as she climbs out. I’m having a really hard time reading her right now—which is abnormal for me. That being said, *everything* feels abnormal right now. My hands feel sweaty, and Addy’s gaze has my mind running in places it shouldn’t go.

I lead the way to the empty beach, feeling grateful for the overcast skies. I spread out the picnic blanket and then plop down. Meanwhile Addy stands there, staring at me.

“What are we doing?” she asks, biting down on her lower lip in a way that, once again, sends my mind running back to last night.

“We’re eating food and hanging out.” I pat the spot beside me. “So, take a seat, and let’s just be us.”

She hesitates but sits down ... and then sighs. “I forgive you for last night.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly before pulling out the chilled bottle of wine and a glass. “Wine?”

“Yes, please.” She laughs. “My dad spent an hour last night giving me a pep talk about the importance of communicating with you about my future goals and desires in life. He saw us get into that little tiff, and he took it the wrong way.”

“Oh...” I pour us each a glass and hand Addy hers. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. And I still don’t get why you kissed me like that. There was *nothing* casual about that kiss.” She runs her finger around the rim of the wine glass as I pull out the fruit and fancy sandwiches.

My appetite is nonexistent, but she might be hungry.

“Okay, well, it... I... I don’t know why I kissed you like that. It just seemed like the right thing to do in the moment.”

“I see...” Addy’s voice trails off. She takes a long sip of wine, and runs her fingers over her red-tinged lips. “How about we play a game of truth or dare?”

Uh oh. I don’t like this.

“Or we could just talk,” I choke out. “Your games always end with me doing something stupid—like streaking across the neighbor’s yard.”

She giggles, her lips curling into a relieving smile. “We were young and dumb college students when that happened. I’m *not* going to send you streaking.”

I huff. “Fair enough. Go ahead.”

“Okay, truth or dare.”

“Uh, truth?” I offer, taking a sip of wine.

“Why did you kiss me last night?”

Of course, that’s how she’s doing this. I run my hands through my hair. “I already answered you. I really don’t know.”

“Hmm,” she says, sipping on her wine again. “Okay, your turn.”

I dare you to kiss me again. The intrusive thought makes my heart pound harder in my chest. “Truth or dare,” I say.

“Truth.”

“Okay...” I try to come up with a question that’s worth something, and I think hard about everything that’s transpired over the last few days. *Got it.* “What did you say to me the other night when you were drunk and we were dancing? It was something about college.”

She furrows her brows again. “I don’t remember.”

“Well, this is going well.” I chuckle, and right as I do, her cheeks grow red. “What?”

“I remember now.” Her eyes meet mine.

“Well?” I’m on the edge of my seat—hypothetically speaking, of course.

“I had the biggest crush on you in college.” She diverts her gaze to her glass. “I know how silly that sounds, but you were pretty much *all* I thought about back then.”

I nearly choke on the air I suck in. “Wow.”

“Wow?” She frowns. “That’s it? Did you know or something?”

I shake my head. “No, I ... I had no idea. I always thought you weren’t into me.” My head starts spinning as I set my glass down, and it’s *not* because of the wine. I want to ask Addy if she’s been into me at any other point in time, but that’s not how the game works. “Your turn.”

“Truth or dare, Blaze?” She holds my gaze.

My heart pounds in my chest. I’m terrified of what she might ask me if I say *truth*. I suddenly feel like I’m twenty-one all over again, contemplating telling Addy I’m in love with her. I never did it. I couldn’t bring myself to say the words, terrified of rejection and losing her.

“Blaze?” Addy snaps her fingers. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” I say. “Haven’t done that one yet.”

She narrows her eyes. “Okay, well...” Addy rolls her lips, and my eyes drop to them, hanging there, dying to taste the wine on her tongue. And it’s as if she reads my mind. “I dare you to kiss me again.” Her eyes burn with a fire I’ve never seen before, and my body moves of its own accord before my brain can stop me.

My lips collide with hers, and this time, neither of us hesitates to lose ourselves in this moment. I’m all over her, slipping her wine glass from her hand and knocking it over in the sand. I cover every inch of her mouth, like my body has been desperate to make up for a decade of denying my feelings for her.

Addy threads her fingers through my hair, pulling me impossibly closer as she parts her lips for me. I trace my thumb along the curve of her jaw, relishing in the softness of her skin as I deepen the kiss, pouring all of my hidden feelings into this moment. She tastes like raspberries and summer heat, a mixture that I could get drunk on forever.

We go down on the blanket, our kiss heating up as I arch over her. My hand runs down her side, while hers is my hair. Her heart races against my chest, her body molding to mine as if we’re two halves of a whole, fitting together perfectly in this moment.

As if she was made to be in my arms.

I had *no* idea we had *this* kind of chemistry.

I nip on her lower lip. She sucks on mine.

A light groan escapes my lips, and *that* sound is enough to completely jar me.

This is inappropriate.

You’re messing everything up.

You’re going to lose her.

I freeze, my hand on Addy’s full hip, and break the kiss. “I’m sorry. We can’t do this,” I mutter.

“What?” Addy’s voice strains as she shoots daggers into my eyes. “Are you kidding me right now? Why?”

“You’re my best friend,” I whisper, my nose still touching hers. “Best friends don’t do this.” Panic fills my chest. “We can’t risk ruining what we have.”

Addy releases me like I might burn her skin if she touches me any longer. “Okay. Sorry for daring you to do that. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I guess we’re even now.” I clear my throat, pushing up off the blanket and putting space between us as I eye her. Her lips are swollen, fresh from our kiss, and I don’t want to admit how crazy I feel for her right now. I suddenly have this strong desire to

love her in the one way I never have before...

But I *can't*.

Because Addy is the only family I have. If we cross that line and things go sideways, I'd be left with nothing, no one.

I'd be a lost orphan once more, with no place to go.

"I think I'm done with lunch," she says, her voice flat. "Can you take me back? I need to pack since we leave tomorrow."

I nod. "Yeah, me too."

And somehow, try to forget this ever happened so we can go back to normal...

Chapter Twenty

Addy

The bare minimum.

That's what I've been doing since Blaze rocked my world and then retreated like I have the plague or something. I don't want to admit just how hurt I am, and at the same time, I *shouldn't* be hurt. This is a *fake* relationship...

But he kissed me first.

I stare down at my carry-on, frustrated as I flex and unflex my hand. Blaze is just a few feet away, nursing a coffee like there's nothing wrong at all. I don't know how he's doing that—just pretending like whatever happened on the beach meant nothing to him.

But maybe that's because it didn't mean anything.

My head spins as they finally call for us to board, and I take a step forward to jump in the line. Luckily my family isn't on the same flight, so we don't have to pretend to love each other anymore.

"I got a freaking aisle seat," a middle-aged guy says in front of me. "I don't care if I'm first class or not, I can't stand the aisle—and this is a long flight." He's grumbling into his phone, and as I glance back, I see that Blaze has been slow to get in line, falling a few people behind me.

I tap the guy's shoulder as soon as he hangs up. "Excuse me?" I say in a polite, quiet voice.

He spins around, a surprised expression on his face. "Yes?"

"I have a window seat in first class, and I'll happily trade you." I give him the best *please accept* smile I can muster, and he hesitates for a moment.

He narrows his eyes. "Why would you do that?"

"It's a long story." I chew on my bottom lip. "But you'll get to sit next to one of the Glaciers' NHL players..."

His face lights up. "No way!"

"Yeah, way," I tell him, smiling. "And it would just be *really* great if you would switch seats with me. I don't mind an aisle seat. In fact, I'd prefer any other seat than the one next to him today."

"Ah, you're in one of *those* situations." He chuckles. "Consider it done."

"Thank you," I breathe as he turns back around. I glance in Blaze's direction. His eyes are suddenly on me, a peculiar look on his face. In fact, he almost looks worried. I give him a blank expression and then proceed to board, switching seats as planned, which puts me three rows behind where I was originally supposed to be.

A woman who's probably in her mid-to-late fifties slips into the window seat beside me. Her Hawaiian dress screams tourist—but hey, just about everyone on this plane is a tourist.

"Hi." She gives me a slight nod as she settles into her seat.

I smile at her and then watch as Blaze boards, has a conversation with the guy I switched seats with, and then searches for me, his eyes scanning each row. I ensure I'm looking away by the time he makes it to my row. In fact, even when I can feel his gaze, I just stare at my phone, pretending not to notice him at all.

Am I being a little vindictive? Maybe. But honestly, I just don't want to cry. My feelings are all mangled right now, and it's harder than ever to combat my emotions. Blaze has been in my life for a decade. But now that I've felt his lips on mine, I don't know how I'm supposed to act normal around him anymore.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

Blaze: *What are you doing? I got us seats next to each other... Why did you switch rows?*

I almost ignore the message, but I decide that's probably *too* cruel. I quickly type back a reply and then switch my device to airplane mode.

Me: *I was just trying to do that guy a favor. He hates aisle seats.*

With a sigh, I put my phone back into my backpack and pull out my Kindle, hoping to distract my mind with a great novel—one that's not even remotely like the beachy fake dating to real dating romcom that I started reading on the plane ride here. That's not going to work.

"Oh, what are you reading?" The woman next to me asks.

"I'm not sure yet. But definitely not a romcom," I say with a forced chuckle. "I need a break from all that mushy stuff."

She laughs, and her smile highlights her green eyes. We continue some small talk about books, and then the plane takes off without a hitch.

I glance toward Blaze and his new buddy, who are seemingly deep in conversation. Well, maybe it's deep. I can't hear anything, so I really don't know. I'm trying to focus on my Kindle—by reading a thriller—but it's not really serving as the distraction I had hoped it would.

Maybe I should've just sat next to him and slept.

Except I know that wouldn't have happened, either.

I barely slept last night, tossing and turning with a pillow barricade between Blaze and me. And you know what's worse? Blaze had *zero* issues sleeping. He snored the whole night, completely unphased by everything that happened between us.

And that only made me feel worse.

"Are you alright?" the woman's voice cuts into my thoughts, and I turn to face her.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, suddenly realizing there's a tear rolling down my cheek. I bat it away, embarrassed. "It's just been one *really* weird vacation."

"Hmm," she hums. "Wouldn't have anything to do with the man that keeps looking back here at you, would it? Not to be nosy or anything."

"Yeah, it does," I admit with a shrug. "I switched seats with a stranger so I wouldn't have to sit next to him on the flight home."

"Oh my." She takes a sip of her drink and then flags down one of the flight attendants. "Get this woman whatever she wants and put it on my tab, please."

"You don't have to do th—"

"Oh, nonsense." She waves me off. "I know what it's like to nurse a broken heart. You need a strong drink and whatever else fits your taste buds."

I giggle, unable to help it, and order a mimosa. As soon as it's brought to me, I turn to the woman and extend my hand. "I'm Addy."

"Mary." She takes it and gives my fingers a light squeeze. "Now, what brought you to Hawaii? Were you on vacation with that disaster of a man up there?"

I laugh. "He was my date for my sister's wedding. He was... He was supposed to be my fake boyfriend because my family is crazy—well, my grandparents are..." I go on to share the *entire* experience with this stranger named Mary. She listens intently, nodding along.

"Wow. It sounds like quite a predicament."

"Doesn't it?" I groan, now on my second drink. "It's ridiculous that I'm even feeling this way. Meanwhile, he's not bothered in the slightest."

She knits her brows together. "I wouldn't say that. Considering he's been stealing glances back here every chance he gets—which I'm afraid will probably leave him with a sore neck tomorrow." Mary giggles and shakes her head. "But tell me, Addy, what made you dare him to kiss you again?"

I pause and take a sip of my mimosa, trying to gather my thoughts before answering. "Honestly, I don't even know. I guess I wanted to see if the sparks were real or just part of the act."

Mary raises an eyebrow. "And were they real?"

"They were..." I trail off, remembering the soft press of his lips against mine, how it felt like coming home and being lost at the same time. "But it doesn't change anything. According to him, we're *just* friends, and that's all we can ever be," I say quickly, just as the flight attendant brings me my third drink.

Blaze gets up from his seat and heads toward the bathroom—which means he has to walk right past me. I look away, catching the scent of his cologne before he even gets to my row. And wouldn't you know it, Mary *waves* at him. I force my gaze up, and Blaze shakes his head, his expression impossible to read.

"He strikes me as being a complicated man," Mary muses as soon as he's out of earshot. "I think he's got baggage. Any man that looks at you like that but doesn't want to be with you ... he's got to have baggage."

"How do you know all this?" I ask, angling my body in her direction. "You seem way too good at reading people."

"Well, quite frankly, it comes with the territory of being a therapist, but..."

Oh my gosh. I've been talking to a therapist this whole time?

I rub my forehead, feeling my face heating up from embarrassment. "I bet you think I'm crazy."

She laughs. "Oh goodness, no. I get it. I get what you were doing with your family, too. You're about to be thirty, and it sounds like you're under some immense pressure. As for what'll happen between you and your friend here, I can't answer that. You'd have to go to a psychic for *that* kind of advice."

I snort. "Yeah, no thanks."

We both burst into laughter.

Blaze walks past us for a second time to return to his seat. As he settles back in, I steal a glance at him, my heart fluttering in my chest. Despite everything, despite the confusion and the mixed signals, I can't deny the pull I feel toward him.

Mary leans in closer, her voice low as she speaks. "Are you in love with him?"

I swallow hard and look out the window, watching the clouds pass by as we soar above them. The question lingers in the air, heavy and poignant.

Am I in love with Blaze?

It's a question I've been avoiding confronting since the night he kissed me at the wedding.

“I ... I think I might be,” I finally admit, a lump forming in my throat. “But it’s ... complicated.”

Mary’s expression softens as she places a comforting hand on mine. “Love is never simple, dear,” she says gently. “But sometimes, we have to be brave enough to confront our feelings head-on. Life is too short to hold back our hearts. You should tell him how you feel.”

I smile and nod ... but nausea churns in my stomach at the thought of telling Blaze how I truly feel. Because as inspiring as Mary’s little speech about love sounds, she doesn’t know Blaze like I do.

And I already know how a conversation like that with him would end.

Which makes this all the more heartbreaking...

Chapter Twenty-One

Blaze

I know something's wrong. Addy's not even really talking to me, and what was with switching seats?

Like come *on*, Addy.

I had to sit next to some guy who wanted to talk hockey for *ten* freaking hours. Meanwhile, she's laughing it up with some lady that I've never seen before in my life—like the two of them are old friends or something...

I toss our bags into the back of my Jeep and take a deep breath as Addy climbs into the passenger seat. She's wearing leggings and an oversized T-shirt, and I try hard not to stare—which is starting to become a problem. This vacation has made me *all* too aware of how gorgeous she is. And I hate the way my body responds when I look at her, giving me the urge to kiss her until I'm blue in the face.

My Vans are quiet on the pavement as I pop open the driver's side door. There's a part of me that wants to instantly grill her with questions, and the other part of me just wants to curl up inside of myself. I mean, honestly, I don't even know how I'm feeling right now—but panicky might be the best term, given that I'm *terrified* to lose Addy as a result of all this.

But Addy assured me that this fake relationship wouldn't change anything between us. So I just have to trust, now that we're back home, things can go back to normal.

"You wanna come over?" I ask her, breaking the silence as I pull away from the curb. "I can get us pizza and we can watch a movie."

She looks over at me like I've just suggested climbing Mount Everest. "Uh ... I don't think so. I'd rather just go home. I'm beat from the flight."

"Hungover, you mean."

"What?" she snaps. "Why would I be hungover?"

"I saw you drinking with that lady on the fl—"

"I had three drinks. Over a span of *ten* hours, Blaze. I'm not drunk. I'm not some alcoholic or something." Her tone is so sharp that I catch my breath. She rarely talks to me like this ... and once again, it makes me feel panicky.

"Okay, sorry," I say quickly. "I don't blame you. It's the last little bit of the vacay before we have to go back to normal life."

She turns her attention to the window and doesn't respond. Her blonde hair is slipping from the bun on top of her head, and my mind flashes with the image of taking it down for her...

STOP.

Stop being a freaking creep.

I sigh and reach for the radio, flipping through the channels until I find something that doesn't grate my nerves any further. It ends up being some kind of classic rock. I spend the rest of the thirty-minute drive to her townhouse listening to a bunch of now-old guys singing about pouring sugar on themselves and whatever else.

Finally, I pull up to the curb and put my Jeep in park. I slide out to grab her bags for her.

“I can get them,” she huffs, jumping out to join me. “I don’t need you to get my bags.”

“I *always* get your bags when I pick you up from the airport,” I argue, beating her to them. “It’s just what I do.”

She scowls. “Well, I don’t *need* you to.” Addy grabs her other suitcase before I can and rips it out of the back of the Jeep, stalking off toward the front of the house. “I can take care of myself,” I hear her add under her breath.

“I know you can take care of yourself. I was just trying to help,” I call after her, slinging the bag over my shoulder and jogging up to catch her as she struggles to climb the front steps. “You grabbed the heaviest one.” I reach down and pluck it from her hands, trying to ignore the way my fingers brush hers.

Addy eyes me, her lips parted slightly, and my heart goes rampant, thudding against my ribcage like I just ran five miles. I quickly step back and away, gesturing for her to open the door. With a heavy sigh, she does.

“I’ll carry them to your room,” I tell her as I step inside, always relieved to smell the crisp cinnamon and vanilla that seems to permeate the air.

“Just leave them here,” she says, still holding the front door open.

I make a face. “I’ll take them upstairs like I always do.”

“Are you seriously going to pretend like I didn’t just say to leave them?” She shakes her head. “I’m *tired*. I just want to take a long shower to wash this whole *vacay* out of my system and then go to bed.”

My chest tightens. “Right. Um, okay, then. I’ll just leave them here, if that’s what you want—or I can take them upstairs and put your stuff away for you so that you don’t have to mess with them. I don’t mind, Addy.” I sound desperate. I know I do, but for some reason, I’m worried that if I leave, she might slam the door and never talk to me ever again...

I hate having anxiety.

“Blaze,” Addy says with a sigh, pulling down her hair and raking her hands through her soft curls. “I just want to be alone for a while. We’ve spent the last however many days together, and I just—”

“Want me to leave,” I finish for her, my eyes dropping to my feet. “I get it. I’m sorry.”

“That makes me sound like a villain.” She rubs a hand over her face. “It’s not like that. I’m just tired.”

I nod, masking the hurt. “Yeah, no, I totally get it. Totally. I’ll, uh, I’ll see you tomorrow. You know, because I always see you on Mondays...”

She gives me a weird look. “You see me almost every day. Go get some sleep.” With that, she sweeps her arm in the general direction of the door. With slumped shoulders, I walk out.

And I’m barely outside before she slams it behind me.

Does she hate me now?

Worry spills into my mind, and I try to push it away as I get back to my Jeep. I rip the door open and climb inside, not wanting to go home. If I go home, that’ll just mean more alone time with my thoughts...

And I can’t stop thinking about her—in all the ways I shouldn’t.

I fish out my cell phone and call Cam, tapping my finger on the steering wheel as I wait for him to answer. Finally, on the fourth or fifth ring, he picks up.

“Hey, Blaze, what’s up?”

“What’re you doing? Can we hit the gym or something?” I don’t even bother trying to explain that I’m back from Hawaii and all that. He has no idea what I was up to—other than going with Addy to a wedding.

“Uh, actually, I’m with Nila right now. We’re about to go out to dinner and spend the evening together. Sorry, man. But maybe we can get together later this week? You know how off-season is, we gotta take the time we can.”

“Oh yeah, I get it,” I say nonchalantly. “Not a big deal at all. I’m just bored.”

There’s a pause. “Since when are you bored? You’re always with Addy.”

I choke out a laugh. “Uh, yeah, but she’s tired from the flight and all that. You know, typical jet lag.”

“Oh yeah, right. Okay, well, Dylan might be available. You might wanna hit him up. He’s literally never doing anything with his life.” Cam laughs, and I hear Nila laughing, too. “Have a good evening,” I tell him before hanging up. I take a deep breath as I pull up Dylan’s number, hoping like heck he isn’t too busy.

“What’s up, man?” he answers immediately. “You back from the *islands*?”

“Yeah, what’re you doing?” I ask, then check the time. It’s nearly seven in the evening now, and this is usually when Dylan starts his days.

“Uh, I was just about to head over to Freddy’s to grab dinner, then maybe head out to some of the bars. There’s karaoke night at a few places. You know how much I love karaoke. Wanna join?”

I cringe. I’m not in the mood to listen to his terrible singing, but... “Yeah, okay. Let me swing by my house, shower, and then I’ll meet you at Freddy’s. Can you give me like forty-five minutes or so?”

“Sure thing. Good to know that I won’t be going alone tonight. Kade is up someone else’s butt right now.”

“A girl?”

“No clue.” Dylan chuckles.



I stroll into Freddy’s, a nice local pub, at 7:30 p.m., and while the fatigue pulls at me like never before, I’m relieved to see Dylan. He’s already perched in a booth and waving me down. For whatever reason, I really don’t want to be alone right now.

“You look like crap.” Dylan bursts into laughter as I slide in across from him. “I already ordered your usual. What’s going on?”

“Uh, it’s a long story. And I think I’ve royally messed up.”

Dylan sets his beer down. “Oh? And how could *you* have possibly messed up? I’m pretty sure you don’t know what failure is on or off the ice.”

“I kissed Addy in Hawaii—*twice*,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. “And the second time, I *really* kissed her. If I hadn’t realized what I was doing... I might’ve... I don’t know...”

Dylan doesn’t look even slightly surprised. “Okay?”

“That’s all you’re going to say?” I exasperate. “Do you not realize that I might’ve screwed up our friendship? My anxiety has been through the roof. I can’t stop spiraling, imagining every possible worst-case scenario. She’s acting weird now, and I’m at a complete loss about where to go from here. And on top of that, now I have these *feelings*...”

“Whoa.” Dylan holds up his hands. “I have not had enough beer for this kind of conversation yet. But...” He breathes out a sigh. “We all know you’re in love with Addy. I don’t know how you’re only *just* now realizing this.”

“Uh...”

“Uh, okay, so you *don’t* want to be more than friends with her?” Dylan cocks his head. “Is that what this is about? Trust me, dude, it’s hard to just be friends once you cross that line.”

“And you know this, how?”

“I just know it,” he says flatly. “Why don’t you want to be more than friends with Addy? The two of you are perfect for each other.”

I shake my head. “Because, even if I wanted to, I don’t know *how* to navigate a romantic relationship. And I’m not gonna go experimenting on Addy of all people. She’s the most important person in my life. I can’t risk losing her.”

“That sounds like a man who knows how to make a relationship work,” Dylan counters. “A man who will do what it takes to keep the girl. A man who’s in love.”

I let out a flustered sigh. “You sure are great at making assumptions. But what you don’t seem to understand is that I *can’t* be more than friends with Addy. She’s my only family outside of the team, the only constant in my life. If I lost her, I’d have nothing.”

He shrugs. “So then marry her.”

I sit in stunned silence, mulling over his words. The vision of Addy walking down the aisle toward me in a white gown to become *my wife* sends a rush of warmth through my veins. But just as fast as the thought comes, the tidal wave of fear rushes in.

Because the reality is, it’s not that simple.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Addy

I'm *not* okay.

Every time I close my eyes, all I can see is Blaze's face hovering over mine, his lips brushing against my own. And then his look of horror as he pulled away. Which is why I've been avoiding him for the past two days since we got back from Hawaii, declining all his invitations to hang out and opting to spend time alone in my apartment instead.

My plane therapist would probably be so disappointed in me right now.

As much as I'd love to take her advice, confronting your feelings head-on is much easier said than done. I'm not really in the mood to embarrass myself anymore. I've done enough of that to last a lifetime already by asking Blaze to be my fake boyfriend, and then daring him to kiss me.

"We're best friends. Best friends don't kiss each other."

His words replay like a broken record in my mind. Except, what he doesn't seem to understand is that *everything* has changed for me. And I don't know how to just be friends with him without it shattering my heart.

I sigh and open up my suitcase, finally tackling the unpacking I've been putting off.

"Maybe this will help me clear my head," I mutter to myself. But as I pick up the little black dress out of my bag, I can smell Blaze's cologne all over it, which serves as yet another painful reminder of the feelings I realized I still have for him. Only now, they're like ten times as strong, and I *still* don't know how to move forward.

Ugh.

I drop my little black dress back on the bed and collapse onto it, staring at the ceiling. And finally, for the first time since this whole thing transpired, I burst into tears, letting the heartache come in waves. It feels overdue, and I let myself cry until there's nothing left. Then, I pick myself up, grab a Ben and Jerry's out of my freezer, and head to the couch to lose myself in a movie.

As I take a seat, my phone vibrates. I cringe, expecting something from Blaze. But it's not him. I take a long, ragged breath, and answer the call.

"Hey Penny," I say weakly. "What's up?"

"Girl, I haven't heard anything from you since you left for Hawaii. I've been wondering how that whole fake dating thing with Blaze turned out. How did your family handle it?"

I'm silent for a few beats. And then, I burst into tears all over again.

"Oh my gosh, Addy! What's wrong?"

I spend the next hour explaining every single little detail of the time I spent with Blaze. I sigh when I'm done. "I'm in love with him, Penny. I know I am. And after all this, I don't know how to go back to just being his *friend*..."

"Okay, well," Penny begins, sounding as shocked as ever, "it's clear there's something beneath the surface. Have you told him how you feel?"

“No. He’s made it pretty clear he doesn’t want to risk our friendship. I’m not sure I could handle being rejected anymore than I already have been.”

“Well, if he’s gonna kiss you and then try to go back to the way things were like *nothing* happened—it’s his loss. But *you* have to do what’s best for you and your heart. I think that’s the most important thing right now.”

“I’ve been dodging him so hard.” I sink lower into the couch cushions, my Ben and Jerry’s now thoroughly melty. “We usually see each other every day during the off-season.”

“Okay, so maybe it’s time to *not* see each other every day. I mean, it’s a little excessive to see each other that often anyway.”

“Well...” My voice trails off. “I guess.”

“Maybe you should tell him you need some space so you can move on.”

“He’s gonna freak out,” I say, chewing on my lower lip. “He’s been afraid of ruining our friendship—that’s been the theme of this whole thing.”

“He shouldn’t have kissed you then. *He* broke his own freaking rules, Addy. That’s not your problem. Your problem is now your hurting heart, which is a big deal. He led you on. So it’s understandable why you feel the way you do.”

“I guess so,” I say quietly. “I already told him I wasn’t going to Dylan’s party tonight. But maybe I *should* go so I can talk to him about needing some space to get over him.”

“No,” Penny counters. “Bad idea. You need to talk to him in private because you have no idea how the conversation will go. For all you know, he might decide that he’s in love with you, too, *or* he might get angry. You don’t want to make a scene in front of all your friends. It’s better to deal with these things in private.”

My heart thumps with anxiety as I think about broaching the subject with him in general—and the prospect of him sharing the same feelings. “This is stressful.” I brush my hair out of my face. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost Blaze’s friendship.”

“You’ll just have to make new friends. You’ll have to come up with some way to get over him. Maybe try some of those speed dating events around town. You might find the man of your dreams. For all you know, Blaze is just the stepping stone to get you to the one.”

“Okay, woah. Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves...”

She laughs. “You’re going to be okay, Addy. You just have to tell yourself if it’s meant to be, it’ll be—and if it’s not, you’ll be just fine. That’s how these things work. We don’t get to decide what is or isn’t. Whatever will be will be.”

“Wow, you should make some of those motivational posters.” I giggle. “I feel you have a gift.”

“It’s all the time I’ve spent scrolling through Instagram lately. Apparently, my algorithm thinks I need a lot of motivation.”

“You’re literally the best,” I say, breathing out a sigh. “Maybe everything will be okay.”

“It will be, Addy. I promise.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Blaze

“Where’s Addy?” Kade asks as I lean against the wall, sipping on my now-warm beer. “It’s weird to see you here without her.”

“I don’t know.”

Kade’s brows disappear into his hairline. “You don’t know where she is? Since when? The two of you are practically conjoined at the hip.”

“Not tonight,” I grit out, trying to swallow the emotion in my throat.

Things are *so* wrong between us right now, and the way she’s been avoiding me has left me reeling. It’s all my fault for kissing her—I know that—but I don’t know how to fix it. I’ve been trying to get things back to normal, but she hasn’t really wanted to see me or talk to me since we got home.

Kade is silent for a few moments. “You okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” I lie, forcing myself to smile. “All good.”

He shakes his head. “No, you’re not. You’ve got that blank expression on your face. Something’s up. Just tell me what it is, and we can talk about it. Come on.” He gestures for me to follow him out into the backyard, where some people are swimming in the pool. We head to the corner of the patio, where the string lights are keeping the place lit up.

“Okay, spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill. It just feels weird without Addy. She’s always here.” I chug the rest of my beer, trying not to visibly cringe as the lukewarm liquid slides down my throat. “Things are weird between us right now.”

“Yeah, Dylan told me you kissed her.”

I chuckle, picking at the label. “Does he ever not tell everyone everything?”

“No.” Kade laughs. “He doesn’t, so let’s figure this out. Do you regret it?”

“No.” I laugh. “It was the second-best kiss I’ve ever had.”

Kade raises a dark brow.

“Right behind our second one.” I admit, feeling my face heat up.

“You kissed her *twice*?”

“Yeah... I thought we could clear the air after our first kiss over a picnic, so I rented out a private beach. But we ended up playing truth or dare, and she dared me to kiss her again. I did it without hesitation—I don’t know how I even stopped myself. She’s addictive like that.”

“Sounds like you have some feelings,” Kade says carefully. “And considering she *dared* you to kiss her, she probably has feelings for you too ... and maybe that’s something you both need to address. I mean, it really seems like there’s something more between the two of you.”

“She knows we’re just friends.”

“But do *you*?” Kade shoots back. “Weren’t *you* the one who kissed her at that wedding? You’re gonna have to own up to that and whatever caused it.”

My stomach knots up. “I don’t know. I got lost in the moment, I guess.”

Pretending to be her boyfriend brought out real feelings.

Kade shakes his head. “Well you better think long and hard about why you did it and where you’re gonna go from here, because she’s clearly feeling some type of way. And if you have feelings for Addy, you need to tell her—whether you move forward with them or not.”

“I’d never risk it.”

He narrows his eyes. “What do you mean? You already *are* risking it ... right now. Addy’s not here. She’s always here. You need to get this straightened out before you lose her either way.” He pats me on the shoulder and then moves on to another group of people.

I slink back into the dark corner of the patio, wishing it would swallow me whole. I pull out my phone, seeing absolutely nothing. Addy’s *never* gone more than a few hours without texting me, and I’m starting to feel her absence.

I pull up our message thread and type out a text message to her.

Me: *It’s weird to be at a party without you. How’s your evening?*

I hit the send button and stare at the screen, waiting. After a few minutes, I decide that she’s probably sleeping. Or maybe she’s not feeling that good. I have this weird urge to go to her house and check on her—but I shove that away. I know that’s my anxiety talking.

The read receipt pops up, and I breathe a sigh of relief as the three dots appear on the screen. My heart thumps heavily in my chest as I wait for her to respond.

The dots flash over and over again for nearly five minutes...

And then they’re gone.

No reply.

My jaw drops. Addy’s never done that to me before. I have the strong urge to text her a second time, but clearly, I’ve already pushed it enough for one night. It’s time for me to back off. I know that.

And it hurts.

I lean back against the patio wall, my mind flickering to all the times I *almost* kissed her in college, thinking that maybe Addy and I could be more.



Seven Years Ago...

“Hey, congrats,” I tell her, threading my arm around hers. “You did it, graduating college and all that.”

She bursts into giggles, leaning her head against my arm. “Yeah, I guess I did. Are you excited for the party tonight, Mr. NHL Superstar?”

“Don’t say it like that.” I laugh, cherishing the way it feels to have her warmth against me. “It makes me out to be a bigger deal than I am. I’m just the same guy I’ve always been. And we’re celebrating *you*, not me.”

“Ha, yeah, okay.” We walk into the party, and Penny runs to greet the two of us, wrapping us in a warm hug.

“You did it!” She plants a kiss on Addy’s cheek. “Look at you, with your business degree.” Her bright red hair is up in a weird sort of bun on her head, and while I’ve never understood the eccentricity of Addy’s best girlfriend, I’m good with it. It keeps things interesting.

“I know.” Addy beams, and then looks at me. “And it’s crazy—Blaze is in the NHL. It’s like we’ve all made it.”

“What’re you going to do now?” Penny asks, handing us beers and leading us out to the backyard. “I bet you’re going to be a millionaire by the time you’re thirty.”

“No.” Addy laughs. “Though, if my family has their way, I’ll be married to one.” She frowns at that. “Did you know they’ve set me up with a date next week? His name’s *Archer*. We were friends in second grade, but then his family moved to London. I guess he’s back now.”

“Wow,” I say, my stomach flip-flopping. “What’s he like?”

I *hate* it when we talk about Addy’s prospective boyfriends.

That, and I’ve finally decided—now that I’m making the kind of money in the NHL that can live up to her family’s standards, I’m going to tell Addy that I’m in love with her.

And tonight’s the night I’m gonna do it.

“He’s not my type.” Addy looks up at me, her gaze lingering for a few moments. My heart hammers in my chest. She turns back to Penny, the two of them going on and on about Penny’s new boyfriend—one she thinks she’s going to marry.

I stand there and listen to the best of my ability, but tonight, my goal is to get Addy alone so I can finally tell her what I’ve been holding onto for the last few years. I’ve been quiet about my feelings since we met...

But tonight, I want to be loud and vocal about them.

Now, I can meet her family’s expectations. I can be the millionaire she marries by the time she’s thirty. My head starts to imagine that scenario, and my palms start to sweat.

I can do this.

I can tell her that she’s the one for me.

Then she won’t have to go out on a date with Archer.

“Oh my gosh, he’s cute,” Penny hums, staring at Addy’s phone. “And *this* is Archer?”

I swallow the lump in my throat, telling myself to ignore it. Penny calls any guy with a face *cute*. Archer is no different, I’m sure.

I roll my shoulders and then slip off to grab another beer. I pop the top and head back, seeing that Addy is finally alone.

Just tell her.

It’s now or never.

“Hey, you okay?” Addy looks at me, probably noticing that I might pass out at any moment.

“Yeah, totally,” I tell her. “Can we talk though?”

She giggles. “We *are* talking.”

“I mean, with a little more privacy.” I choke on my words.

Addy knits her brows together. “Oh, yeah, of course.”

I nod and grab her hand to lead her further from the crowd. It’s not the first time I’ve held her hand, but it’s the first time I’ve done it with the intention of not letting go. I have to admit, it’s getting to me.

“Is everything okay?” Addy pulls her hand from mine as soon as she turns to face me.

Okay, maybe I will let go of her hand.

I sigh, trying to conjure up the words to tell her. “You know, we’ve been friends for, like, three years now.”

She smiles. “Almost four, actually.”

“Okay, yeah, almost four,” I amend. “And they’ve been the best four years of my life. You’re like family now.”

“Aw, you’re so sweet.” She beams, her bright blue eyes alight from the dim glow of the moon above us. I swallow hard, trying not to look at her luscious lips, begging me to kiss them.

Holy smokes, I really want to kiss her.

My heart throbs in my chest.

C’mon, Blaze. Hold it together.

If I can’t tell her that I’m in love with her right now, then I’m not going to *ever* take the step.

“Blaze?” Addy tilts her head. “What’s up? You said you need to talk? What is it?”

“I just love you,” I blurt out, feeling my face grow hot.

She’s quiet for a minute, and then *laughs*. “I love you, too. I’m so glad we got that off our chests since you always say that we’re like family. Family loves each other.”

“Uh…” I trail off as I realize she misconstrued what I’m saying. “No, I—”

Addy’s phone text alert goes off. She groans as she checks the notification. “Oh my gosh. It’s my *mother*. She’s so dead set that this Archer guy is going to be the one.” She peers up at me, shaking her head. “And for the record, I kind of hope he is, too, because I’m so tired of being forever alone. I mean, Archer and I were friends as kids. He supposedly had a crush on me in grade school, but he never told me. Cuz, you know, the moment that someone has a crush that’s one-sided, *everything* goes sideways.”

My lips part, wanting to shout at her that I’m *in* love with her, but I can’t seem to find the nerve—and her words give me pause. “So, if one of your guy friends liked you as more than a friend, you wouldn’t be friends with them anymore?”

She furrows her brow, looking up at me. “Um, it would probably be awkward.” Addy goes back to her phone, her fingers viciously typing something out to her mom. “But thankfully, that’s never happened.”

“Yeah, for sure.” I swallow the rejection and stare off into the yard, trying to look at anything and everything *but* Addy. I had it in my head that everything was going to go my way tonight, but clearly...

I was dead wrong.

There’s no way I would ever want to lose Addy over me being in love with her.

I pick at the label on my beer and vow to bury these feelings for her deep down in my chest. Maybe if I bury it deep enough, I’ll get over her.

And I’ll forget this moment ever happened.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Addy

I stare at the text I still haven't replied to and lock my phone screen. It's been fifteen hours since Blaze sent it, and now it's way too late to reply. Well, maybe it's not, but I don't know what to say. I'm still trying to process what happened between us in Hawaii. It's only been a few days.

And now, I have to suffer through brunch with my mother—who still thinks Blaze and I are together.

Ugh.

“Over here!” Mom waves at me obnoxiously. “Addy!”

I smooth out my freshly done hair and brush the dog hair from my T-shirt. I know what I look like... And it's written all over my mom's face as soon as I sit down.

“Oh my. Are you not feeling well?”

I grab the wine glass full of water. “Not really. I have a headache.”

“Ah, that explains it,” she mutters, picking up her own glass and taking a sip. “Would you like some Tylenol? I have some in my purse.”

“No, that's okay,” I say, my eyes drifting to the window. I take in the street just on the other side, busy with people laughing and talking.

I *really* need to talk to Blaze.

But I haven't gotten up the nerve to tell him how I feel—and that I need some space to get over what happened...

“So, how's Blaze?” Mom goes right in for the kill.

“Great,” I say.

“Why didn't you bring him along?”

“He's got practice,” I lie. “He would've loved to have been here, I'm sure.” I pick up the menu, getting lost in the words that all seem to blend together. This is the worst heartbreak I've ever gone through, and now, I wish I'd never asked Blaze to be my fake boyfriend. We could've kept our friendship going like always instead of being like this.

“Have you seen Aurora's pictures with Robert on their honeymoon?” Mom pulls out her phone and slides it across the table.

I set the menu down with a huff and flip through their lovey-dovey stupid pictures. I barely take them in, though I do visibly cringe at the photo of them lip-locked. “Wow, looks like they're having a great time.” My voice is flat, and I immediately go back to the menu. I know I'm not being pleasant.

And I have no reason for it. Because *I'm* the one who caused this to happen between Blaze and me. It's on me. I know that, but for some reason, it doesn't change the fact that *he* broke the rules first.

He did.

Not me.

I mean, yeah, I dared him to kiss me the next day. But I didn't think he actually *would*. Well, I didn't think he would and then totally freak out.

I shake my head to myself, sick of replaying it all over and over again. It's all I've been able to do since it happened, and I'm so tired of the rut I'm stuck in.

We order our brunch. I opt for the French toast, just so I can eat my feelings fully.

"So, have you made any progress on hiring contractors for your dog-walking business?" Mom asks.

"Not yet," I answer. "I don't really want to think about that right now. I have enough on my plate." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know it's a mistake.

"Like what?" she inquires. "Your headache?"

"What?" I shoot back at her. "What does my headache have to do with this?"

But before she can answer, our food is served. Mom falls into silence and begins to eat. I force myself to do the same, trying to ignore the way she eyes me every so often. I focus on my plate, and by the time I'm done, Mom is already paying the bill.

"Let's go for a walk," she says, pushing back from the table. "It'll help us digest all these crazy carbs."

Uh oh.

A sinking feeling hits my gut as I stand up to follow her. I know her too well—she's on to me. I brush my hair out of my face and follow her out of the small café.

She links her arm in mine. "So, what happened when you and Blaze got back?"

But before I can answer, I catch sight of the one person I *don't* want to see.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mumble under my breath just as Blaze hops out of his Jeep. I should've known that he'd be going to the gym—which just so happens to be right next to the breakfast café.

"Blaze!" Mom calls out brightly.

He whips his head around and smiles so gorgeously. "Hey." He jogs up to us, looking me over from head to toe. "Are you sick?"

"Addy said you were at practice?" Mom interjects before I can say anything about the fake headache I'm sporting.

"Uh..." His voice trails off. "Um..."

"You weren't at practice." Mom's voice is painfully fake.

Blaze visibly swallows. "No, ma'am."

"Uh-huh." She squeezes my arm lightly and then turns to me, asking the *one* question I'm not ready for. "Are you guys having relationship issues?"

Only *my* mother would ask a question like that in front of both of us.

That's just how she is.

And she's waiting for an answer.

"I broke up with her," Blaze blurts out, his tone painfully soft. "It just wasn't working for me. We're better off as friends."

The lump in my throat prevents me from saying anything as my mom's jaw drops. She makes a face that has me wanting to crawl inside a hole and stay there. "So ... you led my daughter on?"

Blaze flinches. "Um, no, not exactly. I love her. I do. It's just that..."

"It's just that the whole thing was a freaking *joke*," I explode, glaring at Blaze. "And he needs to get to his workout sesh before his pre-workout high wears off." I pull my mom right past him, and Blaze just stands there, stunned.

I shake my head, dragging my mom until she rips her arm away from me and lets out the loudest sigh I've ever heard. I glance past her, relieved that Blaze is already inside the gym.

“*What* was that?! I’ve never seen you so…” She can’t even put the words together, glancing back toward the gym. “What’s going on here?”

“What’s going on is that I’m tired of pretending, Mom,” I snap, unable to hold back anymore. “Blaze and I were never really dating. We faked it. All of it.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth falls open before she grabs my hand and drags me off down the street toward a little grassy knoll. She doesn’t say a word until we’re sitting on a park bench—which is surprising given that she usually complains about bird poop being everywhere.

She finally breaks the silence. “Why on earth would you fake a relationship, Adeline?”

“Because I’m sick and tired of being judged by you and Granny and everyone else for still being single at almost thirty. I just wanted everyone to leave me alone for once,” I confess, my voice breaking as tears well up in my eyes. “It was easier to pretend than to deal with the constant questions and pitying looks.”

“Oh, honey.” Mom’s expression softens as my words sink in. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea you felt that way.”

“It just feels like nothing I do is ever good enough. Like I’m the disappointing daughter who can’t measure up to everyone’s expectations,” I say, the floodgates opening now. “I’m so tired of feeling like a failure.”

“You’re not a failure. Not in any way,” Mom says firmly, brushing the tears from my cheeks.

“*Really?*” I pout.

“Really.” She pulls me in for a tight hug. “Addy, you are strong and capable and more than enough just as you are. You don’t need to pretend or put on a show for *anyone*.”

“Thank you.” I pull back from the hug, wiping away the remaining tears with the back of my hand. “I’m really sorry for lying. Granny is just so—”

“Oh trust me, I know better than anyone how hard Granny can be,” Mom interjects with a knowing smile. “I grew up with her, remember?”

I nod, dabbing my eyes.

“And I’m realizing now that I’ve picked up some of her bad habits along the way.” A sheepish look crosses her face. “But I’ll do better. I promise.”

I sniffle. “I appreciate that.”

“I hope you know that your worth isn’t dependent on your relationship status or what others think of you.”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling a sense of relief wash over me as I lean in to hug her once more. For so long, I’ve been carrying the burden of other people’s expectations, but in this moment, wrapped in my mother’s embrace, I feel a glimmer of hope that things could be different. That, perhaps, I can start to live for myself and not for the approval of others. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” She leans back against the park bench, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears. “And I’ll support you in whatever path you choose from now on.” She smiles.

“Well, I’m gonna need all the support I can get, because I have no idea what to do about Blaze.” I take a deep breath and then tell her *everything* that’s transpired between Blaze and me. “I’m an idiot,” I add at the end. “I’ve ruined our friendship. And you saw how easy he plays it off; it’s like he’s not even phased by any of it!” I throw my hands in the air. “And here I am, venting to anyone who will listen. I’m pathetic.”

“Honey,” Mom says softly, placing her hand on my knee. “It’s okay to be upset, but have you told him how you feel about him?”

“Not yet.” I chew on my lip. “I need to. I told myself I would the next time I saw him or talked to him. I’m just not looking forward to the hurt when I tell him I need space to get over him.”

“Well,” Mom begins, straightening her skirt, “you know, your father and I started out as just friends. He was so oblivious to everything, I swear. It was like I had to bluntly say, ‘Hey, I’m in love with you,’ before he ever got it through his thick skull.”

I laugh. “I don’t think much has changed with Dad. He’s still pretty thick in the head.”

“Most definitely.” Mom giggles. “But I wouldn’t change a thing about him. Because that’s also part of the reason he’s determined to make it work no matter what—and that means something. I think Blaze has that same quality, and maybe he’s just being a little stubborn.”

“But what if he doesn’t feel the same?”

“Well, then you can kick him right in the shin for me. Because I’ll be very disappointed in him for acting like that. It’s not fair to you. He’d be leading you on, and I don’t appreciate that.”

“Yeah...” My voice trails off. “I don’t know how to be just friends anymore.”

Mom smiles softly. “You’ll just have to feel it out yourself, but for all the times that Blaze has told you he loves you over the last decade, I think there’s something more beneath the surface. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, Addy. Even before the little love trick you two pulled.”

“The *love trick*?” I can’t contain my laughter, though it comes out a little watery.

“Yes! Or whatever your romance novels call it when two people fake a relationship.” She rolls her eyes. “Anyway, that’s besides the point. The way Blaze looks at you is the same way your dad looked at me. If he’s too scared to accept his feelings, then that’s on him. And at that point, you’ll have to do whatever’s best for you.”

“If things don’t work out, I’ll probably just be forever alone.” I huff. “No one wants to put up with my antics.”

“Oh stop.” She swats me. “You’re amazing, Addy. You march to the beat of your own drum, and I’ve always loved that about you. The right person will see everything about you and cherish it all—even the weird, quirky parts.”

“True.” I breathe out a sigh of relief.

“Now, we need to get you ready for this chat with Blaze.”

I give her a wary look. “What do you mean? I don’t like the way this sounds...”

She laughs. “Well, I saw how he looked at you when you wore that little black dress in Hawaii. I think we can do better than that, though. We’re going to give you a full-blown makeover to make *you* feel like the showstopper you are. I’ll call Lexy, and we can get your hair done, and then we’ll get you something even more sexy to wear. He’ll be crazy if he turns you down.”

“Yeah ... I’m not getting my hopes up.” I pick myself up off the bench, though part of me looks forward to making the kind of impression that lasts a lifetime. Because then, if he *does* end up turning me down, at least I’ll feel like I went out with a bang.

And I wouldn’t want to go out any other way.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Blaze

Was telling her mom I broke up with her the right thing to do? Heck if I know. But Addy's reaction to seeing me didn't feel like part of the act. And now, I'm pretty sure her mom hates me, too.

This is why you shouldn't tell lies.

I run my hands over my face as I step into the gym locker room, where Cam, Kade, and Dylan are waiting for me. I can't hide my confusion or upset any longer. Things between Addy and me have come to a head. I know it. I *feel* it.

And I'm terrified of it.

I slam the locker so hard it rattles the whole wall. "*Ugh!*"

"Dude," Cam drawls from behind me, stripping out of his shirt to put on a tank top. "What's going on with you?"

"Addy's mad at me."

"Why?"

"Probably because he kissed her in Hawaii and is trying to just go back to just being friends," Kade interjects. "That never goes—"

"Woah, hold up." Cam narrows his eyes at me. "You *kissed* Addy?"

"Yeah," I admit, grabbing the back of my neck. "And things have been weird between us ever since. I'm kind of freaking out."

"Was it just a spur of the moment thing or do you actually have feelings for her?" Cam asks.

"Both, I guess. It's ... complicated. I *do* have feelings for her," I confess. "But I don't want to act on them. I can't. We need to just go back to the way things were."

"Good luck with that." Kade claps my shoulder. "Because whether you meant to or not, you kind of led her on. And that's messed up."

My heart sinks at the thought. I know he's right, even if it stings to hear.

And I hate that I hurt her.

Yet another reason I'm not cut out for a romantic relationship.

"I didn't mean to lead her on," I slump down onto the bench. "Our kiss meant the world to me. I just don't want to lose her. She's my ... *everything*."

My mind fills with all the times in our past that I thought I was in love with her—and all the times I swallowed those feelings. For *her*. For *us*. Was it the wrong thing to do? Should I have tried to make some kind of romantic relationship work? But what would've happened between us had we broken up?

Kade takes a seat beside me on the bench. "If you truly feel that way about Addy, then why wouldn't you take the next step? I mean, if she's like family, and you like kissing her, and you can't stop thinking about her, then just marry her."

My eyes grow wide. “I can’t just be like, ‘Hey, let’s get married. Let’s skip dating altogether so you’re totally trapped.’ That’s not cool. Or realistic.”

“Yeah, he’s got a point.” Cam chuckles. “That’s a little much. You’d come across like a psycho.”

“A devoted psycho,” Dylan adds. “Some girls dig that.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” I mutter. “Besides, I don’t even know *how* to be a boyfriend, much less a husband. I mean, I’ve had one relationship in my entire life, and I failed at it. Unlike you guys, I didn’t grow up with any examples of a healthy marriage—how could I ever be what Addy deserves?”

“I really think you’re overthinking this whole thing, man.” Dylan shrugs.

“I get your hesitation, though,” Cam retorts. “You guys have been friends forever, and if you were to take that step, it could potentially end the friendship if something went awry. That’s tough.”

“Thank you for understanding,” I say, breathing out a sigh of relief. “It’s been killing me that we’re not normal.”

“Well, if you want to save your friendship, and stand a chance at moving forward at any level, you’re gonna have to be honest with her and tell her *why* you kissed her and *why* you don’t want to be more than friends,” Kade adds.

“You’re right. I’ll call her.”

Cam taps his fist on the locker twice. “Okay. Well, you’ll have to let us know how that goes. But first, let’s work out.”

“Got it,” I say with a nod.

I spend the next two hours lost in a heavy metal playlist, pushing myself to my limits. It keeps my mind focused on something other than Addy, though I admit it’s only a temporary fix.

No matter what I tell myself, I *know* in a perfect world, it’d be Addy for me.

And maybe it’ll always be Addy.

Maybe I’ll never find anyone else who gets me like her.

Maybe I’m a coward for being the way I am. I know that, but nobody else understands what it’s like to have literally *no one*. I never had parents to come home to. I never had people checking in on me religiously—not until Addy.

Addy is the only person who’s ever made me feel like I mattered, like I was more than just some foster kid with a chip on his shoulder. She knows my flaws and loves me anyway. But even more than that, Addy is smart and driven and fun. She has a way of making everyone feel like somebody. And honestly, she makes me want to be a better person just for the chance to make her proud.

Losing her would be devastating.

My feet pound the treadmill as I try to grapple with the *what-ifs*. I mean, Addy and I promised each other that we would always be friends. This counts, right? This has to count. I’ll just have to tell her, once again, that I’m sorry for kissing her—for getting lost in those romantic feelings I have for her.

Feelings I’ve always had.

I just lost control of them for a few moments, and I can explain that to her. I can. I can do it. She’ll understand ... *right*?

I smash the stop button and slow down before hopping off the treadmill and heading to the locker room. My teammates have long since left the gym, all of them having plans for the day. I usually have plans, too, but ever since Addy started avoiding me, my life has gotten weird.

And I’m fixing it tonight.

When I reach the locker room, I towel off before changing into a pair of joggers and a T-shirt to make the drive home. I down my protein shake on the way out, noticing that the mid-day sun has sunk low in the sky now. My Converse thud softly against the pavement as I make my way to my Jeep, and then climb inside.

I start the engine, letting the air blow in my face for a few minutes before I pull up Addy's name. I take a deep breath, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. But then I bypass it and just hit the call button. No more running around. I need to make things right.

The phone rings multiple times before hitting her voicemail. I let out a sigh and call her a second time—just on the off chance that she couldn't get to it.

"Hello?" she says on the second ring.

"Hey," I breathe out, suddenly nervous. "What're you up to?"

"Um, I'm shopping with my mom right now," she says, her tone light—and incredibly indifferent. "What's up with you?"

I swallow hard. "I was thinking we should meet up tonight, and not just to shoot the breeze or whatever. I think it's time for us to both be honest with each other. I don't know what's going on, exactly, but we need to talk."

"Ah." She chuckles wryly. "So, you mean you want to *clear the air* like last time? Do you remember what happened when we did that?"

I cringe. "Yeah, obviously I know what happened. That's exactly why we need to do this for real, Addy. I want to know where you're at, and you need to know where I'm at. What happened in front of your mom was horrible."

"You mean, embarrassing?"

"You lied about me having practice."

"And you kissed me when you didn't mean it," she sneers, her voice hitting a cord deep in my chest. She *is* hurt. I close my eyes. "Just meet me tonight, and we can work all this out, okay? Things between us have gotten so far sideways; we have to stop this before we derail and end up hating each other."

She's quiet for a few moments. "You're right. Just text me when and where, and I'll be there. We'll figure this out."

"Okay," I say, relief filling my voice. "I'll see you tonight."

"See you," Addy says, hanging up the phone before I can say our usual 'love you.' I drop the phone onto my console and throw my Jeep in reverse. My mind suddenly spins. I have to make sure that I handle this delicately.

I wish I had a dad to call for advice. Or any real family, for that matter.

The thought hits like a freight train right to my chest. I stop before pulling out of the parking lot, needing a moment to compose myself. I have no idea what I'm doing. I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling that familiar old anxiety boiling up in my chest.

Now's the time I'd always call Addy...

But I can't.

I can't call her for advice about *herself*.

Ugh.

Add that to the list of reasons why we can't risk our friendship...

A friendship I need to do everything in my power to fix tonight.

I force a long, deep breath and steady my now-racing heart before backing out of the parking spot and heading home. Along the way, I call Addy's favorite rooftop bar and offer a generous lump sum of cash to the owner so I can rent out the whole place for the night. I need a chance to talk to her without any eyes on us.

I need her to know how much she matters to me.



Four hours later, I'm sitting at a table on the rooftop that overlooks the city skyline. I check my watch, seeing that she's nearly twenty minutes late. This is so abnormal for her.

Is she not gonna show?

I swallow the hurt that follows the thought of that possibility. Would she actually do that? Ghost me?

I run my hand along the top of the table and then grab my water, downing the entire glass.

"Can I get you another one?" the bartender comes out of nowhere, a gaudy smile on his face. "Would you like to order a drink?"

I shake my head. "No, just water."

"Okay, I'll be right back." He saunters off, probably relieved not to be dealing with a whole boatload of people tonight.

I drum my fingers on the tabletop. And when I finally see the door to the bar open, I catch my breath as Addy steps through. Her silvery blonde hair is freshly styled in perfect waves. She's wearing a tight black jumpsuit, showing off every curve she's got. It dips low in the front, giving me an eyeful of parts of her I've only imagined in my head.

And I'm speechless as she heads toward me, her hips swaying slightly as she struts in her high heels. I suddenly feel severely underdressed in my dark jeans and Converse.

"You look nice," I choke out the words as I catch the scent of her perfume. My mind flashes back to the memory of her body beneath mine on the beach, my hand on her hip. I'd do anything to go back to that moment.

"You rented the whole bar, I see," she says. "How come?"

I try to maintain eye contact instead of dropping my gaze to her perfectly kissable shade of red lips. "I thought it would make it easier for us to talk if we were alone."

"Yeah, so why not just go to your house?" She bats thick lashes at me, and my heart skips ten beats all in a row—which I think might give me a heart attack.

"Um, I don't know," I say, finally looking away from her. I can tell she's got her guard up, and I hate the way it feels. It's something that up until this point, I've never been on the receiving end of from her. "I just wanted to give you a proper apology."

She narrows her eyes. "Okay ... I'm listening."

I rake my fingers through my hair. "Well, first off, I'm sorry for *breaking up* with you in front of your mom. I probably could've done that a little smoother."

"It doesn't matter. I told her the truth," she says, shrugging. "She was disappointed, but she's fine. Just another one of my antics, I guess."

"You told her the truth about it all being fake?"

"And then some."

Oh, wow.

"That must've been difficult..."

And her mom definitely hates me now.

"It is what it is." Addy folds her arms across her chest as the bartender sets down two waters. "But you were the one who wanted to talk, so let's talk."

"Why are you being so weird?" I stupidly blurt out.

"I don't know. Maybe because you *kissed* me? *Twice!* What am I supposed to do with that? Why the heck did you kiss me that night at the wedding?"

"Because I *wanted* to. I don't have some great, groundbreaking answer. I..."

She snorts. “That’s not very friendly.”

I can’t help but cringe. She’s right. And I can’t even come up with a decent explanation for it. But I have to try. She deserves that, at the least. “I know I broke the rules. I got caught up in the moment and—”

“Okay, but what about the second time, Blaze? Why did you kiss me *again*?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because you *dared* me to kiss you. And I just ... *wanted* to. But I never meant to cause all this.”

“Well, it changed things for me.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you hate me now.” My voice comes out dry.

This is not going well. Tonight was supposed to be a reset. It was supposed to save our friendship, and now I feel further away from her than ever.

I’m such an idiot. This is exactly why I can’t do relationships.

“I don’t hate you.” She grabs her water and takes a big sip. “I fell in love with you, Blaze. I had a crush on you all through college, and I thought it faded, but I think I was wrong.”

Wait, Addy’s in love with me?

“Oh...” is all I manage to get out.

My mind is spiraling.

This is not at all how tonight was supposed to go.

I can’t tell Addy I have romantic feelings for her. What would be the point? It’s not like we can pursue them. We’ve already done enough damage as it is. And admitting my feelings won’t get us any closer to going back to the way things were before fake dating.

It would just complicate things further.

Right?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Addy

“Oh?” My heart starts to break. “I just told you that I have romantic feelings for you— *big* ones, with the *I* word—and you’re just going to say oh?”

He shakes his head, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I’m just trying to process it, Addy. It’s a lot.”

“How so? When *you’re* the one who broke the rules and initiated the kiss?” I throw my hands up, my emotions swirling in my chest. “Friends don’t just kiss each other for *no* reason. That’s ridiculous.”

“I just...” His voice trails off, almost too quiet for me to make out. “You don’t get it, Addy. I could be head over heels in love with you, but it wouldn’t matter. Because I *don’t* want to lose our friendship.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. My breathing starts to pick up, rattling my chest as I process his words. “So, let me get this straight. You could be *in love* with me, but you won’t ever do anything about it? Because of our *friendship*?”

“You don’t understand,” Blaze says, his voice rushed. “You’re my family, Addy. You’re it. You’re all I have.”

My hands begin to shake as I try not to cry. “So I’m it, but I’m not worth pursuing romantically, because you don’t want to lose me?”

He nods, his visible relief grinding my nerves. “Yeah, you’re my everything, Addy, and I messed up when I broke the rules. I just ... I got caught up in the moment, and it felt good to pretend like you were my girlfriend. But I can’t risk losing our friendship. I just want us to go back to the way things were.”

I fall into silence, mulling it all over before blurting out, “Did you ever have real feelings for me?” I don’t know why I feel the need to know, but I do.

I *want* to know.

Blaze’s eyes fall to his hands. “The night of your graduation party was the first time I ever told you I loved you.”

My heart jumps to my throat. “Yeah, as a friend.”

He looks up, holding my gaze. “I didn’t mean it as a friend, Addy.”

“What?!” I gasp. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Blaze leans forward, reaching for his water. “I had planned to lay out all my feelings that night. But then, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that maybe it was a bad idea.”

“Are you serious? I had the biggest crush on you. Things could’ve been *so* different between us.”

“Maybe. But what if I didn’t meet your family’s expectations? What if we broke up? What if I lost you forever?” His eyes stay focused on his water. “What we have is too important to me to risk it all by trying to be something more. It was then, and it is now. You’re my best friend, Addy. And you always will be.”

“Blaze...” I say his name slowly, wishing more than anything that I didn’t have to say what’s coming next.

“Yeah?”

I meet his eyes, holding them. “I can’t be friends with you right now.”

He blinks. “We said we’d always be friends.”

“But I *can’t* be friends right now, Blaze,” I repeat, reaching out and grabbing his hand. “I have to get over you, and I don’t think I can do that like this. I can’t keep going on as if things are normal between us and still find some way to move on. My feelings are much too strong for you.” I bat away the tear that villainously slips down my cheek. But he’s left me no choice, and I have to be honest. And even *if* he has real feelings for me, they’re obviously not as strong as mine—because there’s no way that I can *just* be friends with him.

Definitely not right now.

Maybe not ever.

“I...” Blaze’s eyes are on his hand. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Clearly.” I sniffle, sliding off the stool as I keep batting my tears away. “I just ... I have to move on, Blaze.” I feel like I’m rambling now. “Every guy I’ve ever dated since I met you wasn’t good enough, and while we were in Hawaii, I finally realized why. It’s because they’re not *you*.”

“Addy...”

“No, it’s the truth,” I say, stopping him before he can come up with any more ridiculous speeches. “I know we’re like family, and maybe eventually we can be friends again, but I don’t think it’ll ever be like it was before.”

“What?! Why?”

“Because this whole thing has shown me that I *want* to find my person, and my person probably won’t like the dynamic of our friendship.”

Blaze’s head falls into his hands, and he doesn’t say another word.

“I’m sorry.” My voice is quiet. “I’ll get an Uber home.”

He lifts his head. “No, I’ll take you home.” He slides off the stool and then gestures for me to go ahead in front of him. I swallow the sob threatening to choke me and head for the door.

He’d rather lose our friendship than date me.

The realization slams into my chest like a sledgehammer, and I can’t look at him as we enter the elevator. I can’t believe it. I *really* can’t believe it.

I stare at my freshly manicured toes as the elevator makes the descent to ground level, my head swimming with confusion.

As soon as the elevator doors slide open, I step out, keeping my eyes straight ahead as we walk to Blaze’s Jeep. We remain in a painful silence as he hits the unlock button, and I climb into the passenger seat.

This is probably the last time I’m ever going to do this.

I close the door and watch Blaze solemnly walk around to the driver’s side. He climbs inside and doesn’t even cast a passing glance in my direction.

“I could’ve Ubered,” I say, my voice coming out with an edge.

“Yeah, and I can drive you home just as easily.”

“You’re clearly mad at me,” I shoot back at him.

He huffs, reaching forward and starting the car. “No.” His biceps flex beneath his black T-shirt, and I hate how attractive he’s suddenly become to me. It makes everything hurt that much worse. I always thought he was out of my league, but now I *know* he is.

Why am I wallowing so much? I roll my eyes and angle my body to the window, folding my arms across my chest. *I knew going in there that this was a possible outcome.* Despite that fact, I’m angry. I’m heartbroken. And I’m shocked.

Blaze makes the drive in complete silence, not even turning on the radio, which makes it all that much more awkward. I keep staring out the window, hoping the twenty minutes will pass a little faster.

Finally, he pulls up in front of my townhouse, and I take a deep breath, knowing this is it for me. Maybe I'm being too harsh, but at the same time, I've got to take care of my heart, right?

"Um." Blaze clears his throat as I unclick my seatbelt and push the door open. "I ... Addy..."

"Save it." I shoot him a glare. "I don't want to hear another spiel about how you just care *too much* about me to be anything more than friends. This isn't about *you* or our friendship. This is about *my* heart, and you broke it." My lower lip trembles as I hop down onto the curb and slam his car door before he can respond.

I can't even bring myself to tell him goodbye. Because, despite the fact that this might be the final time I see him as my best friend, *goodbye* feels way too much like forever.

The tears flow freely as I dash for my front door, hurriedly punching in my code and ripping the door open. I can still hear Blaze's Jeep idling behind me. I've never been angrier at him than I am right now.

Did my feelings *really* shock him *that* much?

I slam the front door closed and peek through the peephole. Blaze's Jeep is still sitting there. I know it takes him time to process things. I know that. But I poured my freaking heart out to him, and the best he could do was tell me that one time, seven years ago, he told me loved me in the same way I said I loved him tonight.

How could our timing be so off?

I stifle a sob as I force myself away from the door and head for the stairs. I start stripping out of my fancy, eye-catching outfit that now only makes me feel pathetic—like just another girl desperate for Blaze's attention.

I'm so stupid.

Why did I let myself fall for him? Why did I dare him to kiss me another time? And why did he ever kiss me in the first place? All his reasons have been vague at best.

Once in my room, I pull on an oversized T-shirt and a pair of shorts and peer out the window, one last time.

Through my tears, I catch a glimpse of Blaze finally pulling away in his Jeep. My heart aches as he disappears into the night, taking with him a piece of me that I fear may never be whole again.

It's really over.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Blaze

Go after her!

My brain is screaming at me as I swing my Jeep door open and slide out. My head is pounding with shock. I know sometimes I miss the obvious, but Addy just told me she's *in love* with me.

And I ... seized up.

Choked.

I'm *still* frozen, and I don't know how to respond. Which is why I've been sitting in front of her house for fifteen minutes, and am now pacing back and forth in her driveway.

I can't believe this is happening. This must be some type of twisted nightmare. Here I thought friendship would keep us together, and I lost her anyway.

My biggest fear just came true.

I feel like I'm gonna be sick.

I want to say something to her, but my anxiety has me in a chokehold. I've forgotten how to formulate a proper sentence. The few words I did get out, she didn't want to hear.

I can't do this.

I climb back into my Jeep and shut the door. My head falls into my hands as a deep, gut-wrenching pain overwhelms my system. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. And where do we even go from here? Do I trust that eventually we'll be friends again? Or ... do I try to be her boyfriend? What if I'm not a good boyfriend? I'm clearly already a bad friend.

Ugh.

I throw the car into drive and pull away, my mind reeling. I need help. I need my friends. I need a mom or dad I can call for advice.

I speed across town to the get-together I skipped out on in order to see Addy. I'm always more than happy to skip things for her—and if she called me, I still would. So why am I so confused right now?

I park along the street, seeing the plethora of cars outside of Dylan's house.

With a sigh, I rake my fingers through my hair and head for the front door. This whole party thing has no appeal without Addy. She's the one who keeps me social. She's the person I lean on all the time, so why am I so scared of being romantic with her?

"Hey, man," Kade greets, swinging open the front door. "You look... You look like we need to talk." He suddenly blocks the entrance and steps outside with me. "It didn't go well with Addy, did it?"

I shake my head, unable to conjure up the words to explain how I'm feeling—which has become an unfortunate recurring theme.

His hand lands on my shoulder. "Dude, just take a minute and breathe. We've got all night."

Nodding, I start to feel a rush of unwanted grief roll through my body.

She has no idea how bad it hurt to be told we can't be friends anymore.

If *this* is anything close to heartbreak, then I don't want it.

"It's all good." Kade waits with me, his hand on my shoulder as I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to breathe and find a way to explain what happened.

Finally, after a few minutes, I lift my head, unwanted moisture in my eyes. "She told me we can't be friends anymore—and I know it's all my fault because I kissed her, but I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

Kade frowns. "And did she say *why* you two can't be friends anymore?"

"Because she fell in love with me—like *love* love. And ... I really care about her. I do. But she doesn't understand that I can't do the romantic thing with her..."

"Because you're scared of losing her, right? But now, it sounds like you lost her anyway." Kade tilts his head, trying to understand me. "Dude, I don't get it. You don't ever cry, and here you are in tears over Addy. So clearly, you love her, too. Why not just be with her?"

"How could I *be* with her and not mess it up? I've already messed up our friendship. She was my only real family and I lost her, just like I've lost every semblance of family I've ever had in my life. I mess everything up."

Kade gives me an embarrassingly sympathetic look. "Listen, man," he starts, his tone gentle. "I get that you're scared. And you have good reason to be, you've been through a lot. But ... I think you need to give yourself a little more credit."

I shake my head. "I don't know, man."

"Well I do. You're a good person, Blaze. And a really great friend, not just to me, but to our whole team. And you've been there for Addy for over a decade. You two are practically an old married couple already. You just need to add in some kissing and whatever else, and *bam*."

"But now it's too late," I say quietly. "She said I broke her heart, and I *did*."

"You also broke your own heart."

Before I can respond, Dylan and Cam slip out into the front yard, laughing. Dylan catches sight of us and jogs over, holding out a beer to me.

"You look like you need this."

I take it from him. "Thanks."

"So, what's going on?" Cam asks.

"He and Addy broke up." Kade proceeds to fill my teammates in on everything that happened.

"I never meant for this to happen. I never meant to hurt her."

"Just go tell her you're sorry," Cam says quietly. "I mean, if I were in her shoes, I'd want an apology. Nila broke my heart at one point, and she made up for it, you know? I know she was going through some things, and she wasn't sure if she could commit. It was scary for her—and I think you're in the same place."

"Yeah, but you shouldn't go running to her if you don't know for sure that a relationship is really what you want," Kade adds. "An apology followed by 'Hey, let's try to be friends' isn't going to go over well. It's not going to change the fact that she already said she can't be 'just friends' anymore. It's too painful for her."

I run my hands over my face. "You guys confuse me." I groan. "I think I'm just gonna go home and sleep on it tonight. This is a disaster. Plus, her birthday is coming up, which makes this whole thing even worse."

"Just take it one day at a time," Dylan says. "Let us know if we can do anything for you."

“Okay,” I mutter. “Night.” My shoes are quiet on the pavement as I make my way back to my Jeep. Every ounce of me wants to drive back to Addy’s house, beat on her door, and tell her that I’m such a freaking idiot.

But then what?

Kiss her.

My heart jolts at the thought. She’d probably smack me across the face at this point. I’ve royally messed *everything* up.

I make it to my Jeep and tear open the driver’s side door.

Maybe if I give it some time, we can talk again.

And maybe during that time, I can figure out how to be a good boyfriend.

It sounds so stupid, but it’s the truth. Everyone says I just need to keep doing what I’ve been doing with Addy, but being someone’s life partner, holding someone’s heart in your hands, is a huge responsibility. I was never taught how to do that. Most of the foster families I stayed with were dysfunctional, and love was never a priority.

How do you learn how to be a good boyfriend when you’ve never had a role model to show you what that looks like? How are you supposed to know what it takes to have a healthy relationship? Especially when it comes to opening up and talking about the hard stuff...

If there’s anyone I could do it with, it’d be Addy.

That thought causes my heart to squeeze as I start the engine and make the short drive back to my house. I pull into the garage and shut the door behind me. My eyes land on a pair of her tennis shoes in my garage, covered in mud from when we went hiking. She didn’t want to get her car dirty, so naturally, she left them in my garage.

I chuckle at the memory, then quickly frown.

There won’t be any more memories with her if I don’t fix this.

I swallow hard and swing the door open, stepping inside my empty house. It’s always empty.

Slipping through my living room, I catch sight of the only picture I have on display—one of Addy and me at Disney World. She bought the frame, put it together, and set it there on my shelf. I stare at it for several long seconds.

We look like a couple.

My heart thumps in my chest as I think back to our picnic on the beach. The same picnic I was *trying* to make up for my mistake—but ended up kissing her again. What’s wrong with my head? Why did I do that?

I know why she dared me to kiss her.

She had feelings for me.

But why did *I* want to kiss her?

I shake my head as I make my way to my room and crash down on the bed, haunted by the memories of my body wrapped around hers while we slept in Hawaii. Her fingers perfectly interlaced with mine when we held hands. Her hips beneath my fingertips in the sand. The sweet taste of her lips on mine.

I mean, I’d *never* do those things with any other woman.

I’d never be interested in it.

I just want to do those things with Addy.

Because I’m in love with her, too.

My heart races at the thought.

I’ve gotten so good at swallowing my romantic feelings that I somehow convinced myself nothing I felt was anything more than just close friends.

But it’s so much deeper than that.

I want to be the one who she comes home to after a long day, and wakes up next to in the morning. The one who holds her hand through all of life's ups and downs. The one who wipes away her tears and makes her laugh when she feels like crying. The one who makes her feel safe and cherished.

I roll over on my back and stare at the ceiling fan swirling overhead.

"I'm in love with you, too, Addy," I say to the fan, wishing I'd been brave enough to say that to her face tonight.

I close my eyes, trying to figure out where to go from here. In my head, it's easy. I'd just get up in the morning, drive over to her place with a massive bouquet of flowers, and tell her how sorry I am—and that I love her, too. I'd kiss her until neither of us could breathe.

I'd probably just marry her the next day, too. Skip the dating stuff.

I laugh out loud at how absolutely ridiculous I sound. Knowing Addy, she wouldn't give me more than five seconds before she flipped me off and sent me on my way. I know her well enough to know that she'll give me the cold shoulder.

But still, I could just tell her right now, get it off my chest...

I reach for my phone and pull up her number, hitting the call button. I put it to my ear, trying to breathe as I prepare myself. *I'm sorry. I love you, too.* That's it. That's all I have to say, and then we'll figure it out from there. I don't have to have all the answers right now.

The call goes straight to voicemail.

I furrow my brow and try again.

Nope. Straight to voicemail. Again.

I type out a text to her.

Me: *I know I messed up and I am so sorry. Can we talk?*

I hit send and watch intently, waiting to see if it's been read. And that's when I notice my text message doesn't show the usual "delivered" message underneath. Which can only mean one thing.

Addy blocked me.

My heart rattles my chest as yet another fear is realized. Addy is done with me. It really *is* too late.

How am I ever going to fix this?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Addy

Sometimes, you have to just try and move on.

And that's what I'm doing. One small step at a time.

I glance down at my phone on my bathroom counter, knowing there won't be anything from Blaze.

I blocked him.

Was it a harsh move? *Yes.*

But my heart *hurts*, and I can barely get through the day without crying.

It feels like a decade-long marriage has come to an end—not that I know what that feels like, but this is more than just the end of a little fling. This hurts so deeply that I think I might die.

It's been almost a week since everything went down between us at that rooftop bar, and he's yet to show face. Not that I expect him to. He probably knows he's blocked. But I don't know for sure.

"Addy, are you in there?" Mom calls out.

"Coming," I reply, straightening my shoulders and my freshly styled hair.

I've taken my mom up on her styling advice, and now I *look* the part of the wealthy daughter. My black tank top is free of dog hair and stains, my jeans are designer, and my Gucci sneakers have replaced my Vans. This feels like a costume, but clearly I've been doing things wrong prior to this, so I have to try something new—reinvent myself.

"Wow," Mom says as I step out of the bathroom. She's been coming over a lot more, and I'm pretty sure she's worried about me.

"You look nice. Ready for lunch?"

I nod, plastering on a fake smile. "Absolutely."

"Aurora will be there," she says as we head toward my front door. "She's so excited to see you. I think their extra-long honeymoon has made her heart grow fonder of us." Mom elbows me, and I force a laugh.

But is the distance making Blaze's heart grow fonder?

I swallow hard and open the door for Mom. We step outside into the warm air, and I inhale a lungful. My eyes drift back to the spot Blaze's Jeep was parked. It's empty now, and I brush it off as we walk toward the breakfast café Mom likes to frequent—the one right next door to Blaze's gym.

My heart has a nervous stutter as we meander down the sidewalk. "Do you think Aurora will be on time?" It's such a stupid question, but I'm desperate to fill the silence and stop my head from running right back to Blaze.

"Of course, she will be." Mom laughs. "But speaking of Aurora, she and I would like to throw you a party for your thirtieth birthday. What do you think about having an old-school Hollywood theme? You know, Aurora's always trying to find a reason to glam herself up."

“Yeah, sounds great.” I clench my hands at my side, hating the thought of my upcoming birthday. Mom *never* throws me parties. It’s always been Blaze and me doing something—just the two of us. But Mom knows what happened.

And I know she’s just trying to make things easier on me. I get it.

And I appreciate it. I do.

“Okay, cool. I’ll send out the invitations today. Is there anyone specific you want me to invite?” She keeps her tone so upbeat that I nearly roll my eyes.

“No,” I say flatly. “I can’t think of anyone.” My voice sounds distant as my eyes zero in on the familiar Jeep parked right outside the gym. My heart flip-flops in my chest, and I find a lump in my throat as the door swings open.

Why does he have to be getting here at this exact time?

I know the answer. It’s ten-thirty. He’s meeting his friends here to work out just like he always does.

I watch Blaze step out, his Converse hitting the asphalt.

“Addy?” Mom’s voice breaks my thoughts, and I realize I’ve stopped a few feet behind her.

I can’t respond, not as Blaze’s gaze flicks in my direction. His deep, amber eyes meet mine. I can’t breathe. His lip twitches, surrounded by a light grazing of stubble. He looks tired. Maybe even upset?

He probably hates me now.

He may have been the one who broke my heart, but I’m the one who called off our friendship.

Guilt pummels me at the thought, and I subconsciously wrap my arms around my middle.

“Maybe you should go talk to him?” Mom offers, standing beside me again, her voice barely above a whisper.

My lips part, and Blaze gives me a ghost of a smile. He’s not going to approach me, and the realization that it’s all in my hands makes me feel anxious. I chose that when I called it off and blocked him.

I take a step forward, but it’s too late. Blaze ducks his head and heads into the gym. He’s literally *running* from me.

I swallow the knot in my throat as Aurora’s face fills my vision.

“Hey, you,” my sister chirps, not even knowing what kind of cataclysmic moment I just had. She wraps me up in a hug. “Mom filled me in on everything that happened. You deserve so much better.”

“Shh,” Mom says, her eyes still on the gym. “He was just right here.”

“Who? Blaze? Seriously?” Aurora’s eyes widen. “Is he *stalking* you? Girl, I have some contacts. I can take care of—”

“No,” I cut her off. “And also, *weird*. I don’t know how you have those kinds of contacts. Everything is fine. Sometimes this city is just too small.”

“Yeah,” Mom says quietly. “Let’s go inside.”

I nod as she loops her arm around mine and leads me toward the restaurant entrance. As I enter, I take one more glance toward the Jeep in the parking lot.

I *miss* it.

I miss *him*. So much.

Part of me wants to go running back to him and tell him we can just be friends if that’s what it takes to have him in my life again, but...

But that’s not the answer for me.

I take a seat at the table, my eyes drifting to the window, while Aurora and Mom chat happily about married life. I tune out and reach into my pocket for my phone. I scroll to my blocked contacts and unblock Blaze.

I pull up our old message thread and start to type, “I miss you.”

But I can’t bring myself to hit the send button.

He should know I miss him, right? I mean, I told him I *love* him.

I close out of the message thread and put my phone back in my purse.

“You really love him?” My sister nudges me.

I look over at her, feeling pathetic and teary all over again. “Yeah, I do—er, I did.”

“Well, I think he loves you, too,” Aurora says in a tone that makes me want to dump my ice water down her shirt.

“*If* he did, don’t you think he would’ve said that by now? I told him how I felt, and it all came back to bite me.”

“Men aren’t that easy,” Aurora tells me. “Let’s not forget that Blaze is an orphan. He has no idea how to do things like this.

He doesn’t know how to tell you he loves you, and he’s probably scared.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, letting the conversation die at that.

Thankfully, Mom doesn’t chime in. We’ve talked it all to death, and she was pretty adamant that I shouldn’t block him—but she also knows how hard this is for me.

So, we keep the conversation focused on Aurora and Robert, and then my thirtieth birthday party, which will mostly consist of everyone else’s friends. Penny won’t be able to make it, and without Blaze, well, I don’t really have any other close friends. Apart from the team, of course—his team.

Ugh.

I don’t eat much, and finally, the scent of syrup is overwhelming me for whatever reason. I push back from the table, forcing a jovial tone. “I’m going to go wait outside for you guys to finish. I have a headache.”

“Okay,” Aurora chimes, though my mom only gives a solemn nod.

I slip from the table, a fresh stain on this tank top that costs more than my couch. I jog down the steps and head for the bench...

Right as Blaze steps outside of the gym, his phone to his ear.

As soon as our eyes lock, he immediately pulls it away and hangs up on whoever he was calling. He forces a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Addy.” He breathes out the greeting, his eyes dropping to my shoes.

“They’re new,” I say stupidly. “My mom bought them for me. Actually, she bought everything I have on. It’s all new.”

He nods. “Yeah, looks like it.” His eyes drop to his beat-up Converse, black gym shorts, and black cutoff. “Still the same over here.” The comment nearly rips my heart right in two.

“Yeah,” I choke out, my voice laced with defensiveness. “Well, I can’t stay the same, Blaze. It wasn’t working for me before.”

His brow furrows, and then he takes a step forward. “There was nothing wrong with you, Addy.”

“Yeah, well,” I scoff, raking my fingers through my hair, “I’d beg to differ. Besides, I read this article that says reinventing yourself helps you ... um, move on.” I feel so awkward admitting it to the guy who’s the *reason* I’m trying to move on in the first place... Meanwhile, he’s not having to do anything.

Ugh. I’m so pathetic.

“Right.” Blaze shoves his hands in his pockets. “Is that the same article that mentioned blocking people, too? Because if so, maybe I should read it so we’re on the same page.”

My heart stumbles over itself, heat flooding my cheeks. “I had to. Otherwise, I probably would’ve gotten drunk and called you or something.”

That crooked grin tugs at his lips. “And would that be such a bad thing?”

“Yeah,” I snap. “I’d embarrass myself. That’s all I’ve done, Blaze. That’s all I ever do. I embarrass myself, and that’s why we can’t be friends. I’d just keep embarrassing myself.” I laugh dryly, because I know if I don’t, I’ll probably burst into tears.

Blaze takes a step forward. “Addy, nothing you did was *ever* embarrassing to me. If anything, I was the one who embarrassed myself.”

“Please stop.” I hold up my hand. “I don’t want to rehash our kiss. I *really* don’t. It hurts too much.”

“I don’t regret kissing you.” Blaze’s eyes search mine. “I don’t at all.”

“Okay, great.” I shake my head. “I’ll add that to my journal of things I *don’t* understand about you.” My voice increases in volume just as I hear my mom and Aurora’s chatter behind me. “I have to go,” I tell him, ripping my gaze away.

He doesn’t say anything as I storm toward my family, and it only serves to reiterate how freaking *sick* I am of always being the one who has the last word. I’m *so* over it. I place myself right in between my mom and Aurora.

“Well, that seemed heated.” Aurora eyes me. “So much passion for two people who apparently are *moving on*.”

“There’s no passion on his side,” I seethe, nearly dragging my mom and sister away from Blaze. “He just stares at me.”

“Are you serious?” Aurora gives me a funny look. “It’s written all over his face, Addy. Maybe you should try to give him more than five seconds to come up with something to say.”

I don’t say anything in response, telling myself it doesn’t matter.

I can’t listen to any more of his speeches about just wanting to be *friends*.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blaze

I scroll through all the undelivered texts I've sent to Addy, wishing I could show her that *I'm* the embarrassing one. She's moving on in her bitterness, and I've been sending awkward apologies and heartfelt messages to her phone.

I read the most recent one from yesterday.

Me: *I miss you.*

And the one before it...

Me: *I don't regret kissing you because I'm in love with you.*

The worst part is, I would've told her *all* of these things when I saw her today if she'd have let me get a word in edgewise, but she was already talking, worried about embarrassing herself. The only thing embarrassing is being unable to just spit out how much I love my best friend, and that I was terrified of what that meant.

But it's clearly too late.

She blocked me out of her life.

I set my phone down on my kitchen counter as I head for the sink to wash my hands. I'm *so* ready for training camp to begin next month. I just want to give my mind something else to focus on. I know that won't fix this, but it's got to help.

My phone buzzes against the counter, and I go to it.

"An e-invite," I say to myself as I read the link from an unknown number. I pick it up and click on it, seeing it's for Addy's thirtieth birthday party. "Why the heck would I be invited to this?"

I scroll through the dress code, theme, and information.

It's *so* not Addy.

But then again, neither are the Gucci sneakers and designer clothes she was wearing today. I roll my lips together, about to hit the decline invitation, when my screen lights up with a phone call. My heart sinks at Addy's mom's name on the screen.

Why is she calling me?

I debate on ignoring it, but then my mind starts to race. She's had my number since Addy and I were in college—in case of an emergency—and she's never called me. Until now.

I quickly swipe the phone to answer and put it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hey," her mom says. "I wanted to call and make sure you were coming to Addy's party. I know it's weird of me to call, but ... I think it's important that you be there."

"She doesn't want me there," I reason, my voice flat. "I think that was pretty evident with her blocking me and—"

“Stop it right there. My daughter is heartbroken, and she’s doing what she thinks she needs to in order to move on. Most of the time, I would agree with her blocking whoever she wanted because she’s my priority, but I can’t *stand* this.”

“I’m not sure I’m following...” I breathe out, rubbing my forehead. “If I show up, she’s going to be angry.”

“You have to man up, Blaze,” she snaps in a very motherly tone. “I’ve been watching this play out, and I realized that you maybe don’t have a parent to fall back on for advice.”

“Well, no, but ... I’m not going to force Addy to talk to me.”

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I answer, the word coming much easier than before. “I just didn’t know how to handle it, I guess. I’ve tried reaching out to her, but I couldn’t get ahold of her. And then when I saw her today, I couldn’t really get a word in...”

“So, come to her birthday party,” Addy’s mom reasons. “You tell my daughter to listen, and you *tell* her what you’re feeling. If you don’t, you *will* lose her. I don’t want you to lose her any more than I don’t want her to lose you.”

I swallow the knot in my throat. “Does this mean you don’t hate me?”

“Hate you? No, Blaze. I love you. You’re like the son I never had. But this isn’t about me.”

I take a deep breath, feeling a wave of emotions crash over me. “And what if she tells me no? What if she’s lost interest in me because of the time that’s passed? What if she hates me now?”

“Well.” She sighs. “Would that be any worse than what it is now?”

“I guess not...”

“Tell me, if you could only choose *one* person to spend the rest of your life with, who would it be, Blaze? When you’re old, and no longer able to get around easily, and you spend your days sitting in a rocking chair, who do you want to be by your side?”

“Addy,” I say without hesitation. “It’s always been Addy.”

“Then I think you know what you have to do.”

“It looks like I have to rent a tux.”

She bursts into laughter. “How about you actually *buy* one? Do you need some help? I can go with you. I know a wonderful tailor on the west side of town. He’s my go-to for every formal event. I’ll schedule you an appointment and meet you there. Okay?”

“Um, okay,” I say carefully. “But a tux isn’t really my style.”

“Yeah, I know, and this formal dress stuff isn’t Addy’s, either, but she seems determined to be everything she’s not, and now I regret ever hounding her to be anything other than herself. *However*, dress codes are dress codes, and I think you should match her level.”

“I can *match her level*.” I laugh. “Though I’m not sure if I can match her attitude. She’s got me on that one. I don’t think I could have that level of sass even if I took a class for it.”

“You’ve got me there. I’ll text you the appointment information. Aurora and I will be there to help you with the tux, but listen, it’s up to *you* to fix this with Addy. You deserve the world, and so does my daughter, but this one is up to you.”

“Got it.”

She hangs up.

I rake my hands over my face. I can’t believe Addy’s *mother* is meddling in this. I mean, it’s definitely like her to meddle, but I never expected her to be supportive of *me*.

But for some reason, that gives me a boost of confidence.

I’m going to sweep Addy right off her feet.



“How about this one?” The jeweler picks up a silver bracelet inlaid with diamonds. It’s sleek and expensive. But it’s *nothing* that Addy would wear.

Well, the Addy *I* know.

“I don’t think so,” I finally grunt, shaking my head. “She needs something more sentimental than that—and less shiny.”

“You really seem to know your lady.” The woman, a middle-aged redhead, tips her head back and laughs. “Normally, men just buy the first thing I hold out.”

“Yeah, well—” I blow out a nervous breath, already dressed in a tuxedo that’s far, *far* from my normal. “This is a massive apology gift. And a birthday gift.”

“Oh my,” the woman hums, her smile fading. “You’re one of those...”

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” I mumble, fighting the urge to rake my fingers through my freshly styled hair. “But if falling in love with your best friend and then denying it for way too long counts, then yeah, I am one of *those*.”

Her smile returns. “Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. This is a much better predicament. You mentioned it’s her birthday,” she continues. “What about we find something with her birthstone?”

I shrug. “Okay, I don’t know about stones... She’s not really—” My words fail as she pulls out a bracelet with alternating green and turquoise-colored stones. “We made this for a client who wanted August and December alternating birthstones.”

“December is my birthday,” I say blankly, as if the stars are aligning right here and now. *What are the odds?* “I’ll take that one.”

The woman holds it out to me. “It’s got a hefty price tag...”

“That’s fine.” I take it from her, imagining it against the pale skin of Addy’s wrist. The thought makes me smile—until I imagine her throwing it on the ground and stomping it to pieces.

Yeah, really, this night could go either way.

Ugh.

I keep a pleasant look plastered on my face and hand it back to the woman. “Yeah, I’ll take it.”

Honestly, this was a last-minute gift, but it wasn’t like I hadn’t already bought Addy a birthday present. There’s a brand new Kindle at my house, all wrapped and ready, but it didn’t feel like the right kind of present for tonight.

I want to give her something with a little wow factor.

“Well, the lady who gets this is a lucky one.” The jeweler beams as she rings it up, then places it in a fancy box. I mean, seriously, the box is nearly as delicate-looking as the bracelet.

Addy might hate it.

Once again, I battle the urge to rake my fingers through my hair. I feel *so* out of place right now, wearing a tuxedo that costs more than my mortgage payment and a pair of shoes that are so polished they might start a fire.

And now I’m buying a bracelet.

All because I need to tell Addy I love her.

After she blocked me.

I fish out my phone, thinking about that very fact, and then pull up our message thread as I hand over my debit card. I type out one last message to her.

Me: *Happy Birthday, Addy. Miss you.*

The jeweler hands me the bag and thanks me. I give her a nod and then head for the exit of the store, pausing at the door. A slight frown tugs at my lips. Addy's birthday party starts in forty-five minutes. I'm going to see her, so why am I even considering sending a text that won't go through?

Because it feels like the right thing to do.

I grit my teeth and then press send, already knowing the message will never be seen. I tap my foot, watching the word "delivered" pop up on my screen...

"What in the world..." I mumble, shock flooding my system. I catch my breath.

She unblocked me.

Three dots pop up on the screen, and I wait for her reply, mentally begging her to invite me to her party. I don't want to crash her thirtieth birthday party if she doesn't want me there. I know what her mom said. I know what her sister said. They spent an hour blabbing about me surprising Addy while I got this suit tailored. I *want* nothing more than to sweep her off her feet. And that's all fine and great...

But I want *Addy* to invite me.

Finally, a message comes through.

Addy: *Thanks. Spending it old Hollywood style for my birthday party.*

I stare at the message, trying to read through the lines. I immediately heart the text, giving myself a chance to think about what to say as I roll my lips together. I'm still standing inside the jewelry store, and these people probably think I'm going to return the bracelet or something.

Me: *I hope you have a great time.*

I hit send, then stare at how mundane the response is. Normally, I would've asked her if she needed saving—or *something*.

But I already told her I missed her, and she didn't say it back.

She didn't invite me there.

Maybe this is a bad idea.

She likes the text, and I shove my phone into my pocket, stepping out into the evening air. My nerves have my stomach churning, and my anxiety starts picturing all of the bad outcomes that could come from this. For all I know, Addy probably told her mom she didn't want me there...

Maybe I should just go home.

I slide into my driver's seat, setting the gift on the console. I start the engine and sit here, already knowing I'm going to be a few minutes late. My knee bounces nervously as I debate calling my friends for advice. I was so certain after talking to Addy's mom that this was the right thing to do, but...

But now, it seems *really* terrifying.

Chapter Thirty

Addy

I stare at Blaze's text, my heart thumping in my chest. I could text him back, but what would I say? I *know* he knows I'm not into this glamorous stuff. And after a week of trying to look luxurious with the help of my mother, I gave that up so fast.

I don't know why I thought dressing up and pretending to be something I'm not would help me move on from Blaze. It only made me feel even more out of place in my own skin. And it's really not much better than pretending to have a relationship to avoid my family's judgment.

I'm done trying to win the approval of others and losing myself in the process.

Which is why I'm back to wearing my dog-hair covered, off-brand attire.

Well, not tonight. Tonight, I'm in a black floor-length gown that accentuates my curves, and my hair is in a sideswept wave. I look the part, but I feel empty inside... Especially when I think about starting a whole new decade of my life without Blaze in it.

"Hey, gorgeous!" Mom calls to me, sauntering over with a fresh glass of chardonnay for me. "Why the glum face? This night is all about you."

I stare at her, unable to conjure up why this woman is so excited—or why she keeps looking toward the entrance. As far as I know, all the guests have arrived. Although I don't know many of them, I appreciate her and my sister's effort in planning this thing. They're just trying to help me feel better, and that's made evident even more so as the lights dim around us and a slideshow starts on the wall of the ornate ballroom. I choke up as pictures of *me* flip across the screen.

"I had to make this one special." Mom plants a kiss on my cheek and then joins my dad, who's chuckling at a picture of Aurora and me with ice cream all over our toddler faces.

I try to find it in me to laugh, standing here as the pictures keep coming, following my life from diapers all the way to college. And *then* there's a picture of Blaze and me, my freshman year. I have on his jersey, and his arm is wrapped around my shoulders.

I need air.

I need air now.

Sniffing, I slip through the crowd of people I don't know, making my way toward the back exit of the building. Pushing through the door, I step out into the warm evening, the back lot aglow by a strand of lights. I glance around at the empty area and blow out a ragged sigh.

"I hate this night," I mutter to myself, shaking my head and considering what might happen if I just take off and go home.

"Yeah, turning thirty can be hard," a deep voice says from behind me, followed by the sound of a door closing.

I spin around, my eyes wide at Blaze ... *in a tuxedo*. "Why..."

"Am I here?" he finishes for me.

“No.” I shake my head, trying to conceal a grin. “Why are you in a tux?” I take in his brawny figure, dressed to perfection in an *expensive*, tailored tuxedo. His hair is perfectly styled, swept to the side, and as I make it to his shoes, I gasp. “You’re wearing your Converse?”

“Yeah...” His voice trails off. “That’s why I’m late. I just couldn’t do the fancy shoes. They were too much.”

I nod, lost in a stupor. I want to be mad at him. I want to yell that I don’t want him here, but I can’t bring myself to do that. Instead, I’m so relieved to see his face that I rush toward him, wrapping my arms around him in a hug.

“I’m so sorry that I blocked you, and I’m sorry that I—”

“Stop.” Blaze lets out a breath. “I need to talk first.”

I loosen my grip, my heart sinking. “If this is about the kisses, we don’t—”

“Addy.” He says my name curtly as he takes a step away from me. “I *need* to get something off my chest before we start going into all this, okay?”

I nod, wrapping my arms back around myself. “Okay...”

“Okay.” He breathes out the word, and then silence follows.

Tapping my foot, I blow out a sharp breath. “So...”

“This is just really nerve-wracking.” Blaze runs a hand over his face. “But I’m here tonight, because first of all, I haven’t missed your birthday in over a decade.”

I nod. “Uh-huh...”

“And your mom and sister invited me.”

“Okay, I was not expecting that.” I raise my brows, unable to hide my surprise. I cock my hip out, knowing there’s more.

“Also...” Blaze holds my gaze, his eyes locked in on mine. “I love you, Addy—and I don’t mean I love you like a friend. I mean, I love you the whole nine yards, and I have loved you since college. Since the day we met. I thought you were the prettiest klutz I’d ever seen. That’s why I gave you my jersey. I wanted to make you my girlfriend, but I didn’t know how.”

“Blaze...” My voice trails off as tears fill my eyes.

“No, no.” He shakes his head and takes a step toward me. “Let me finish. Our time apart has given me a *lot* of time to think. And I finally realized why I’ve been so afraid to lose you.”

“Okay...” I say softly, my heart racing as I wait for his next words.

Blaze takes a deep breath and continues, his eyes never leaving mine. “Growing up in foster care, there were times I wondered if that place and those people would become my family. But every time I got my hopes up, it was time to pack up my bags and move on. And I finally realized that’s why I’ve been so terrified to lose you. Because you’ve become my family, Addy. You’re the family I choose.”

“Oh, Blaze.” Tears stream down my face now, and everything suddenly makes sense. “I’m so sorry you’ve been carrying that weight all this time. I had no idea.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t want to burden you with my past, but it’s a part of me—a part that made me who I am today. And the night of your graduation party, when I told you I loved you and you took it the wrong way, it made me think that it was more secure for us to be friends. So, I shoved those romantic feelings so far down in my chest that I thought they’d disappeared. But they didn’t, and the moment I got to *pretend* to be your boyfriend, I subconsciously realized *that* was what I’ve always wanted to be.”

“My boyfriend?” I ask, sniffing.

“Yeah, but more than that.” Blaze grabs my hand. “I want to spend forever with you, and to be honest, I don’t want to just date you. I want to sweep you up and marry you, because for some reason, in my head, it feels like if we just date, I run the risk of

losing you—which is the whole reason I was scared. But as it turns out, my fear is the reason I almost lost you, anyway. And I’m so sorry for that. I’m sorry that I was scared, and I’m sorry that I didn’t understand myself until now ... But I’m—”

“Blaze,” I cut him off. “I love you, too.”

He sighs, his whole body finally relaxing. “Okay, so happy birthday, then? Are we good now? Can we go back to normal?”

I raise my brows as he threads an arm around my waist. “I don’t think we can go back to our old normal, Blaze.”

He chuckles, brushing his nose against mine. “I meant the *new* normal, Adeline.” His lips brush mine, and I catch my breath as he hums against me. “The moment I kissed you, all I could think about was doing it again.”

“Really?” I giggle as he plants light kisses along my jaw.

“Mhmm,” he murmurs, holding me tighter against me. “You’re like a drug, Addy, and I think I’m addicted.”

“That sounds serious,” I breathe out as his lips trail downward to my neck, and his hands slide to my lower back. “You might need some help.”

“No, thanks.” He chuckles and then lets out a sigh against my skin. “Oh, yeah, wait.” He pulls away, leaving me longing for him to come back. “I got you something. Well, I technically got you *two* things, but one was a *friend* gift, and this one is a gift for my *girlfriend*. Apparently, when I looked it up online, there’s a difference.”

I burst into laughter. “Why did you look it up online? You should *never* Google relationship advice.”

“Yeah, well, the only other option was your mom, and based on her expensive taste”—he motions to his tux—“I think I might end up buying you a fifty-acre winery in upstate New York.”

“She helped you with that?”

“Yeah, even set the appointment and showed up.”

I can’t hide my surprise. “She had this up her sleeve the whole time.”

Blaze pulls out a box from the inside of his jacket pocket. “Happy Birthday, *baby*.” He shoots me a wink that makes me feel like I might pass out. A deep blush tints my cheeks.

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” I say nervously, taking the box from him. “But please tell me you’re not proposing, because the speech was really cute and all, but we probably shouldn’t move *that* fast...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Blaze motions toward the box. “No engagement ring. I promise.”

I open the box, shocked to see a bracelet with our birthstones alternating in a delicate pattern, complemented with rose gold. “Wow.” I stare at it for a few seconds, running my finger over the pattern. “This is gorgeous.”

“I thought you’d like it. It seemed more *us* than the other pieces I looked at,” Blaze says quietly. “It’s not custom or anything, but—”

“I love it.” I press my mouth against his. He leans into me and deepens the kiss, his hands cradling my face gently—as if I’m something precious.

I lose myself in the warmth of his touch, feeling a rush of emotions swirling inside me—love, desire, security. We’ve both been waiting for this moment for far too long, and now that it’s finally here, it feels surreal.

I run my fingers through his hair, memorizing every detail of this instant, wanting to capture it forever.

As I pull away, he grins. “We still have a whole party to finish before we can leave...”

I swat his shoulder. “You’re supposed to be a gentleman.”

“I am.” He bursts into laughter, though his face grows hot.

“Good, then help me put this on.” I hold out the bracelet. “My mom is going to *die* when she sees this.”

He eyes me carefully as he fashions it around my wrist. “Why’s that? It was *not* cheap...”

“Oh, I know. This is made by one of her favorite designers. She’s going to be so jealous.” I giggle. “I’ll have to only wear it on special occasions.”

“You mean it won’t go with those new Gucci tennis shoes?”

“Ha ha.” I snort, flipping my hair over my shoulder. “I think that was just a desperate phase. I was pretending to be something that I’m not, and I’m done with that. No more pretending. No more striving for other people’s approval. I just wanna be ... me.”

Blaze nods, dropping his arm to grab my hand. “Well, for the record, I’ll take *you* in any form, any day, over anyone else.”

I squeeze his hand. “Right back at you. I’d have taken you well before the NHL swept you up and turned you into a pro athlete that all the girls swoon over.”

He leads me back toward the door. “The only girl I want *swooning* over me is the one who has been wearing my jersey for a decade.”

The reality of this moment hits me as Blaze opens the door for me, and we step back into my birthday party.

We’re together. *For real.*

And as if everyone was waiting just for us, the whole crowd at the party erupts into applause, shocking me sideways into Blaze.

“Who *are* all these people?” Blaze leans into me, his voice barely above a whisper.

I shrug. “No clue.”

“Okay, cool.” Blaze grunts, letting me lead the way to my parents, sister, and grandmas, all standing in a little circle and watching us.

“Family,” I say. “*This* is my boyfriend, Blaze.”

Granny Esme makes a face. “Honey, do you think I have dementia? I met him at Aurora’s wedding, for heaven’s sake.”

Blaze and I exchange a look. We burst into laughter.

Some things are better off *not* being explained.

I raise my glass and squeeze Blaze’s hand. “Here’s to starting my third decade in a new chapter with the love of my life.”

Epilogue

Blaze

Eight months later...

“And that’s it, folks, the Glaciers are headed to the playoffs to compete for back-to-back Cups!” the announcer booms across the rink as I skate out, joining the massive team huddle. It’s been one heck of a season thus far.

“Can’t believe that you blocked that shot.” Cam smacks me on the head, bursting into prideful laughter. “I guess you still have some time to go before retirement.”

I smack him back, shaking my head as I spit my mouth guard free. “Yeah, no thanks. I’m not retiring anytime soon. I have at least another decade.”

“Yeah? What does Addy think about that?” Kade asks as we skate toward the edge of the rink, where friends and family are making their way toward the ice.

“I think she’ll be happy no matter what,” I tell him, spotting my girlfriend in the crowd. She’s got on my jersey, as per usual—and so does the rest of her family, which has unofficially adopted me as one of their own. Even her *dad* is wearing a jersey with my name on the back.

It’s excessive.

But I’m good with it.

“Hey, baby,” I call out as she picks up her pace, a massive smile on her face.

“Hey, Twenty-Six.” She jumps into my arms, not even caring that she might knock both of us over in the process. She plants a kiss on my cheek and squeezes me tightly.

“I’ll never get tired of seeing my last name on your back,” I whisper.

“I’ll never get tired of wearing it.” Addy laughs and drops down. “So, Mom said you had something for us to do tonight? We’re not going to the party like usual?” She looks up at me with fresh curiosity.

I drape my arm around her. “Yeah, no party tonight.”

She narrows her eyes. “What’re we doing?”

I plant a kiss on her nose. “Maybe you should just wait and see. You don’t always have to know what I have planned.”

She hums, then shrugs. “Okay, then.”

“Okay.” I wink. “See you soon.”

“Love you,” she calls after me as I skate away, my heart pounding in my chest with nerves already.

“Love you, too,” I reply, trying to swallow the way I feel light in the head. Tonight is *huge*, and while I’m almost one hundred percent sure Addy will say yes, there’s always the possibility she might change her mind.

Never mind the fact she talks about having kids all the time now.

She started using a generative app that predicts what kids will look like, and I swear, she saves them and sends them to Penny and her sister more than she wants to admit.

Someday, our kids are going to be so confused when they see those.

I shake my head as I make my way off the ice and into the locker room to strip down.

“Tonight’s the night, yeah?” Dylan asks me, raising a brow. “You think she’ll say yes?”

“Y’all should be married already,” Cam grumbles, rolling his eyes. “You could’ve been married a decade ago.”

I shrug. “If only.”

“I’m excited for you,” Kade chimes in, tossing his stuff into his bag. “Won’t be long before we’ll have a bunch of kids running around the rink. I think that’ll be awesome.”

“Why does everyone always assume that I’m going to marry Addy, and then *bam*, there’ll be kids?” I chuckle.

“Have you *seen* those little pictures Addy sends?” Kade bursts into a fit of obnoxious laughter. “I swear they never end. She’s so determined to figure out what your kids will look like since you have polar-opposite features.”

“She’s just... ambitious.” My face heats up. I can’t wait to build a family with Addy, and the grace she’s extended to me over figuring out how to be in a relationship has been incredible. However, I learned pretty quickly that I really was already boyfriend material. Funny how that works.

I spend the next twenty minutes taking a quick shower. I change into a pair of dark-wash jeans and a plain white T-shirt. We aren’t fancy, and we like it that way—most of the time. I double-check the ring is in my pocket and head out of the locker room, meeting Addy in the hallway.

“Hi,” she greets, batting her pretty lashes. “Where to?”

“The car?” I play dumb. “Where else?”

“Oh my gosh, are you going to tell me what we’re doing? What if I’m not dressed right?” She grabs my hand and lets me lead her out into the parking lot.

“You’ll just have to see.” I head straight for my Jeep and open the door for her.

“Ugh.” She pretends to huff as she climbs in. She folds her arms across her chest in the most adorable way, pretending to be annoyed as I jog around to the driver’s side and climb in. She’s going to be *so* confused by where we’re about to go. But I can’t help it. It’s just too perfect.

We ride in silence as I navigate across town, finally pulling into a dimly lit parking lot—the same one where I told her I loved her for real.

She makes a funny face as I pull into a spot and put the car in park. “Blaze, are we going to some kind of party?”

“No.”

“Okay, this is just too weird. Why are we in a parking lot?”

I take a deep breath, roll down the windows, and grab my phone. I navigate to “Somebody to You”—the revamped version. The same song I’ve always dedicated to her. “Come on.”

“Blaze, what are we doing?”

“We’re dancing,” I tell her as I jump out. She reluctantly follows suit, and I meet her in the space in front of the Jeep. I pull her to me, and we start dancing in the headlights, in the middle of a desolate parking lot.

Addy giggles in my arms as I spin her in circles, neither one of us the most skilled at what we’re doing. I take a long, deep breath as the song comes to a close, and I tug her into me, giving her a kiss.

And then I drop to one knee.

Her eyes grow wide as I dig out the little black box in my pocket. “Oh my gosh...” Tears instantly begin to fall, and I haven’t even said anything yet.

“Adeline Harper Williams,” I begin, clearing my throat. “I was going to ask you to marry me at the hockey rink, but that seemed a little too cliché, so ... I brought you to the very place where I finally made things right between us. I’ve spent my whole life wanting a family and a place to call home. And you’ve become just that. I love you. And I want to make a home with you. Will you marry—”

“*YES!*” Addy shouts before I can even finish.

I burst into laughter as she throws her arms around my neck, planting a kiss right on my mouth with a force that nearly takes me to the ground. I deepen the kiss as the song starts to repeat, knowing I’ll *never* get enough of her.

Forever.

Extended Epilogue

Addy

Four months later...

“Oh my gosh. *Oh my gosh.*” I can barely breathe as Penny finishes lacing up the back of my white gown. I stare at myself in front of a full-length mirror, my hair in perfect beach waves and my flowy, beachy gown hitting in all the right places.

Blaze hasn’t seen it yet.

In fact, he hasn’t even seen *me* in over twenty-four hours, and I’m itching to see him. No, I’m *dying* to see him.

“You look gorgeous, sweetheart.” Mom places her hands on my shoulders.

“He’s going to be shocked,” Aurora adds with a smile, adjusting the last few tendrils of hair falling around my face.

“You think?” I choke out, dabbing at my mascara again. “What if he changes his mind?”

“Ha, I don’t think there’s a chance of that happening.” Penny laughs, looking at me through the mirror. “He’s been in love with you since the day he laid eyes on you, remember?”

“Plus, he’s been with Dad and all his teammates, ready to go long before you were even in this dress.” As the words leave Aurora’s lips, my phone buzzes.

Blaze: *See you at the altar in five, baby.*

I heart the text and then slip my phone into my bag, turning to my mom with a smile. “It’s time.”

She nods.

Dad comes into the small bridal room at the Hawaiian resort. Unlike Aurora, I’m choosing to get married right out on the beach.

“You know there’s rain moving in,” Dad says. “We need to get a move on unless we all want to end up soaked.”

I squeeze my eyes shut for a split second, trying not to smile too hard. “It’s like God just knows exactly what I want,” I say under my breath, taking my dad’s arm. “I’m ready.”

Mom slips away to go take her seat. Penny and Aurora line up just outside, alongside the rest of the wedding party. I stand by the sliding glass door that leads right to the ocean. It’s not that far of a walk, and out of the glass, I can just catch sight of the top of Blaze’s head.

“You look beautiful.” Dad nudges me. “Blaze is a lucky guy.”

“Yeah?” I look over at him.

“Absolutely.”

The wedding coordinator nods to us and opens the door. Dad leads me out under overcast skies, and I smile wide as our friends and family stand for my entrance. My eyes immediately find Blaze, who’s wiping away moisture from his cheeks.

I blink away tears as my dad leads me all the way down the aisle.

“Welcome to the family, son. Now take good care of her,” Dad says before handing me off to Blaze.

Blaze’s grip is strong and steady, just like the way he’s loved me for the last decade—never mind our little hiccup. It took that to get here.

“You’re stunning,” Blaze says, sniffing. “And I’m being so weak right now.”

“Stop.” I swat him just as a raindrop hits my cheek.

His eyes widen as the minister starts the ceremony. “It’s going to rain,” he mouths.

I stifle my giggle, tipping my head back as the Hawaiian sky opens up, raindrops tickling my skin. The minister keeps going, and I glance over to see my mom shielding her eyes with a mortified look.

But I can't stop smiling.

Blaze's amber eyes hold mine as his white dress shirt starts to be speckled, and the minister picks up his pace, spitting out the traditional vows faster than ever.

"This rain," the minister mutters in between as the sprinkles turn to a steady shower.

"It's perfect," I say softly, squeezing Blaze's hands as we make it to the final few parts of the ceremony.

"Addy, do you take Blaze to be your lawful wedded husband?"

"I do," I say, holding his gaze. And just like that, the steady rain turns into a torrential downpour, sending the whole audience jumping from their chairs. Our bridesmaids and groomsmen join the chaotic crowd to find shelter.

The arch blows in the wind, and my dress whips around my legs, but even as the minister has to shout to finish Blaze's question, the two of us stay right here in the moment, becoming more and more drenched by the second.

"Blaze, do you take Addy to be your lawful wedded wife?"

"I do!" Blaze shouts over the rain—and to no one left, the chairs are now empty.

"Great." The minister holds onto his flapping paper as he finishes. "I now pronounce you husband and wife! I'm getting out of here! You may now kiss the bride!" He ducks out and makes a mad dash for the resort.

Blaze leans forward, wrapping me up in his arms and leaning in for a kiss. His lips lock with mine, and I thread my fingers through his hair, the rain soaking the two of us. His tongue grazes my bottom lip, and I let him deepen the kiss as he dips me back in a dramatic swoop, the rain pouring down on us like a blessing. It's chaotic and beautiful, the sound of the storm drowning out everything but the pounding of our hearts.

We stay wrapped up in each other for another few moments. The rain thoroughly soaks our clothes and leaves my hair flattened and drenched. Finally, we break apart, both of us laughing.

"I guess God didn't forget that conversation we had the last time we were here." Blaze presses his forehead to mine. "Did you?"

I shake my head, flinging warm water as I do. "Nope, and I think this might be the exact scenario I pictured in my head. It's *perfect*."

"*You're* perfect, Mrs. Adeline Harris," Blaze says, his voice husky with emotions and desire. "This is by far the best wedding I've ever gone to."

"The chairs are empty." I gesture to them, bursting into a giggle.

"I like it better this way." He claims my lips again, and just like that, I'm lost all over again.

Just the way it was meant to be.



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To you, dear reader. THANK YOU for taking the time to read my stories. I write for YOU! And for me too, of course. But it's much more fun to have someone to share my stories with. Thanks for picking up this book. I hope you loved reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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About the Author

Kristine W. Joy is an Amazon Bestselling Author who loves creating sweet and swoony stories full of sizzling chemistry and laugh-out-loud banter. She prefers her coffee iced and her kisses hot. When she's not dreaming up romance novels or writing from a cozy coffee shop in Northern California, she is spending time with her hubby and two young boys. Becoming a published author was a lifelong dream. Becoming a momma was the inspiration to make it a reality.