

a sweet romantic comedy

OUR
BIG
FAT
FAKE
VACAY



ASHLEY FUNK

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*For all my nerdy girls—
Whose love language is watching
other people play video games*

PROLOGUE

Three Months Ago

MY BODY CAN'T BOUNCE back from sleeping on the floor like it did when I was fourteen. Each joint groans as I snake my arms out of my borrowed sleeping bag and stretch them above my head. Somewhere in my back, muscles scream in protest and I wish that I had been able to unload some of the moving truck before falling asleep last night. But I hadn't expected the difficulties with the moving van that I experienced on the twelve-plus-hour drive from LA to Ogden—I had almost missed Thanksgiving dinner at my parents as it was.

When I sprung the whole, “Surprise! I moved back to Utah!” thing on them, our small family celebration rejuvenated itself, and I didn't leave my childhood home until almost midnight. After being awake for nearly twenty-four hours, I was desperate for some sleep. My brothers had already cleaned out a room for me in the house they own together—the house I'm now calling home—so my options were the floor in my room or the couch.

I opted for the one with a door.

Even eight years away couldn't expunge the embarrassing memories of everything Jase and Wesley did when I would fall

asleep on the couch when we were kids. There were a couple instances of marker on my face and my hand in a bowl of warm water—y’know, the classic stuff. But I don’t think I’ll ever live down being tied to the couch with thread or the multiple whipped cream beards—all of which were documented with unflattering photos they taped to my junior high locker.

When your parents decide to have three kids in quick succession, you either grow to hate your siblings with a fiery passion or love them to a smothering death. Despite the couch antics, I’ve been lucky to land on the loving side of the line as an adult. And when rent for my California apartment spiked, it didn’t take much convincing to get me to move home.

I had already been working remotely since the big You-Know-What of 2020, so with some frank discussions with my boss, and reassuring him that it would not be a “productivity nightmare” to have me living a few states away, they gave me the go-ahead to relocate. And when I broached the subject with the two knuckleheads I share DNA with, they wouldn’t hear of me renting my own apartment when they had plenty of space to spare.

I shimmy to the top of my sleeping bag and sit up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes and trying to tame my wild light brown hair. Yesterday’s bun is still mostly intact, but it’s hanging lopsided on my head, reflecting my restless night on the uncomfortable floor. My watch says it’s nearly 11:00 am, and the rustling from beyond my door says that Jase and Wesley are back from the football game they play with a group of friends on Black Friday every year.

I climb to my feet, grabbing my thick glasses from where they’re tucked next to my pillow. I push a handful of rogue flyaways out of my face and shuffle to my door. Each step makes the bottoms of my feet ache and hips complain. I feel like a grandma. Or at least a rusty hinge in desperate need of some WD-40. I’ve never been a morning person, and the older I get, the more I’m convinced that everyone who says they are is lying.

When I pull open my door, the voices in the house become clearer, though I'm hardly listening. My brain is still on its boot cycle and my body is on auto-pilot for life-sustaining cereal. I shuffle down the hall with closed eyes, my hand sliding along the wall for guidance, and my too-sleepy brain protests the brightness of the light as I near the kitchen. When I lose the wall, alerting my slowly waking body that I've left the hallway, I raise one arm to scratch the back of my elbow where a loose hair has been tickling it. The voices abruptly stop.

I stop.

Then I lower my arm.

"Good morning, sunshine," Jase greets me from somewhere to my left.

I crack my left eye, and though I'm temporarily blinded by the sudden light, I recognize that blurry figure as my older brother.

"Good seeing you up and about," another voice comes from my other side. I open my second eye and mark Wesley, my younger brother, standing a few feet away to my right. I rub a hand over my eyes and slide my very smudged glasses up the bridge of my nose. My two brothers come into sharp focus, and I see them look over my head at something behind me.

"Now that's a sight I haven't seen in a long time."

The voice is behind me. Like, *directly* behind me. Which means, I either narrowly missed colliding with the speaker as I stumbled in blind, or he snuck up on me.

But the strangest thing about that voice is that I *know that voice*. The last time I heard it, it was a little higher pitched. But it's unmistakably the same voice.

Keeping my face as blank and sleepy as I can, even though my heart rate jumps higher than a kangaroo, I cross one ankle over the other and slowly spin on the balls of my feet.

Cooper Whittaker, my older brother's best friend, and the boy who broke my heart before I moved to California, smirks

at me. “Good morning, Hannah.”

CHAPTER 1

WITH MY LAST BOX of books open at my feet, I arrange and rearrange them on the two bookshelves I squeezed into my bedroom. It's tight with my bed tucked in one corner and my dresser in another, but I'm not asking for any more space in the shared rooms of the house. I already set up my computer—complete with my oversized, comfy office chair and three monitors—in the front room because it doesn't fit in here, and I need a space to work where I'm not using my bed as a chair.

Jase and Wesley have said time and time again that this is my house, too, and I can put my stuff wherever I want, but that feels a little bit...too permanent. It's why I've put off unpacking all of my belongings. Mingling my stuff with my brothers' would signal to them that I'm here long term. And I am, in Utah at least, but I would like to find an apartment of my own eventually. Living with two grown men who still keep house like they did when we were kids is not how I want to enter my thirties. I still have a few years before that deadline, but...be prepared and all that.

As soon as I find an apartment that doesn't cost me an arm and a leg—those are spoken for by my student loans—I'll move out. I might be working with a California paycheck, but living on my own means shouldering all of my own expenses instead of splitting them with Jase and Wesley, and I want to save up before taking the plunge into living without a roommate.

I've messed with this same row of books more times than I care to count, trying to get them all to fit.

Spoiler alert: they will not all fit.

Maybe it's time for me to invest in an e-reader.

Once again, I pull off one series and replace it with another. I scrunch up my face, still unhappy with the arrangement, when my phone rings. Because I work on Pacific Time, which is an hour behind local time, it's unusual for me to get a call this early from anyone other than my brothers, who both left for work an hour ago. When my mom's name and picture flash across the screen, I take a deep breath and answer.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetie. How are you today?”

“Good. Same as when you called me yesterday.” Back when I was living in LA, Mom called maybe once a week, but my new proximity seems to be her green light for calling me nearly every day. Our calls are usually short, and sometimes I think it would just be easier if she sent me a text, but every

once in a while, Mom really gets going and it's hard to end a call with her short of chucking my cell phone out into the snow.

“That’s great, sweetie. Did you get the email I sent you about the trip?”

My phone buzzes against my ear, and I pull it away to see the email notification. I flip over to speaker and set my phone on the bookshelf. It sounds like today is going to be a long chat, and I can at least finish unpacking this box of books while we discuss whatever my mom has in mind. It’s basically the equivalent of listening to an audiobook while cleaning.

“Yeah, I just got it.” I bend down and pick up the first three books of my favorite series, the edges worn and the spines broken from how many times I’ve reread them over the years. I set them on a shelf at eye-height, forming a second row in front of the books that are already there. I guess I’m stooping to double-shelving for the time being.

“Have you looked at it?”

Keeping my sigh quiet enough that my phone won’t pick it up, I lean forward and tap open the email. The subject line is “BRADFORD FAMILY TRIP” with way more exclamation points than is necessary, but still not enough to convey how excited we all are about our yearly vacation.

When us kids were in school, we’d go in the summer, but now that we all have “big kid jobs,” our vacations are whenever we can fit them into the year. Last year’s was in April. This year’s is coming up in a few weeks, just before Valentine’s Day. I’ve had the dates blocked out for months, already requested as time off from work, but upon opening the email, I stare in stunned silence at the location Mom has picked.

Orlando.

As in Florida.

As in all the way across the country.

“I’m looking at it right now,” I say, my voice small and quiet as I peruse Mom’s itinerary.

My mom's next words are drowned out by the anxiety creeping up my spine as I read the words in the email that declare I will be *flying* out to Orlando in three weeks. Up until this year, all of our family vacations have been close enough that I've been able to drive. Lake Tahoe. Las Vegas. San Diego. I haven't been on a plane since I flew out to California to check out UCLA during my senior year of high school, and that had been a harrowing experience.

The funny thing about my fear of flying—which I've very intentionally never mentioned to my mom—is that I didn't know I had one until I was taking off and I couldn't bail from the flight. Being thousands of feet up in a steel deathtrap that has no easy exits...not for me, thank you. But driving myself to Orlando is out of the picture. It would take too long and cost too much, never mind the fact that I'm staring my flight details in the face.

I've always managed to slip around my mom's suggestions to "just fly home and visit." My flight phobia is a secret I'll take to the grave because a terrified homebody doesn't fit with the go-get-em image I've projected to my mom for years.

"Mmhmm," I reply mindlessly to Mom. My phone buzzes in my hand, and one of my favorite notifications drops down from the top of the screen. I navigate away from the vacation details—those flights are a beast I will deal with later—and open the group chat I have with my two brothers.

Jase

Did you guys see the email yet?

Wesley

Yup. Looking at it now. Super stoked.

Me

Yeeessss

The good thing about texting is that it hides the delivery. For all my brother's know, that's a "heck yeeessss!" when in reality, it's more of a creaky groan "yeeessss" with some silent tears thrown in. Technology for the win.

Jase

Let's grab lunch together tomorrow and discuss.

Wesley

Can't we just talk about it over dinner? When we're all at the house, like usual.

Jase

Why do that when we can make an event out of it?

Besides, tomorrow is Family Dinner.

We won't be at the house.

And the whole point is to talk about the trip without Mom.

Wesley

eye roll emoji

Mom transitions into a long-winded story about someone she ran into at the grocery store the other day, regaling me like it's funny, not horrifying, to be caught in your rattiest, laundry day clothes while shopping for food to fill your near-empty pantry. But maybe that's just me. For all I know, Mom goes to the store dressed to the nines.

Me

You realize I take lunch an hour later than both of you, right?

Wesley

Also, I have a student coming in to work on a project during lunch, so I'm out.

Jase

You guys need better jobs.

Wesley

I can't help that I actually work at mine.

Me

Samesies *shrug emoji*

You can't slack on the job when you need to prove to your boss that working three states away is not a problem.

Jase

Cheesecake Factory. I'm buying.

Me

When and where do I need to sign to sell my soul?

Wesley

Pass

Party pooper

Jase names a time, and I quickly add it to my calendar. In this case, I can make my work from home schedule a little more flexible. As long as I begin and end my day at the same time as my team, it shouldn't be a problem. Moving around some things for one lunch with my brother won't be the death of me.

"You've been back for a few months now, and you haven't really mentioned that you're dating anyone yet."

I scrub my hand up and down my face as I tune back in to what Mom is saying, even though I wish I could hang up on this dead horse. I don't want to tell her it's because I spend all of my free time playing games on my computer. Guys let you down. It's a fact of life. You know what doesn't let you down? *Skyrim*. Twelve years later and it's still going strong.

I've tried giving her various excuses—I don't want to, I don't have time, nobody wants to date me—but nothing has worked so far. "It's for your own good," she said when she set me up with one of the sons of an acquaintance a few weeks after Thanksgiving—a kid I remembered from high school.

And not in a good way.

More like the he-teased-me-because-of-my-glasses way. My glasses were definitely more for function than looks, and his teasing was one of the reasons I begged my mom for contacts the spring of my senior year.

I went on the date and left as soon as it was polite to do so.

But that didn't stop Mavis Bradford. Since then, she's coerced me into three other dates—all with kids, now men, I guess, that I went to school with before I moved to California.

It should be easy to say "no," but it's not. I've never really been one for big confrontations, and I can sense that telling my mom to stop meddling in my life altogether would be a Big

Confrontation. So I let it slide. For now. In the meantime, I sidestep what matchmaking I can and politely let my dates down when I do meet up with them.

“So I gave him your number and he said he’d give you a call.”

The gears in my brain grind to a halt as I fully process what Mom just said. “Wait, who?”

“Dallas Martin. Wasn’t he the young man who you dated for a bit during your senior year of high school? He took you to prom.”

Dang, my mom has a good memory. I’d almost forgotten about Dallas, since prom and our subsequent break-up were a minor blip on my radar during my last few months before I moved out of state. Not that he was incredibly memorable in the first place. I liked him alright, he was in a few of my classes and was always nice to me, but I only dated him because he was the only guy in my grade who was even interested in me. Looking back, I should have just turned him down. He was a nice guy and all, but a little...*bland*. I figured he would have settled down by now, maybe have a kid.

Not getting my number from my busybody mom.

“Mom!” I whine, so *over* her meddling.

“Hannah!” Mom mocks in the same exasperated tone.

“Why are you handing out my number at the grocery store?”

“You’re not going out of your way to meet anyone, so I thought I’d help that along! It’s time the three of you settle down and give me some grandkids.”

Not this again.

“But why are you always setting *me* up? What about Jase? Wesley? They can give you grandkids just as well as I can.”

“They actually go *out* for their jobs and in their spare time. They meet people. They don’t need my help to get dates. But Hannah, you just sit in the house all day on that computer of yours.”

I don't have anything to say to that because I do spend eighty percent of my time at home on my computer. My computer is my job. My computer is also my hobby. I game on my computer. I watch TV on my computer. I dink around with side projects on my computer. My computer brings me joy and even Marie Kondo wouldn't get rid of it.

But it's frustrating that my mom thinks that I have to go *out* to meet people. Loads of people I know have met through online dating, or even just being in the same niche Facebook group. I could easily find someone to date from the comfort of my office chair if I really wanted to.

"People meet online these days, Mom."

"That may be true, young lady," oh shoot, I'm in for it now, "but I know you're not dating anyone." Ouch. "The least you can do is make an effort to find some friends and meet people that live near you. People your age. Even if you don't date these boys I'm sending your way, it at least gets your foot in the door."

More than a tiny part of me is frustrated that Mom doesn't think I can land dates on my own, but that's just my mom. Always looking out for me, even when I don't want her to, and meddling where she shouldn't. I know she's over the moon to have me living closer and she wants me to settle down and be happy, but her methods of...encouragement...don't always land as predicted.

"What if I *am* dating someone?" The thought flies out of my mouth before I have time to catch it.

There's an uncharacteristically long pause from my mother. "*Are* you dating someone?"

I hesitate. Did I just shoot myself in the foot with an offhand comment that I thought would make her stop and think about her actions? Judging by the hope in my mom's voice, the answer is most likely. I can tell she'll run with it if I imply I'm dating someone. A plan forms in my head, and I only give myself a few seconds to mull it over. It'll work. If it doesn't, it will only lead to more bad dates and awkward phone calls, which is where I'm at now.

Would it really be so bad to let my mom think I've found someone?

“Well...”

That one syllable is enough to break the Mavis Bradford Dam.

“Oh my gosh, Hannah!” Her disappointment flips to enthusiasm at my insinuation of no longer being single. “Have you been holding out on me? Dating someone and not telling me?”

A tiny bit of guilt pricks my heart that I just lied to my mom, but I want her to be happy. And more importantly, I want her to stop handing out my phone number.

“Relax, Mom. I'm twenty-six, not sixteen. I don't want to say much about it right now. It's still really new and I don't want to jinx anything.”

Yeah, like thirty seconds new.

“Are you sure? Not even a teensy little bit?” Mom is the queen of weaseling information out of people, but I am Fort Knox. One lie is bad enough, I don't need to go adding a bunch of little smaller ones in the form of details about my imaginary boyfriend.

“I'm sure. Maybe when things are a little more concrete I'll bring him around.”

Not likely. Because there won't be any sort of relationship solidifying any time soon.

Mom's sigh is so exaggerated, I'm sure it spins windmills in Wyoming. “Do I know him? Do I know his mother?”

“Mom!”

“Okay, fine. Fine. You keep your little secrets. But for what it's worth, I can't wait to meet him!” She sounds both satisfied and irked.

“Sure, Mom.” Time to kill the conversation before my ankle follows my foot into my mouth. “Listen, I have some

things I still need to do today before I get to work, so I'm gonna go."

I made the mistake once of saying, "I'll talk to you later," and when I didn't call, I heard about it for two weeks in the family group chat.

"Right, right. Well, I'll talk to you soon! Love you!"

"Love you, too."

CHAPTER 2

AS I SUCK IN a breath of the horrible inversion air, I'm secretly grateful that I'm going to be escaping to Orlando in a couple weeks. Hoofing it several blocks to the restaurant from the nearest parking spot I can find isn't ideal, especially in the frigid, dry air of February in Utah. But parking in downtown Salt Lake is an outright nightmare on a good day.

Couple that nightmare with an awkward phone call with a much-older-than-I-remember Dallas Martin. I let him down as gently as I could, explaining that, contrary to my mother's

belief, I'm not on the dating market at the moment. I could tell that his nice-guy-ness hadn't been dulled by the years I was away, so it sort of felt like I was kicking a puppy by turning down his invitation to catch up over dinner. His disappointment was palpable as I politely excused myself from the call after only a few minutes.

My mother. Why does it have to be *my life* she's so fond of meddling in? Why can't she ever pester my brothers about settling down with a *nice girl*, instead of digging her fingers into the chocolate cake of my life and gobbling it up like that kid in *Matilda*?

By some miracle, I've been able to avoid telling her anything more about my supposed boyfriend, even though she's asked about him every time she's called. It's exhausting, dodging her questions, but I don't want to back myself into any more of a corner than I already have. Adding details to my lie will only complicate things.

By the time I pull open the restaurant door and escape the horrible air quality, I'm tired and irritated, but the promise of fancy, overpriced cheesecake soothes my annoyance. I check in with the hostess who gives me a buzzer and instructs me to wait for it to go off.

I pull out my phone and find a corner, settling in to wait for Jase. I'm a little sad that Wesley didn't want to come, but I'll see him at home. It's not the same as making plans outside of being roommates, but I'm trying not to be too butt hurt. Something about adulthood that no one ever tells you is how difficult it is to make plans that actually work for all the members of a friend—or in this case, sibling—group.

Fifteen minutes pass and the buzzer goes off in my hand. There's still no Jase in sight, and no messages, either, which is surprising, since he called and confirmed our meeting time just this morning. I bring the buzzing block to the hostess stand and get escorted back to a small table. Thanking the hostess, I check my phone again for a text from Jase, but my notifications come up empty. I type out a quick text before setting my phone in front of me and browsing the veritable novel that is the menu.

Jase is not normally one to be late. The last time he wasn't on time to something, it was because he got in a car accident and had to be taken to the hospital. I don't know if his pathological need for punctuality is an oldest child thing, but thanks to him, I was on time, if not five minutes early, for everything.

"Is this seat taken?" a familiar voice says from somewhere above my head. I'm about to politely turn down whoever is trying to hit me up in the middle of the Cheesecake Factory when *Cooper Whittaker* slides into the seat in front of me.

Cooper Whittaker who was glued to Jase's hip from elementary school through high school.

Cooper Whittaker who I had a crush on during most of my formative teen years.

Cooper Whittaker who I've been avoiding like the plague since running into him the day after I moved home.

When I turned around that morning and Cooper had been standing behind me, smirking that cute little smirk I remembered from high school, I froze like a deer in the headlights. The memories his appearance dredged up were some of my best...and worst. He was best friends with my best friend, so we became friends by association. I was the little sister he never had. But then I went and did a Big Dumb and started crushing on him. Everything went downhill from there, culminating in the one moment I wish I could forget.

I had secretly loved him for years, and when I finally mustered up the guts to ask him out, he shot me down.

"You'll always be Jase's little sister to me."

Those eight words flipped a switch inside me that day, and I started yelling. I had never yelled at Cooper before. Looking back, it was not one of my finer moments. I left him there on the driveway—ran away and hid in my room until he drove away—absolutely embarrassed at being turned down by the guy I had been in love with for years. It wasn't like I had declared my undying love, only to get publicly rejected, but I

was eighteen. It was still painful. So I swore I'd put Cooper behind me and start fresh in California, and that's what I did.

Until I stood in front of Cooper in ratty pajamas, no bra, and morning hair.

When my brain overcame the frozen shock, I high-tailed it out of the kitchen, forgoing my life-giving cereal until the sounds of Cooper leaving filtered through my bedroom door.

I've been trying to avoid him for the last three months, but there's only so much I can do. It's rather difficult to never see someone who has been given free reign of the house you live in. I wouldn't be surprised if Cooper has a house key or knows the combination to the garage door opener. I managed to avoid him at Christmas and New Years by sneaking off to my room until he left with my brothers, but I knew there'd come a day when I couldn't hide away or lurk on the other side of a room. I distinctly remember yelling, "I never want to see you again," the last time I saw him before moving to California, and I had intended on following through with that.

I was doing as well as I could under the circumstances. At least until his cocky butt slides onto the bench seat across from me.

I haven't been keeping close tabs on Cooper by any means, but when you share a best friend, you hear things. I know he still lives somewhere around Salt Lake doing something related to his degree in a field that I can't name off the top of my head, but that's about it. I heard him in the background of phone calls with my brothers over the years, but now that crystal clear, smoother-than-a-chocolate-fountain voice is no longer hidden behind poor phone quality.

I can deal with him being Jase's friend. But seeing him here without my brother as a buffer makes me jittery. Panicky. Unsure in a way I haven't been since high school.

He smiles at me as he sits down, not waiting for my reply, and starts flipping through the menu. Tilting the laminated booklet up, he takes his time perusing the endless pages, and I'm grateful for the small barrier between the two of us that gives me a moment to reel my emotions in one by one.

For a moment, I'm struck dumb. After successfully avoiding anything Cooper-related for eight years—finding excuses to end my calls with my brothers if he came over, changing the subject whenever they brought him up—I'm completely caught off-guard with his sudden appearance. I didn't even have the benefit of giving myself a pep talk before interacting with the one person who tainted my memory of the last few weeks before moving to California.

As my heart struggles to process the overwhelming feelings resurfacing at seeing Cooper again, my brain is wildly taking notes.

The years have been good to Cooper. The last time I had really seen him (the Black Friday Incident doesn't count), he still sported some of the gangliness from his last growth spurt. Now, all those long limbs have been filled out into a body that is all man. He sets his winter coat on the bench seat, leaving his upper body on display mere feet from me. What I can see is a collared shirt, but the way it pulls and drapes over his arms and chest makes it apparent that those arms are not the twiggy little things they used to be.

He still styles his hair the same way, though—cropped close at the sides with more length on top that's casually messy, but still workplace appropriate.

“What are you doing here, Cooper?”

“Having lunch. It's lunchtime, isn't it?” He flicks his wrist to glance at his watch before looking at me with a self-satisfied smirk. Pain flares in my chest. That's the same smirk that made my insides fluttery when I was seventeen. Now the memory of it just hurts.

I've spent the last three months slowly coming to terms with the fact that I won't be able to avoid him forever. Eight years is a long time to go out of my way to ignore one person, and maybe I'm ready to show him that I've changed while I lived in California—I've become an adult instead of just Jase's kid sister who was always tagging along and pining after the off-limits best friend. But that smirk and flippant attitude is so

Old Cooper, it's apparent that while I have been making strides, he hasn't.

"It is, but you can't have lunch with me. I'm waiting for someone." No need to tell him that it's his best friend who is running late. That will only encourage him to stay longer, and I need to get him out before all of my carefully crafted emotional bags split at the seams. His sudden appearance, without the benefit of preparing how to act in front of him, grates on my quickly fraying nerves.

Cooper swivels his head from side to side, making a show of looking for who I could possibly be waiting for.

"I don't see anyone eager to fill this seat, so I think I'll stay."

"*Cooper*," I lower my voice so it won't carry across the dimly-lit restaurant. "You need to leave."

"Why? It's not like you're meeting a *date*, Hannah."

I sit up straighter. What is it about me that makes people assume I don't date? I mean, the assumptions are all correct—I don't—but still. It would be nice if the first thing people thought about me sitting alone at a booth in a restaurant wasn't, "That girl couldn't possibly be on a date."

"What makes you say that?" I challenge. Cooper averts his eyes back to the menu and doesn't answer. "Maybe I am on a date, and now you're ruining it." I lean back in my chair and cross my arms, but he doesn't look up.

Cooper presses his mouth into a wry grin as he continues to look over the menu, like he's actually staying for a meal instead of just being here to annoy me. I need to get rid of him before Jase gets here, or Cooper will never leave. My sibling lunch will turn into their dude bro hangout, and that's not something I want to witness, especially after promising myself eight years ago I wouldn't have anything else to do with Cooper Whittaker.

I open my mouth to speak again, the exact words still forming in my brain, but I'm interrupted by a buzzing on the table.

My phone.

MY PHONE.

CHAPTER 3

MY PHONE IS LIGHTING up with my mom's name and picture, and Cooper is eyeing it as it buzzes across the table. A wide grin splits his face, and it's like my life moves in slow motion as he barely has to move his hand to swipe at the screen. My rusty ninja reflexes kick in fast enough to snag the device off the table, but not quick enough to prevent the call from being answered.

“Hello?” I glare at Cooper, and he just grins back at me.

“Hi, sweetie. How are you today?”

“I’m good, Mom. How are you?” I’m just going through the motions with her because the majority of my focus is on the man in front of me. He sets the menu down and folds his hands together, resting his chin on them, perfectly content to listen to my conversation.

“I’m doing well. I just wanted to check in with you today, now that you’ve had a chance to look over everything for the vacation. We’re only two weeks out, and I wanted to make sure it all looks good to you.”

“Yeah, Mom, it looks great. I’m really excited.” I try to infuse my voice with as much enthusiasm as I can muster, even though a familiar pit forms in my stomach thinking about the flights to and from Orlando.

“That’s wonderful! I was also calling to tell you—“

A waitress materializes at the edge of our table, and I smile apologetically as she hesitates, but I give her the go-ahead to ignore me and my ill-timed phone call. I half-listen to my mom as I split my attention between her and the waitress, who is ready to take our orders. I tuck my phone against my chest, choosing to fight this battle over listening to whatever story my mom is telling. I feel like an awful daughter, but if I don’t act quick, I’ll be in for one really long, really awkward lunch.

“Oh no, he’s not staying,” I say at the same time that Cooper begins rattling off his order. The waitress looks between the two of us for a moment before jotting down his order. I press my phone to my ear and shift my focus back to my mom. “Listen, Mom,” I interrupt her, letting only the smallest drop of guilt into my head. My brain is being pulled in too many directions to give any more of my attention to the call, and I’d rather be a little rude than go crazy from overstimulation. “I can’t really talk right now, can I call you back?”

Mom ignores my interruption and focuses on me. “Where are you, Hannah? It’s so noisy.”

It's not really that noisy, except for Cooper's voice on the other side of the table, and I turn to put my body between my phone and Cooper, silently praying that his voice is going through the line as part of the general din.

"I'm at lunch. With someone." I don't know what to call Cooper. Not a friend. More than an acquaintance. And I sure can't say "Jase's friend" because I know exactly the direction my mom would take *that* after all of her pestering this week.

"Is it your mysterious boyfriend you won't tell me anything about?"

It's scary how quickly my mom can pinpoint the exact thing I don't want to talk about and bring it up.

"Mom, I told you. It's still new." I'm being vague, not only for the benefit of keeping my mom in the dark about the true nature of my non-existent beau, but also to avoid giving any hints about the embarrassing topic of this conversation to a clearly-eavesdropping Cooper.

"Well, at the rate you're willing to share details, I'm beginning to think he doesn't exist! You won't even give me a name!"

While Mom continues to lament about how close-lipped I'm being, I move my phone from my ear to my chest. The waitress looks at me expectantly, her lips pursed like I'm the worst customer she's dealt with today. I rattle off my order, with a, "To-go, please," added on at the end. The waitress scribbles on her pad and walks away, promising to bring back more bread, even though I haven't touched what was already there.

Putting my phone back to my ear and ignoring Cooper's pointed look, I try to slow my mom's roll. If she finds out that I've been lying to her about the whole boyfriend thing, I'm dead meat. With my luck, Cooper can hear both sides of the conversation and he will tease me from the moment I hang up until...forever. He will literally tease me until I die over something this big.

“You know,” my mom continues with her little rant, “I saw Mindy Lowell the other day—you remember her son Hudson, don’t you? I think he was in Jase’s grade. She said he was also back in town and single. Maybe I can give him your number?”

Mom is closing in on my lie, and she’s using handing out my number as a threat to get the information out of me. I need to say something convincing.

“Actually, I’m with my boyfriend right now.”

What the Cheesecake Factory is coming out of your mouth right now, Hannah?

The look on Cooper’s face is priceless, though. Shock and disbelief is mixed with a healthy dose of...is that disgust? I’m a little rusty at deciphering Cooper’s expressions, but I do believe it is. Because what could be more gross than going out with your best friend’s dorky little sister?

Going out with your brother’s obnoxious best friend, obviously.

“So you won’t need to give my number to Hudson Lowell.”

Cooper stiffens, and my heart clenches as he leans across the table. I give him a pointed look—a silent plea to keep his ever-loving mouth shut. He ignores it. “Your mom was going to give your number to *Hudson Lowell*?” His happy demeanor shifts into something more displeased, and a subtle frown creases the space between his eyebrows.

“Cooper!” I hiss. But I must not have tilted the microphone far enough away from my face because my mom latches on to that small piece of information.

“You’re with Cooper? Cooper Whittaker?” she asks, unable to mask the excitement in her voice.

I’ve done messed up now, but I can’t backtrack. I have to see this through to the end. “Yes, Mom, I’m with Cooper.”

“Oh my gosh, you’ve been dating Cooper this whole time and you didn’t tell me?”

If I hadn't already moved out of my parents house, I would have gone home and done so immediately. Cooper must have heard my mom's outburst because his funny expression morphs into a beaming smirk. More of a smile than his signature smirk, but still with a sassy edge to it that says *boy, do I have some words for you when you get off the phone*. I have to avert my eyes because a nagging feeling I've been trying to stuff back into its grave since November is knocking at the door to my heart.

"He's right there, isn't he? Would you put it on speaker so I can say hi?" Mom always loved Cooper. The kid practically lived at our house, when he and my brothers weren't making mayhem over at the Whittaker's.

Feeling defeated, I pull the phone away from my ear, setting it on the table between me and Cooper, and tapping the speakerphone icon.

"You're on speaker."

"Hello, Cooper!" Mom's enthusiasm oozes from my phone. "How are you doing, young man? It's been ages since I last saw you!"

Cooper's green eyes shift from me to the phone as he smiles at my mom's comments. I finally get a break from his undivided attention and can breathe normally again. "I'm doing great, Mavis. Better now that I'm here with Hannah." He glances at me and winks. The teenager inside of me swoons, but the realist adult in me clamps down on that and stuffs it back where the cobwebs of my infatuation with Cooper should remain.

"That's so sweet of you for going to lunch with Hannah. You know, she hasn't gotten out much since she came back, and I was beginning to think she'll never find someone special."

I am mortified. Did my mom really just say that to Cooper?

"Really?" Cooper tilts his head to look at me. "I thought that the boys had been all over her. I guess I'm the lucky one

now that I get her all to myself.”

My jaw drops. Did he just...*play along*?

“All this time, I was trying to get her out of her house, and I should have thought of you in the first place! But I guess that all worked out for the better!”

Cooper laughs and relaxes back into his seat, but Mom’s comment lodges into my brain like a muck boot in deep mud. If I had been dating someone, my mom wouldn’t have been handing out my number like Halloween candy. And now my imaginary boyfriend has a name and a face and...for some reason, he’s playing along.

A new thread to the lie I unintentionally wove a few weeks ago takes shape and tucks itself into the web. A perfect fit.

Out of everyone I remember from growing up here, Cooper would be the perfect man to fake date to get my mom off my back. He and I have a history. Maybe not a romantic history, but I know him well enough that I wouldn’t have to make up random details that might catch me in a lie later.

“That’s right, Cooper and I are dating.” At my comment, Cooper raises his eyebrow, almost daring me to continue. But if he can do it, so can I. “And we’re on a lunch date right now, so...”

“Oh, right! Call me back later so we can chat about this.” The tone of Mom’s voice drops from enthusiastic to serious, and I can picture her giving me The Look. You know, The Mom Look.

“Oh, look, there’s the waitress with our food! I’ll talk to you later, Mom. Love you, bye!”

I end the call.

Cooper leans his forearms on the table, an eerie smile creeping to his face. One of the ones where the mouth says *I’m happy*, but the eyes say *I’m going to murder you*. “What the heck was that, Hannah?”

I lean forward, matching his posture. “What the heck was that, Cooper?”

“What do you mean, Hannah Dearest? That’s what I call you, right? Since we’re dating?”

I sigh dramatically and flop my head into my arms. Maybe if I ignore him long enough, he’ll go away, this whole problem will go away, and I can call my mom right back and tell her *just joking! I’m not actually dating Cooper!* But Cooper pokes me harder than he needs to with his fork.

“Hannah!”

I abruptly sit upright, and Cooper leans back and crosses his arms. He’s wearing an amused smile—not what I expected, but okay.

”I *may* have insinuated last week that I have a boyfriend.“ I rub the spot where Cooper’s fork stabbed me. “She wouldn’t stop trying to set me up, and I figured that if I finally gave her what she wanted, it would all stop. But then you had to go and play along! You could have told her we weren’t dating, and I’d probably get an earful the next time she called, but now we’re in this mess together.” I point a finger straight at Cooper’s chest. “So this is half your fault.”

Cooper reaches up and grasps my finger, pushing it down and pinning it to the table. I wiggle and jerk my hand, but it’s no use trying to remove it from Cooper’s grip. His brow lowers as he stares directly into my soul, but his face just looks serious, not upset. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to. That face of his is making his thoughts abundantly clear.

He’s not happy with my lie or his involvement in it, but his hands are tied, same as mine. I can see the wheels of his brain turn and examine our joint predicament from every possible angle. After a few minutes of silence, his eye contact makes me twitchy, so I go with another tactic.

I lean back as far as I can with my hand trapped on the table. “Relax. I’ll let her believe it for a few days and then tell her we broke up. That it wasn’t meant to be, blah, blah, blah. And I’ll tell her that I’m too heartbroken to go out with anyone else, and she’ll finally leave me alone about dating.”

Cooper raises his eyebrows at my ten-second plan and shrugs. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt letting my mom believe I’m seeing someone either. She’s no Mavis Bradford, but she’s been hinting more and more lately about wanting grandchildren before she’s eighty.” His skepticism fades as he speaks, settling into a neutral expression.

“It’s a win-win, then.”

Cooper dips his chin in a small nod, not breaking eye contact. I hold his stare, not wanting to be the first one to show weakness and look away.

I feel a thumb slide across the back of my hand, and I instinctively jerk my hand away from Cooper’s just as the waitress arrives with our food.

CHAPTER 4

JASE'S LATENESS, IT SEEMS, is a one-time thing because he shows up exactly five minutes before five o'clock for our monthly family dinner. I jump out of my rapidly-cooling car and hurry over to his side as fast as I can without busting my butt on the icy driveway approach.

“Where were you this afternoon?” Jase's long legs outpace mine, but I can't have this conversation with him in front of Mom.

“Something came up at work. I couldn’t get away.” He doesn’t even look down at me.

“Excuse me, sir.” I grab the sleeve of his coat, stopping him before he climbs the three steps to our parents’ porch. “Have you ever heard of texting?”

Jase is still dodging my eye contact, which is weird.

“I’m sorry, Hannah Banana. I couldn’t get away. I got caught up in a project and forgot to text you.” Jase places his foot on the bottom step and finally meets my eyes. “Sibling date night to make it up to you?”

I don’t say anything, dragging out the moment, making him think I’m not going to accept his apology.

“Fine,” I breathe out, rolling my eyes like the obnoxious little sister I am. Jase smiles down at me and pulls me into a gentle headlock, messing up my already messy bun. “But just so you know, whatever happens in there is on your head.” I take the three steps quickly, leaving my confused brother behind.

Warmth surrounds me as I step into my childhood home. Not much has changed over the years, except the contents of the picture frames in the hallway leading to the living room. Formerly graced by chubby faces and missing teeth, then braces and acne, the photos have now shifted to adult Jase, Hannah, and Wesley. There’s a mix of selfies and pictures of us with friends, and even a few of my brothers and me at past Bradford Family Vacations.

If you were to put the three of us in a line from oldest to youngest, it would look like my parents’ genetic printer ran out of ink. Jase is dark—dark hair, dark blue eyes. Wesley is light—beautifully blond (a color that millions of women pay good money to replicate), with steely eyes. And I’m somewhere in the middle. Average brown hair. Blue eyes somewhere in between—not clear and deep like Jase’s, but not Wesley’s uniquely cloudy sky color either.

I take a few extra minutes to study the pictures and remember the memories behind them. It’s been a long time

since I bothered to pay attention to them. As Jase stomps his snowy feet on the welcome rug, I notice how many of his pictures also feature Cooper, and I'm afraid of what Jase will say if he finds out that Mom thinks I'm dating his best friend.

Most brothers would defend their sister's honor and mess up their best friend for dating their sister behind their back. Jase isn't most brothers, though. He'd be more likely to mess *me* up for pursuing his buddy and wedging myself between the two of them.

I enter the living room mere steps ahead of Jase. Peeling off my coat, I find Wesley lounging on the couch with our dad, watching the Utah Jazz play on TV.

"What up, loser?" I greet Wesley with a light flick to his forehead as I pass him then lean down to give Dad a hug. "How's it going, Old Man?"

I dodge a lazy foot swipe from my younger brother as my dad responds, "Can't complain when your mom is making meatloaf." He pats my back twice before letting me stand up. "It's good to see you, sweetheart."

"Hi, Mom." Jase gives our mother a squeeze when she comes in from the kitchen. The house smells amazing—Mom is the best meatloaf cook this side of the Wasatch—and I am hungry, which is why I'm unprepared for what Mom says next.

"Hannah, why didn't you bring Cooper?"

I wave my hand noncommittally and turn away, making a show of heading back to the coat hooks in the front hallway to avoid giving anything away with my face. *Quick, Hannah, get it together.*

"Why would Hannah bring Cooper to family dinner?" Jase's voice follows me down the hall.

I can only pretend to hang up a coat for so long, so I venture back to the living room with my game face on. When I walk through those doors, I'm *Hannah who is dating Cooper Whittaker*, not *Hannah who lied to get her mom to stop setting her up*.

“Because they’re dating,” Mom says in a very *duh* tone. “I’m not surprised Hannah didn’t tell you—I had to pry it out of her. I thought you would have heard it from Cooper.”

Jase’s eyes turn to me with a silent question in them. “*What the....?*”

“It’s really new, okay? I didn’t want to scare him off by pushing him into the deep end.”

“He’s been coming around for years, sweetie.” Mom wraps an arm around my shoulders, squeezing me in a side hug. “If he hasn’t been scared off by now, I don’t think he ever will.” She laughs, but all I can muster is a weak smile. Thankfully, we’re interrupted by Wesley and Dad shouting when the Jazz score another basket, and the attention is pulled away from me for a minute. Jase is still giving me crazy eyes while joining halfheartedly in cheering, but it’s my turn to ignore him.

Wesley turns around, looking over the back of the couch to where I’m still standing with Mom and Jase. “*Hannah is dating Cooper?*” I don’t like the sound of those emphases.

“Shut up, Wesley.” Whoever wrote those lines in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* needs a pay raise. “Don’t act like it’s a huge surprise.”

Well, it kinda is, but I’m choosing to embrace my role as the girl who is now dating Cooper Whittaker.

“I mean, it’s really not. Remember that huge crush you had on him in high school?” Wesley’s smile is all derp.

Dead. He is so dead.

“Wesley,” I say sweetly as my face heats to the temperature of the surface of the sun, “you are literally the worst. I hope you get rabies from a squirrel.”

“Hannah, be nice,” Mom chides. I roll my eyes when she can’t see them and stick my tongue out at my younger brother. “But he’s right, though. You did have a huge crush on him in high school. Now come help me set the table.”

elle

I make it through dinner.

Barely.

If I have to say, “It’s really new and I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d flip out,” one more time, I might give up and tell the truth. Eventually everyone (aka my mother) realizes that they aren’t going to get any more details out of me, and the topic of conversation moves on to the Jazz’s win-loss record.

Jase keeps glancing at me while my dad and Wesley argue back and forth about basketball strategies, but I’m not about to reveal anything else that would get me in trouble in front of Mom. I don’t need or want to be discussing my supposed relationship at the dinner table, especially when the best friend of the guy I’m “dating” is sitting next to me, kicking my foot surreptitiously underneath the table and making weird faces at me when no one else is looking.

By the third kick, I’ve had it, and I sneak my phone out underneath the table like I’m one of Wesley’s high school students.

Me

I’m NOT talking about Cooper, so drop it.

Jase

HANNAH

Me

JASE

Jase

I’ll buy the snacks for sibling date night

Me

DROP IT

I hold down the power button to turn my phone off before Jase sends another text and I get busted for having it out at the dinner table. No matter how old we get, it's always the same. Mom's house, Mom's rules.

CHAPTER 5

WHILE MOST GIRLS SPEND their high school years dating or hanging out with girl friends, I spent most of my time reading books or doing homework at my brother's sports practices or theater rehearsals. More often than not, Cooper Whittaker was there, too, as either a teammate or a guy killing time, waiting for his friends—same as me.

During college, when my roommates were going out partying or spending late nights in the library, I was video calling my bros and having what we colloquially named

“sibling date nights.” I turned down invitation after invitation for events that landed on sibling date night. Because I could either upset my college friends, who were more than likely only going to be in my life for a few years, or my brothers, who I’m stuck with for life.

It was always an easy choice of which relationships to prioritize.

Thanks to my recent move, gone are the days of virtual watch parties and speaker phone sibling date nights. Instead, I’m sprawling on the ridiculously comfortable couch in our living room. For a bachelor pad—plus me, of course—my brothers’ place is actually really nice. Light colors and comfortable furniture. Sure, there are a few gaming chairs and larger-than-they-need-to-be computer setups, but I’m not one to talk, seeing as how three of the seven monitors in this house are on my own desk in the front room. Besides, there isn’t a “Man Cave” sign or stuffed deer head in sight, so I’ll call that a win on their part.

Sure, it looks like two dudes and their sister live there, but it also doesn’t give off overgrown man child vibes.

Wesley starts *The Princess Bride*, my favorite movie. (It’s a classic. And Wesley hates when we call him Farmboy. “His name is Westley! With a T! Not Wesley!”) Before the end of the opening credits, Jase’s phone starts buzzing on the arm rest between his seat and mine. At least I had the decency to put mine on do not disturb, more to help me ignore all of the calls and texts from my mom. Her efforts to glean additional details about Cooper and me are valiant, but I am a vault. Until this whole misunderstanding-turned-misdirection blows over, not a word is passing my lips.

Wesley and I both groan obnoxiously loud as Jase answers with a muffled “hello” before extracting himself from the couch and moving toward the kitchen behind us.

“Hey, bring back some popcorn,” Wesley says, reaching out to smack Jase’s leg as he passes by. Jase responds with a distracted hum as he listens to whoever is on the other side of the phone call.

I try focusing on the movie, but even popcorn being thrown into the microwave can't drown out Jase's deep voice, amplified by the hardwood floor and bare walls in the kitchen. "Yeah. Yeah, she's here. It's just our movie night."

There's only one *she* in this house, so I know he's talking about me. To whom, I don't know, but I hate being the topic of conversations I'm not involved in because usually, people talk behind your back to talk crap. I trust Jase not to say anything too nasty about me—we dish our fair share of crap at each other, but we both know it's out of love—but there's no guarantee that whoever is on the other end of that call has the same opinion of me.

My irritation spikes. I catch myself scowling at the tv and smooth my features before Wesley notices and launches a *what's wrong* interrogation. Normally, I would welcome a frank chat with my younger brother, but complaining about suspicions and gossip is not something I want marring our movie night.

For all I know, it's our mom, and even though I'm not happy with how meddle-y she's been the last few months, I won't get in the way of her talking to my brother. Heaven knows I talk to my mom about my brothers plenty.

The microwave beeps, punctuating Jase's, "Cool. See you." My older brother makes his way back into the living room, dropping the bowl of hot popcorn onto Wesley's lap as he passes and sinks into the deep corner seat of the sectional.

We're fifteen minutes into *The Princess Bride* when the front door opens and shuts. Jase and Wesley don't let just anyone walk into their house uninvited, without even knocking. I slouch down in my seat, wishing I could bury myself between the cushions. Mom has really reached a new low if she's driving all the way out here to get a hold of me.

Except...

Mom lives nearly half an hour away, and Jase got off the phone ten minutes ago.

“Hannah,” Cooper says from behind me, “I need to talk to you.”

The snort and eye roll are reflex, and I twist my body to look up at the man who has his forearms propped on the back of my seat.

“What?” I keep my voice flat and devoid of emotion. I try to reign in my annoyance for my older brother’s sake, since Cooper is Jase’s best friend, but my control only extends so far.

“Can we please talk in the other room?” Cooper drops his voice lower, trying to avoid interrupting the movie. Neither of my brothers even react to having Cooper in their home, and after a few months here, I know it’s a fairly common occurrence.

I squint at Cooper, trying to read if he’s pulling a joke on me—it wouldn’t be the first time—but he seems sincere, and, do I dare say it, *nervous*.

Cooper Whittaker, a man I’ve never seen be anything but confident, is *nervous*.

My morbid curiosity gets the better of me. I climb off the couch and follow Cooper into the hallway on the other side of the house.

The hallway is dark, and I don’t know why Cooper doesn’t flip on the light. He leans against one wall and I lean against the other, leaving only a few feet separating us. I can barely see his face in the shadowy light trickling down the hall from the dining room.

Cooper rubs his hands on his thighs before crossing his arms. Then he uncrosses them and slips his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans. A moment later, he slides them out and steeple them in front of his lips. I watch him fidget and squirm, curious as to what squirrel crawled up his britches.

Crossing one ankle over the other, I slip my hands between my back and the wall, pinning them behind me. And I wait for whatever Cooper has to say to me.

“Are you aware,” Cooper says after a moment, his voice so low that I have to lean forward a few extra inches to make sure I hear him, “that your mother invited me and my parents to your annual Bradford Family Vacation?”

Cooper’s words hang in the air, despite their weight crushing my chest like an anvil. My eyes bounce around his shadowy face, searching for any sign that he’s lying. But all I find is open honesty and anxiety.

“And my parents accepted the invitation.”

The world falls away beneath my feet. I fibbed, hoping it would stop my mother’s incessant meddling, but I only made it worse by dragging Cooper—and now *his parents*—into the whole deception.

“So, you’re saying—“ my voice is so thin and fragile that a puff of wind could shatter it.

“That both sets of our parents believe we’re in a *committed* relationship and are going to be vacationing together in two weeks.”

I slide down the wall, my butt landing with a soft thud on the carpet. Bringing my hands to my face, I rub at the stress pooling at my temples before I lean my head back to look up at Cooper.

I let loose a word I normally reserve for when my code tests fail for no reason.

Cooper’s eyes widen at my unexpected outburst.

The knee-jerk reaction to apologize is right there on the tip of my tongue, but I roll my lips together and keep that apology in. Cooper doesn’t deserve an apology. This is half his fault anyway, for playing along with my little charade at lunch. But this isn’t a charade anymore.

This is a nightmare.

Cooper straightens and crosses his arms, staring down at me like my disappointed high school gym teacher when I couldn’t do a full push up. I scowl up at him.

“Any bright ideas you’d like to share, Coop?”

Cooper purses his lips and studies my face. “We could keep faking it.”

“Are you for reals?”

“Yes, Hannah, I am for reals.” The corner of his mouth ticks up in a serious smirk.

He gives me a moment to think, and...I think it might work. I started this whole thing to get my mom to stop meddling, so if we keep it up a little longer, surely it will sell the ruse better.

“So, we pretend to be all lovey dovey for a few days. Make it believable. And then when we get home, I’ll break up with you. I’ll cite that vacationing together was really eye-opening and that we’re not as compatible as I thought.”

The more I elaborate on the plan, the more sense it makes. Pretending to actually be in a relationship in front of my mom will get her to stop asking me about my boyfriend because she’ll be able to see it with her own two eyes. She won’t be begging me for secondhand information because she’ll be a primary source, experiencing it in real time.

“Wait, wait. Why do I have to be the one being dumped?”

“Because I started this thing, and I get to do what I want.”

“And what if I say no?”

I roll my eyes at his sass. First, he suggests we keep it up, and now he’s trying to back out of it? Puh-lease. I know he’s just messing with me. “Then you get to go back to having your mom ask you about when you’re giving her grandkids.”

“She thinks I’m in a relationship. She’ll never leave me alone about it now.”

“Maybe she will once the newness wears off. And if I know your mom, which I do—don’t forget that we spent just as much time at your house as we did mine—she’ll leave you alone to ‘process your feelings,’” I air quote, “if we break up.”

I study Cooper as he continues to contemplate quietly. I don’t want to hang all my hopes on him, but this just might work.

“By the way, when *are* we having kids?” Cooper breaks his silence with a smirk. I roll my eyes. Two seconds of seriousness is all I get. We’re going to have to really straighten out our stories if we’re going to make this work.

“We’re not having kids.”

“Wait till I tell Mom, she’ll be heartbroken!” Cooper grasps at his chest and leans down toward me, putting on a good show of overacting a broken heart. If he can put that much enthusiasm into a little fakity-faking in front of my mom, she might just believe us.

“Cooper,” I say in my sternest voice. “I’m serious. If you do this, my mom will stop asking about my dating life. Even after we ‘break up.’ She’ll think I’m actually heartbroken and leave me alone to grieve the loss of the love of my life.”

Cooper leans closer, a smile splitting his face. The back of my neck prickles at his nearness. “I’m the love of your life?”

I punch him in the arm.

Gently.

Okay, maybe not as gently as I should have.

“You wound me, Hannah.” He’s gone past exaggerated and straight into over-the-top.

“Be serious for just a minute, will you? If you look at the facts, this will work.” Cooper stands upright, actually taking me seriously. I watch his face as he thinks, his mouth twisting this way and that as he considers my proposal.

His eyes focus back on me instead of some space to my right, and I know he’s made his decision.

“You really think they’ll buy it?”

“They have thus far. Enough to get you invited on a *family-only* trip.”

“And you’re sure you can make it through the whole trip without falling in love with me?” Cooper’s smirk darkens as he stares at me, daring me with his eyes to blink first. Too bad he smothered whatever spark existed between us years ago.

My hopeful face falls into an emotionless mask. “I did that once, and it didn’t turn out so well.” Cooper raises his eyebrows. As if he didn’t know I had a crush on him in high school. My mom knew. Even my brothers knew, and if they figured it out, there’s no chance they didn’t tell him. That was probably why he turned me down—why we had our falling out. “I think I’ll be okay for four days.”

An uncomfortable silence falls between us, and I break it by standing and raising my chin until my eyes meet Cooper’s. “So are you in?” I extend my hand.

Cooper takes it. “I’m in,” he says. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, and I squeeze his hand, sealing our deal.

“Okay, *boyfriend*.”

CHAPTER 6

COOPER FOLLOWS ME INTO the living room. I drop onto the couch mere moments before he slides next to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. Jase's and Wesley's eyes go wide as they turn to look at the interruption.

“What are we watching, *babe?*” Cooper exaggerates the pet name and I pinch his side. He jerks away, but his arm remains across my shoulders.

When I notice my brothers' stares, I shrug. “What?”

Jase's finger bounces between the two of us. "You guys are dating?"

I roll my eyes as I grab Cooper's hand, unwinding myself from his arm. Then I scoot onto the arm of the couch to put some distance between us. "Of course not."

Now all of the men in the house are looking at me like I just grew a second head. I roll my eyes again. If this keeps up, they're going to dislocate. "You two are so gullible. And you." I poke Cooper's shoulder. "Don't have to pretend in front of them. This charade is for our parents."

Wesley leans forward, putting his head in his hands. "I am genuinely so confused right now. What about everything from family dinner?"

Cooper turns to me, raising an eyebrow, a question splashed across his face.

"Mom just thinks Cooper and I are dating because she called while I was waiting for some *loser* at the Cheesecake Factory." I pin Jase with a glare promising death and dismemberment, and he raises his hands in defense. "When Jase didn't show up, Cooper took it upon himself to join me for lunch. All this could have been avoided if *you* would have texted to say you weren't going to show!"

"I'm sorry, Hannah. How many times do you want me to say it?"

"A few more wouldn't hurt."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Happy now?"

"Very." I throw Jase a cheesy grin, a complete one-eighty from a few moments ago. I stand and walk to the other end of the sectional and sit on the cushion as far away from Cooper as I can. "This goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway." All eyes are back on me. "If either of you tell Mom and Dad, I'll feed you to the sharks."

Wesley rolls his eyes with a good-natured smile on his face. "There aren't any sharks around here, numbskull."

I shrug. “I also know where you guys keep your shampoo, and I have a bottle of Nair, so...”

In unison, Jase and Wesley gasp and try to cover their hair with their hands. “You wouldn’t dare,” Wesley whispers.

I smirk and shrug, turning back to the movie that we’ve reduced to background noise. “Try me.”

I focus on the movie, trying to enjoy the remnant of our sibling date night, even though it’s been invaded by an outsider. The three of them exchange glances, but I ignore it in favor of young Cary Elwes. *SWOON*. My peace is short-lived because Cooper stands and joins me on my side of the sectional, sitting so close that the sides of our thighs are pressed together. My heart rate jumps and I lurch up, practically leaping past Jase and Wesley, landing on the far end of the sectional in the spot Cooper just vacated.

Wesley snickers at me, and I steal the soft blanket—my addition to the living room—off his lap. My eyes catch on Cooper’s, and his pursed lips slide into a wicked smile. I shove down the tingles that run up my spine, and turn away from the mischief sparkling in his eyes.

“Alright then,” my younger brother says, surprising me, “if you’re going to convince Mom that you’re actually dating, then you need to practice. You can’t be jumping away from Cooper every time he tries to touch you.”

Wesley stands, jostling me, and turns to face the sectional. He places his hands on his hips, and instantly, my younger brother shifts into Teacher Mode.

“Alright,” he says, like we’re two of his drama students, “stand up and let’s work through this. Like we’re blocking a scene from a play.”

Jase snickers and Cooper and I both hesitantly stand. Wesley used to do this to us when he needed help rehearsing at home. We’d become his little props, reciting lines while he moved around the living room like it was his stage.

“This is going to be good,” Jase mumbles, and I shoot eye daggers in his direction while he turns off the movie. Now

Cooper and I are the center of attention.

Wesley rolls his eyes when he beckons Cooper and me closer, but we only move a few feet. Letting out an exasperated sigh, he grabs both of our arms and shoves us closer together.

“Listen, you two. No one is going to think you’re dating if you can’t stand near each other.” Wesley presses on Cooper and me until our arms are touching.

Fire shoots from my wrist to my shoulder, where Cooper’s bare arm is pressed against mine. The fine hairs on his forearm tickle my skin in a not unpleasant way, making my whole arm feel hot, and it’s quickly spreading to the rest of my body.

Wesley lets go of us and takes a step back, bringing a hand to his chin as he observes. My arms are locked, and I can feel the same rigidity oozing from Cooper. Wesley frowns and shakes his head. “Not good enough. Hannah, relax.”

Wesley takes a deep breath through his nose, scrunching his shoulders up to his ears, and then drops them as he forcefully exhales through his mouth. He raises his eyebrows and watches me expectantly.

So I mimic him. Breathing in, I tighten every muscle from my shoulders to my neck. My arms raise, brushing against Cooper’s. Releasing that breath, I drop my arms and shake out the tension in my shoulders. When my arm touches Cooper’s again, I don’t immediately lock up, so there’s something.

A tiny shift is all I feel from Cooper as he drops his shoulders and relaxes his arms. Lucky. Wesley didn’t make him do the whacko breathing exercise.

My younger brother eyes us critically. Okay, so we’re standing next to each other without looking like we just ate a bug...now what?

Wesley looks back and forth between Cooper and me. “Okay, let’s start with the basics. When you start dating, the first thing you usually do is hold hands.”

I raise my eyebrow at my brother. When did he become a relationship guru? Last time I checked, he was as single as me.

But he ignores me and continues, “Before you two can get to first base, you’ve got to step in the batter’s box. So, show me what you’ve got.” Wesley folds his arms across his chest and waits.

Neither Cooper or I move.

This is awkward.

Cooper moves first. His much larger hand covers mine, and now we’re linked, palm to palm. I lean to the side, sticking my elbow out toward him, like it’s a cattle prod. Too bad it’s not electrified. Cooper mirrors my positioning.

Wesley just shakes his head.

I’m pretty sure he mutters, “You’ve got to be kidding me,” but my brain zeroes in on the feeling of Cooper’s dry palm against mine as each fidget shifts our hands slightly. His light calluses that must come from his working out—I mean, *hello*, I’m not blind, I can see the way he fills out a shirt with my own two eyes—scrape my decidedly uncalloused palm. The toughest workout these hands get is flying over W-A-S-D while I play *Skyrim*.

My younger brother sighs and takes a step toward us, pushing our elbows down and smooshing our arms back together. But now, because of the height difference, my arm is bent with my elbow going behind me, instead of out to the side like I had it before.

It’s a little chilly now that it’s not pressed against Cooper’s.

Cooper’s hand shifts in mine as we adjust to Wesley’s wordless instructions, but it just feels...*weird*.

I yank my hand away and shake it out. “Sorry, it felt weird,” is my lame excuse when Wesley gives me the eye. Thank heavens I’m not an *actual* student of his.

“Try it a different way,” Wesley instructs.

“A different way?” I’m skeptical. “How many ways can you hold hands?”

Oh boy, I'm not expecting how many different ways there are to hold a hand.

It's not like I'm completely inexperienced in the art of hand holding, but any and all past dates/boyfriends of mine just stuck with the generic "interlaced fingers." But with Cooper, we try every way.

My arm underneath his.

My arm over his.

Interlocking our fingers.

Interlocking the fingers of the same hands. (Those calluses are even more noticeable on the sensitive skin on the back of my hand.)

Same thing with my hand on top. (My hand looks comically small in this hold.)

Cooper's arm over my shoulder and reaching up to lace through the fingers there.

My arm around Cooper's waist and him placing his hand over mine.

One sitting and one standing.

Double hand holds.

Behind-the-back hand holds.

It takes us half an hour to get through all the variations Wesley wants to see, but we finally end with the classic "interlaced fingers," which I've discovered is my favorite.

Cooper doesn't object. So we stand palm-to-palm, hip-to-hip while Wesley decides what our next step is.

Jase yawns loudly from the sectional. He's lying across one side, my soft blanket covering him, and his arm tucked behind his head. I glance at the clock, wishing this would end. It's late already. But Wesley claps his hands together and gives us a new set of instructions.

The later it gets, the sillier we become.

“Okay, now put your arm around her,” Wesley demands from the couch. It’s nearing two in the morning, but we’re still running on caffeine and pure determination.

Cooper flings his arm over my shoulder and drags me into his side. We’ve done this so many times at Wesley’s request that I don’t even fight it anymore. It’s the same motion he pulled on the couch when we first walked into the living room, but now I’m not peeling his arm away from my body.

For a brief moment, I’m reminded of similar familiarities during high school, when we were actually friends. Er, friend adjacents. More friends than we are now. I’d like to think I’ve grown up in the last eight years and put Cooper’s hurtful words behind me, but that’s the thing about grudges—they have a tendency to stick around when you don’t actively work to break them apart, and I’ve given mine nearly a decade to fester without confronting Cooper.

Be the bigger person, I remind myself as I shake off the memory of friendly Cooper from years past. But a small kernel of hurt refuses to be dislodged from my heart.

“Hannah, you stopped smiling. Bring the smile back.”

I won’t admit it to Cooper, but I’m glad Wesley suggested we practice before we jump right into trying to fool our parents. My brothers will call it how it is, and if we’re not believable enough, they’ll let us know. And they have. See: half an hour of practicing hand holding.

How do you mess up holding hands? I don’t know, but apparently Cooper and I did.

Despite our earlier hiccups, we’re getting better. The more we practice, the more I’m reminded of what our relationship was like in high school, before Cooper broke my teenage heart with eight words. The more I’m reminded that back then, I had a huge crush on Cooper, which apparently my brothers knew about.

Knew about and never gave me crap for, thank goodness.

I force a smile to my face, but I’m getting tired, and I know it’s not as authentic as it would have been a few hours

ago.

“Not good enough, Hannah. Try again.” Wesley is a taskmaster, and I’m starting to get tired-grumpy. He’s lucky I’m not one of his Drama Club students.

I harrumph, and Cooper tickles the top of my shoulder with the hand that’s hanging there. I grunt and shake his hand off and he quickly moves it to my neck, where I am powerless. I tuck my chin and laugh, but Cooper’s work is done and his hand retreats instead of continuing to tickle me.

Huh.

“Okay, now dip!” A wicked gleam enters Jase’s eye as he calls out the order from where he’s sprawled on the couch. Cooper obliges.

In one smooth move, he guides the shoulder he was holding across his body, his second hand coming to my waist to support me as he takes a step to the side and quickly drops me. I yelp, but Cooper’s hands hold me steady, hovering parallel to the floor. His face falls close to mine, and my vision is consumed with his light green eyes, looking murky in the shadow his face casts. Eyes that are so familiar, I could perfectly describe them to an artist.

“And kiss.”

I jerk up, my forehead colliding with Cooper’s. It was a glancing blow, but it still leaves a stinging spot on the side of my forehead. I rub at it, using the motion to shield most of my face from everyone in the room. In that one moment, Jase effectively killed whatever Cooper and I had going, and now I need to get out. Get away. And definitely *not* get kissed.

“Nope! We’re done for the night. Thank you for the practice, but I’m out.” I wave behind me as I walk quickly out of the living room.

“Let me walk you to your door!” Cooper calls from the other room. Jase and Wesley snicker, and then belly laugh as I hear Cooper’s footsteps nearing. I cut him off with my arm before he can get into the dining room.

“No, you’ve done enough. You’re off the hook, boyfriend.” I force a smile to my face and pat his chest, like I’d pat a hand or a child’s head.

That was a mistake.

My cheeks heat and I have no defense to hide the blush rising to my face because *why* did I have to notice right now that Cooper is *solid*? I need to get out of here before I notice anything else like how my high school crush on Cooper isn’t as dead as I thought. No need to resuscitate it any further. My heart might not survive being turned down a second time.

“Night, Coop.” I pull my hand back like I’ve been burned and hurry down the hallway to my room at a gait that is somewhere between a jog and a walk and is just awkward enough to make Cooper regret the moment we agreed to fake date.

CHAPTER 7

I REFRESH MY WORK email one more time before ducking back into my room and double checking that I have everything packed. It's only four days. Five if you count today, but our flight arrives in Florida really late, so the only thing we'll be doing in Orlando today will be checking into our hotel and going to sleep.

But I'm trying not to think about the flight. I'm looking at my packed bags as if I'm about to put them in the car for a road trip. Yep. Just a road trip in the sky. No biggie.

I pull my carry-on suitcase off my bed and wheel it into the living room. Checking my computer one last time, and, satisfied that I've finished as much work as possible, I log out and shut it down. I am officially off the clock and as ready as I can be for the Bradford Family Vacation. Er, the Bradford-Whittaker Family Vacation. Grabbing my laptop and cords off their shelf on my desk, I slide them into my backpack, along with the e-reader I bought a few weeks ago. It's a four-and-a-half hour flight to Orlando, and I know I'll need all the entertainment I can get to take my mind off the whole flying thing.

I check my last text from Jase, who spent the morning at Mom and Dad's with Wesley, since they both took the full day off. A luxury I didn't allow myself for two reasons: 1) I don't want my boss to think I'm slacking off. And 2) I needed *something* to keep my mind off the flight.

Jase

Leaving now.

Sent thirty minutes ago. Jase should be here any minute now.

The whole family agreed that we'd drive together so we didn't have to park more than one car at the airport. I argued that we'd be much more comfortable taking two cars, since I'm going to be the one stuck between my two massive brothers in a cramped back seat. But Jase's assurance that there will be plenty of room in Dad's truck won out. I told them to come pick me up on their way to the airport because the least I can do is make my squished ride as short as possible. Plus, it doesn't hurt that I'm able to get a little bit more work done before we leave.

My computer chair glides in a circle as I push it around lazily with my foot. The front door knob turns, and I jump up with a smile on my face for my brother, grabbing my bags.

Except Cooper walks through the door.

My smile falls, followed by a much-too-defensive sounding, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m picking you up to go to the airport?” Cooper’s brow is scrunched in confusion. “Didn’t Jase tell you I was coming?”

“Nope.” I’m going to be having *words* with my brother when I get to the airport.

I stare at Cooper while I contemplate my options. One: drive my own car to the airport. While it removes the awkwardness of being alone in a car with Cooper for twenty minutes, the whole point of carpooling was so we didn’t have everyone’s cars at the airport for no reason. Not to mention, I have no idea what Jase told Mom and Dad about why they weren’t picking me up, so if they’re expecting me to show up with Cooper, it would be suspicious.

And suspicious is the last thing I need my mom to be right now.

So I guess I’ll go with option two: ride with Cooper.

“Alright,” I sigh, shifting the bags to one hand and grabbing my coat with the other. “Let’s go.”

Cooper’s confusion melts into his lopsided smile and I have to bite the inside of my lips to stop myself from grinning back at him. Things have been less frigid between us since we agreed to fake date our way out of our parents’ meddling grasps, but I need to save all my sweet smiles and goo-goo eyes for when we’re in front of my mom.

Cooper leads me to a sleek black car that’s running in the driveway. After depositing my bags in the trunk, he moves toward my side of the car, but I put out an arm to stop him.

“I can get my own door.”

Cooper hmms and nods before hustling to the driver’s side. We settle into our seats without another word between us, then Cooper puts his car in reverse and pulls out of the driveway.

It’s an awkward few minutes of glancing around the car, out the windows at the cold, gray landscape, and at Cooper

before I break the ice.

“Nice car.”

“Thanks.”

I tap my fingers on my knees. “What do you do again?”

Cooper glances at me out of the corner of his eye. “What, Jase hasn’t kept you apprised of everything I’ve been doing for the last eight years?” He smiles like he’s made some grand joke.

“No.”

Cooper’s smile drops and his eyes dart to mine.

I shrug at his confusion. “Jase and I avoided talking about you.”

The silence that fills the car is big and uncomfortable. My fingers resume their dance across my kneecaps.

“Why?”

I turn my body to face Cooper and lace my fingers together to stop their fidgeting. I can do this. I can be an adult about what happened all those years ago.

“You told me you’d only ever see me as a little sister, and I didn’t take it well.” I study Cooper for a moment before continuing. “I had real feelings—big feelings—for you and I didn’t know what to do with them when you turned me down. So after that day, Jase and I just never talked about it because it was really awkward. And, well, you know how the next eight years went.”

Cooper doesn’t react when I mention my high school crush, and it does something weird in my stomach. *I knew he knew*. But regardless of his knowledge about the secret I was obviously not great at keeping, it feels nice to be this open with Cooper. Even though my heart hiccups a little bit as I recall that day and the hurtful words I hurled at Cooper in anger.

“I’m sorry.”

My eyes widen. “Why are you sorry? I’m the one who should be apologizing! So, I’m sorry, Cooper. I didn’t react very well and I said some really mean things—“

“Yeah, ‘I never want to see you again?’ That was a little harsh, coming from you.” Cooper cracks a smile and takes a second to look at me fully. Just one because then his eyes go right back to the road.

I didn’t mean for this car ride to become a heart-to-heart apology fest, but I feel lighter about the past, even if it doesn’t change our future very much. Cooper still sees me as Jase’s little sister, and I don’t have a chance with him.

Not that I want a chance.

Nope. That hope died a long time ago, and it certainly hasn’t resurfaced *at all* over the last three months. It hasn’t.

“So,” I say to break up the mature moment we just had, “let’s talk about the rules.”

“Rules?” Cooper’s expression is pure amusement, which is a far cry from the confusion I was expecting.

“Yes, rules. As in rules for our fake dating. We need to make sure we’re on the same page so this whole shebang goes off without a hitch. And Rule Number One: It’s all about the optics.”

“It’s all about the optics?” Cooper repeats slowly. “What does that even mean?”

I settle myself back into the comfortable seat. Knowing that Cooper isn’t going to try to change the subject back to the *I liked you a lot in high school* bit, I can focus on the matter at hand.

“It means what it means. It’s all about the optics. It’s all about what we show to our parents. We need to be on our game whenever we’re around them. If we’re alone or with just my brothers, we can turn it off.”

Cooper chuckles. “You’re talking about our relationship like it’s a child’s toy with an on/off switch.”

“Fake relationship,” I correct him. “This is all about *looks* and not about *feels*. We need to look like we’re a real couple, but we don’t need to feel it.” High School Hannah would be tearing my own hair out, hearing that I’m turning down the chance—any chance—to be in a real relationship with Cooper. I’m not interested in dating Cooper for real. Everything we are doing on this trip is for appearances only. “If we’re going to make it *look* like we’re dating, hand holding is a given. So let’s stick with that as much as we can. Hugs, arms around shoulders, and standing close together, all easy and all okay with me if they’re okay for you.”

“All are fine for me.”

“Excellent. Basically, everything we practiced last week is fair game.”

Cooper nods along, like a good little student. “Is kissing on the table?”

But then again, good students don’t ask stupid questions.

It’s a good thing I’m not driving, or we’d be off the road in a ditch. I try to keep my face blank to mask the fact that my heartrate just skyrocketed at the idea of kissing Cooper. I haven’t daydreamed anything like that about Cooper in *years*, but suddenly, all those high school fantasies are at the forefront of my mind, flying straight past the memory of me freaking out and smashing foreheads with Cooper when my brother suggested the same thing.

“Nope,” I say, a little too quickly to be casual, but I hope Cooper doesn’t notice.

“Why not? Couples kiss. Won’t your parents think something’s up if you never kiss me?”

“We can just tell them that we’re not big into PDA.”

“Says the woman whose love language is physical touch.”

I open my mouth to retort, but shut it. My first instinct is to ask *how do you know that?* but Cooper’s known me for most of my life. Aside from the few years of early childhood before his family moved into the neighborhood, and the eight years I was away in California, Cooper has been as constant as the

North Star. But I've changed a lot in eight years, I remind myself. Cooper doesn't really know me. Not anymore.

"No kissing."

Cooper glances away from the road to study me, but then nods.

"Now that that's out of the way, I have a few more items of business to discuss." It really does make this whole thing easier if I treat it like one of my work meetings. "Rule Number Two: We don't talk about fake dating."

"This isn't Fight Club, Hannah."

"But you never know who is watching. Or listening. It has to be all heart eyes, all the time. If we even think our parents are around, let's keep any arguments and sass behind closed doors." I punctuate that by raising my eyebrows at Cooper.

Cooper pins me with a pointed look that lasts a little longer than I feel comfortable with. Mostly because I know the roads are a little slushy, but also because it feels like Cooper is staring directly into my soul. "I'm not the one who needs to worry about their sass."

I can't help it, I stick my tongue out at him. It's a knee-jerk reaction.

Cooper's face relaxes as he laughs and looks back at the road, but that musical sound—a direct response to something I did—makes a bubbly feeling cascade up from my sternum. *Bad bubbles.* I pop every last one and clear my throat, ready to move on to my final rule. The most important rule. The rule that those bubbles need to listen to.

"Rule Number Three: No catching feelings."

Cooper doesn't say anything. He doesn't even look at me. I keep going before I give him too much of an opening. "I know that you know that I'll only ever be like a little sister to you, so we don't need to complicate anything by mistaking all of our pretending for the real deal. I'm not interested in dating right now, and especially not you, so let's agree that at the end of this, we part ways as friends, and nothing more."

Cooper shoots me an unreadable look, but is quiet as we exit the freeway. He remains quiet as he follows the signs directing us to the long-term parking. By the time we're pulling into a parking spot, my bottled energy is threatening to burst out of my chest. I need to know what he's thinking with an intensity I've never felt before. Did I just ruin the whole thing? Am I going to have to do the walk of shame and admit I lied in front of both of our families?

Cooper turns off the car, and I can't stay quiet any longer.

"Do you agree to all the fake dating rules?"

He turns his upper body to face me, so I mirror his actions. Cooper's undivided attention in a space this small makes me buzz with energy, and I feel like my heart is going to burst out of my chest. Cooper extends his hand over the console, and I take it, remembering the feel of that big palm wrapped around my much smaller one while we practiced holding hands.

"I agree to all the fake dating rules."

The handshake makes this deal feel official, but the way Cooper's hand lingers in mine feels anything but professional. His thumb just barely shifts across the back of mine, and a new wave of butterflies swarms me. I've got to lock those down if I'm going to follow my own rules for this trip.

I pull my hand out of his and open my door, hoping the blast of arctic air will help clear my head. Twenty minutes ago, I was certain I knew how the next few days would go. Completely fake. No feelings. But Cooper's long looks and his lingering touches are upending my expectations. It's only been a twenty minute car ride. How am I supposed to do this for another four days?

Cooper beats me to the trunk as I climb out of the car and slip my arms into my coat, not bothering to zip it up. I won't need it for most of the trip, but I refuse to make the trek from the long-term parking lot to the front of the airport without it. Not in these temps. He lifts his suitcase from the trunk then reaches for mine.

“Hey, I can get my own bags. You don’t need to do that.” I put my hand over where he’s gripped the handle of my red hard-shell suitcase, stopping him from removing it from the trunk.

“Rule Number One, Hannah. It’s all about the optics. If I were your boyfriend, you’d let me do this.”

“But you’re not my boyfriend. You’re my *fake* boyfriend.” I squeeze my hand tighter around his, but there’s no way on this planet that my flimsy, computer nerd grip will do anything to persuade Cooper’s large hand to let go.

Cooper tuts at me, shaking his head with a little smile on his face. “Ah, ah, ah. Rule Number Two: we don’t talk about fake dating.”

I close my eyes and let out an aggravated sigh. I can’t tell whether I like that he’s taking the rules seriously or frustrated that he’s catching me with technicalities.

“Let me do this,” Cooper’s voice softens from his usual sarcasm, and my heart squeezes at his sincerity. “Please.”

Shoot.

I open my eyes and slowly peel my hand away from my suitcase handle. Cooper lifts my luggage out, and I shut the trunk before he nods his head, gesturing for me to walk in front of him. I stuff my hands into my pockets and begin to walk, chanting in my mind, *Rule Number Three. Rule Number Three.*

Rule Number Three.

CHAPTER 8

MY FAMILY IS NOT hard to find once we enter the airport. *Game face on*, I remind myself. My smile is genuine when Cooper and I walk up to the group and find his parents, Aaron and Evelyn, waiting with my mom and dad. I haven't seen them in years, and it's not hard to be happy around the two people who were practically a second set of parents to me and my brothers growing up. They both give me hugs in lieu of handshakes, which puts me more at ease. They don't immediately jump in and ask me about my dating Cooper, like

my mom has over the last few weeks, which is reason enough to relax a little. In fact, they barely react to the two of us showing up together.

I take a step back from their embraces and bump into Cooper, who has positioned himself behind me. His arm snakes around my waist and he slips his hand into my unzipped coat and spreads it wide across my stomach. In practice, it was no big deal. Cooper had his hands all over my waist and shoulder and arms, but in execution? When it really counts?

Huge freaking alarms go off in my mind, each one notifying me of every single nerve ending that's greedily soaking in Cooper's touch like parched ground during a rainstorm.

The heat from his hand bleeds through my t-shirt and spreads up my abdomen to my chest. I inhale deeply, trying to stop the warmth from spreading up to my face. A cute blush might lend credibility to our show of affection, but my face doesn't do cute blushes. The heat spreading through my body is more likely to make me look like I died running a mile than like I'm twitterpated over my boyfriend.

Keeping my breathing slow and steady, I smile like that mask is the key to calming my heart that is *freaking out* about Cooper's hand placement. Whether it's because Teenage Hannah is having a heyday or Adult Hannah is, I can't really tell. Blowing out a breath in a controlled stream, I decide to put everything I've got into this performance. *It's easy*, I tell myself, *just like we practiced*. I drop my shoulders from where they've creeped up near my ears and lean back into Cooper slightly.

Cooper's hand presses me closer to his body, and I am cocooned in his warmth and his smell. If I hadn't put rules in place, I might have nuzzled around and made a nest here, but that's a big no-no. Not today. Not ever.

Even as I pull off my coat with Cooper's help, he makes it seem like we've done this a million times before. He helps me untangle my arms from the puffy material with ease and then

drapes it across the top of our two suitcases before pulling me back into his chest like that's where I belong.

I try not to enjoy it too much because I know this isn't real. But even if the feelings are fake, the sensation of being wrapped in Cooper's arm is *divine*. It's everything my teenage self dreamt about and more.

"Alright," Mom says when she spots me and Cooper, practically cuddling, near the back of the group, "now that we're all here, let's get through security. We don't want to miss our flight because we get stuck in a line."

The next hour is a slow-mo montage of shuffling through lines and intense Cooper proximity that I never imagined, but probably should have, when we cooked up the whole fake dating thing. He's constantly there, only a handful of steps away. His hand is either around mine, gently pressed against my lower back, or resting on my shoulder. Every touch is one hundred percent by-the-book, but it takes me longer than I expected to shake off the weirdness clawing at the inside of my chest and convince myself that this is no big deal.

By the time we're slipping on our shoes and stowing electronics back in our carry-ons, I've warmed to having Cooper as the newest extension of my arm. Conspicuously absent is my mom's pestering. It looks like my plan with Cooper is working. A real smile creeps to my face, but is wiped away when I catch my first glimpse of an airplane out a window. The sudden reminder of what *here* is is a mental bucket of cold water. But while I'd like to turn around and walk the other way, Mom leads our group onward.

With each step of the more-than-half-mile walk to Concourse B, my anxiety ratchets up another notch. Now that we're through security, it's a fifteen minute walk to our gate. *Fifteen minutes*. Did I google it? Yes. Yes, I did.

This newer area of the airport opened sometime between the last time I flew on a plane and now, and let me tell you, walking *fifteen minutes* to my doom does nothing good for my anxiety about getting on a plane again. But if I can pretend to be dating Cooper and pretend to be unaffected by his

proximity, then I can pretend to not be worried about a teensy four-hour plane ride.

Right now, the panic I'm feeling inside is replacing even my most ardent nervousness about the believability of my acting. No one has remarked on it yet, so I guess we're still in the clear. I grip Cooper's hand a little tighter as we finally get to our gate and sit down to wait. He must mistake it for one of those couple-y *hey boo* squeezes because he smiles down at me and squeezes my hand back, completely oblivious to the DEFCON 1 alarms going off inside my body. He leans his head closer to mine, and since my brothers create a barrier that gives us a little space from our parents, he risks the ruse. "We're doing great."

"Rule Number Two," I hiss back at him, a little sharper than I might have if we had been somewhere comfortable, like my parents' living room, instead of inching closer to a panic attack.

"Relax," Cooper says as he pulls his hand from mine and instead drapes it over my shoulder, giving him access to lean his head even closer. My now unoccupied hand involuntarily balls into a tight fist, and I tuck it awkwardly behind me and lean into Cooper's touch in an attempt to hide how freaked out I am. I'm sure from the outside, we look like a real couple but only because no one else knows I'm trying to steal some of his calm by osmosis or conduction or some other completely scientific phenomenon.

As his hand runs up and down my upper arm, my heart rate slows and the anxiety in my chest lessens. My breaths come a little easier, and Cooper gives me a little squeeze as I relax into him.

The jury's out on whether it's actually osmosis, but the solid, steady presence of Cooper's arm around me makes waiting to board the death trap bearable.

After an hour, an airline employee starts calling for groups of people to begin boarding, and we all shuffle toward the gate. Cooper guides me along from behind, like he's herding a flighty toddler, which is exactly what I feel like at this point.

On the outside, I'm wearing a mask that says I am completely Zen, but on the inside, it's *Inside Out* Girl Alert levels of crazy.

We're guided down the ramp and onto the plane. I put all my focus on finding my row and seat number, and internally cringe when I find the row with another passenger already seated in the aisle seat. I smile, trying to look unbothered, as I lift my luggage into the storage compartment and shimmy past him into my assigned seat. My row mate returns my small, polite smile and goes back to scrolling on his phone.

Cooper follows me into the middle seat, and I frown at him.

"That's Jase's seat."

"Jase swapped with me," Cooper says with his usual half-smile. "Thought I'd want to sit next to my *girlfriend* instead of my parents."

I half-stand to see over the seats. Mom, Dad, and Wesley are in the row in front of me, too busy adjusting their belongings to notice me. But I catch Jase's eye, about six rows ahead of them on the other side of the plane. He's next to a window, head popped up and looking my way with a big, stupid grin on his face. He gives me a thumbs up and slides down into his seat, and I glare at the sliver of his dark head that I can still see.

It's fine. It's cool. Everything is fine. I planned on having my brother distract me for the whole flight, but now, I guess that honor falls to Cooper. Cooper, who looks completely at ease as he tucks a backpack underneath the seat in front of him. I sit down, sliding my own backpack in place and buckle myself in. Cooper's wide shoulders crowd into my space as he attempts to avoid invading our row mate's personal bubble. His gentle lean pushes me toward the outside of the plane, and when my shoulder hits the cool, textured plastic of the cabin wall, whatever semblance of calm I have shatters.

That physical reminder that I am mere inches away from the outside of the vehicle that is going to transport me many thousands of feet in the air rips apart my carefully constructed

composure. My eyes are drawn to the tiny window, less than a foot in front of me, through which I can see the wing of the plane. I snap the window cover shut as my heart rate spikes closer and closer to its maximum. I grip the armrests with all the strength my fingers possess and inhale slowly. My exhale is choppy, and the panic begins seeping down my arms. We haven't even started moving—not even taxiing to the runway—and I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

A warm hand covers mine on the armrest I share with Cooper. I take a long, shaky breath before turning my head.

“Yes?” My quivering voice is barely loud enough to be heard over the din of passengers boarding. I don't have time to feel embarrassed that I'm about two seconds away from having a panic attack because said panic is overflowing all of my senses.

“Are you okay?” Cooper's brow furrows in concern, and he dips his head, putting those clear, green eyes in my direct line of sight. It's completely obvious that *no*, I am not *okay*, so I don't embarrass myself further by lying.

“Nope,” I whisper. Glancing at the row in front of us, when I'm sure my parents are too absorbed in their own conversation to eavesdrop on mine, I continue. “I hate flying.”

Cooper squeezes my hand a little tighter. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Do I have any other choice?” The smile I attempt falls so far from the mark, I don't even know how to classify the facial expression. A wibbly, wobbly, super creepy, marionette smile, maybe, but certainly not one that communicates that I will be fine.

Cooper's head dips closer to mine. So close, our foreheads are almost touching. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

He looks so earnest, so openly concerned, that I immediately tell him the truth.

“Could we switch seats?” I take another deep breath. “The window is freaking me out.”

Without hesitation, Cooper sits up straight and unclasps his seatbelt. I do the same, grateful that the flight attendants don't immediately tell us to sit back down. It's an awkward shimmy for the both of us, our bodies pressing close together as we swap seats. If I hadn't spent the last few hours with Cooper draped over me like a blanket, I would feel more self-conscious, but at the moment, his proximity is grounding me, keeping the full force of my panic at bay.

I sit down and buckle the seatbelt as quickly as I can with jittery fingers, giving the man in the aisle seat, whose expression looks more annoyed by the minute, an apologetic smile. When he goes back to scrolling on his phone, I lean toward Cooper. Maybe if I spend the entire flight giving my neighbor extra space, it will make up for whatever we're putting him through.

Cooper settles into his seat and wraps an arm around me. But airplane seats are not for cuddling, and his bulky arm behind my shoulders pushes me too far forward into an awkward hunch. I reach up and unwrap his arm from around me like I did on my brothers' couch, but instead of pushing him away, I interlace our fingers tightly and lean into him.

I close my eyes and focus on the feeling of Cooper's hand in mine, grounding myself. The roughness of his palm, the way the pads of his fingers press into the back of my hand, his warmth and peace and steadiness. I halfheartedly listen as the flight attendants conduct the pre-flight safety briefing. While I know it's mandatory, being told how to put on an oxygen mask or inflate a life jacket in case of emergency does little to put me at ease.

"Hey." The sound of Cooper's voice makes me open my eyes. "I found some tips for overcoming a fear of flying."

I shush him.

Then I tilt my head in the direction of my parents in front of us and lean closer to Cooper. "Um, my parents don't know that I'm afraid of flying, and I'd like to keep it that way," I whisper. Cooper's eyes dance back and forth between me and the seats in front of us a few times before he extends his phone

for me to read the title of an article. *How to Cope with a Fear of Flying*.

Just as I'm reaching forward to scroll down for the tips that I so desperately need, I feel the plane start to move, and I press my back into my seat. My hand goes to grip the other armrest for dear life, and I squeeze Cooper's hand so hard he might lose circulation. Accidental amputation was not on my to-do list today.

Cooper squeezes back, and he leans forward so I can see his face without moving my body.

"Would you like those tips now?" he asks in a low voice.

"Yes, please," I squeak.

"Okay, first is to label your feelings."

I can't bring myself to voice them aloud, but I think them like I'm shouting them. *I AM SCARED*.

"Now remind yourself that you're safe."

I AM SCARED AND I AM SAFE.

If that's supposed to make me feel better, it isn't working. The plane continues to bounce toward the runway in time to the anxiety beating in my chest. "Can we try another one?"

Cooper nods. "Try focusing on why you're flying in the first place."

"I'm flying for a family vacation that I'm really excited for. I'm going to Orlando, Florida to spend four days with my family. And my f—" I stop myself before I break Rule Number Two. "And my boyfriend."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cooper smile. "And you're excited to be vacationing with your boyfriend?" he prompts.

The corner of my mouth perks up. It's not even a half smile, but it eases the muscles around my mouth that are tense from the death grip my anxiety has on me. I may never be able to unclench my hands again, but at least my facial muscles haven't rebelled completely. I meet Cooper's eyes.

“I’m *so* excited to be traveling with my boyfriend.” The sweetness in my voice could give me a cavity. I bounce my eyebrows up and down, the only movement I seem to be capable of at the moment, and a smile stretches across Cooper’s face. His genuine reaction makes me smile, and my heart rate drops a few more BPMs. It’s still nowhere near the recommended “at rest” range, but at least I’m not going to pass out from prolonged tachycardia. He shakes his head in what can only be exasperation as he lifts his phone again to read from the list.

“The final tip is distraction. Did you bring anything with you to do on the flight?”

“Yeah. I brought some books to read. Finally converted to e-books.”

“Is it under the seat? I can grab it for you.”

I tip my head forward, looking for the bag I stashed under the seat in front of me, but then I straighten abruptly when an extra large bump jars my body. “Nope.” I gulp. “I can’t get to it.”

“I can probably reach it,” Cooper says as he bends, but another errant bounce has me gripping his hand tighter and shaking my head. He raises his eyebrows at me, but straightens back to our original position.

“It’s not worth it. I’ll just sit here and...” I glance around, hoping to find something to occupy myself with as each bounce cranks my panic dial by another notch, but I come up empty.

Cooper squeezes my hand. “Here,” he says, offering me a small white earbud. Slowly, I peel the fingers of my left hand away from the arm rest to take the proffered earbud and slip it into my ear. I don’t know what I’m expecting, but it’s not Taylor Swift.

Familiar, but updated, chords filter through the small speaker in my ear. *Oh my gosh, Cooper listens to Taylor’s Version.*

I'm about to ask Cooper about his choice in music—is he *really* a Swiftie, or did he pick this for me?—when the plane rapidly accelerates for takeoff and my stomach swoops. Cooper's free hand covers our interlocked fingers and he starts running the pads of his fingers across the back of my hand. Focusing on the movement distracts me from the sensation of the airplane leaving the ground and ascending. But Taylor Swift and Cooper's fingers keep me firmly grounded in the moment, and although my grip tightens on Cooper, I'd rather be flying with him here next to me than having him sitting six rows ahead.

Don't tell my brother.

As the airplane climbs, I close my eyes and focus on the music and Cooper. The song ends and the next plays, another Swift classic, and the rhythm of Cooper's fingers on mine changes to match the music. I peek an eye open to watch Cooper. His face is turned toward the window, but I see the other earbud in his own ear. A small bit of warmth wraps itself around my heart. He turned on a mini T-Swift concert for *both* of us, which is a dead giveaway that he's a fan.

I close my eyes again and focus on the lyrics. The chorus hits and my stomach drops a little. The warmth of his little musical gesture turns cold. "You are the best thing that's ever been mine," Taylor sings. Cooper's hand tightens almost imperceptibly, but I ignore it. I'm not *his*. Not really. And I can't forget it.

CHAPTER 9

MY PILLOW SHIFTS, AND a hand brushes across my forehead and down toward my ear. “Hey, Hannah,” Cooper’s soft voice rumbles up from underneath my cheek.

I inhale deeply and sit upright. I sleepily untangle the fingers of my right hand from Cooper’s to rub the sleep from my eyes before dragging my palms over my face. My hand comes away from my cheek slightly damp, and that strange sensation sends me into awareness faster than a whiff of smelling salts.

I try to peek surreptitiously at where my cheek had been propped on Cooper's shoulder, and my face heats in embarrassment when I see a spot on his shirt darkened by my drool. It was bad enough that I nearly had a panic attack in front of him, but *of course* I had to go and drool on him. Like a toddler.

I want to melt into a puddle of mortification. At least that way, they could mop me up and I wouldn't have to look Cooper in the eye ever again.

"We're about to land," Cooper says, oblivious to my embarrassment. He doesn't even look fazed that his shoulder is covered in my spit. I watch him remove his earbud, and I'm reminded of the one that's still in my own ear, quietly playing Cooper's T-Swift playlist. I pull out the earbud and offer it back to Cooper. He slips it into its case, and I realize the whole plane is awash with the quiet sounds of people shifting, putting away their own in-flight distractions.

We're landing.

And I'm not freaking out.

Miraculously, I was calm enough to fall asleep, and that drool spot on Cooper's shoulder is proof.

I run my palms down my thighs and huff a small pleased sound through my nose. A voice comes over the intercom on the plane, alerting us to the beginning of our descent, and as I feel the plane shift, my anxiety starts to rise again. Cooper straightens from stowing his earbuds in his bag, and reaches for my hand.

He laces our fingers together and rests our arms on the armrest between us, and without prompting, he begins the slow brush of fingers across the back of my hand like he did during takeoff.

Cooper doesn't let go of my hand during the entire descent, landing, and taxiing to the gate. He doesn't say a word about it, either. As one of my brother's oldest friends, I expected some sort of teasing about this irrational fear of mine, but not once during the four-hour flight did Cooper poke

fun at how I struggled with the takeoff or nearly squashed his hand into jelly.

The lack of brotherly teasing is...unsettling. Nice? Refreshing? It's hard to describe because even during at-ease moments, like the drive to the airport, Cooper always pokes and prods good-naturedly. I assumed that my over-the-top reaction to flying would be fodder for Cooper's jokes, but when it isn't...I almost don't know what to do with myself.

Except be guided out of the plane by Cooper who keeps a steady hand on my shoulder as we shuffle toward the jet bridge.



If I knew I was going swimming, I would have worn my swimsuit.

The moment I step out of the climate controlled plane and onto the jet bridge, I'm cocooned in the overwhelming humidity of Orlando. The heavy, wet air shoves itself down my throat and wraps around my lungs in an uncomfortable hug that makes me want to do an about-face back onto the plane.

Even the moderate humidity of LA can't compare to the swamp we're wading through as we file politely up the jet bridge and into the terminal. Every breath feels like a swig of water, and I'm grateful that this is temporary. Give me my air so dry you get nosebleeds any day of the week.

As we enter the airport proper, I'm not the only one who wants to revolt against the water content of the air. Jase sticks his tongue out and sucks in a huge breath. Mom whacks him lightly on the arm.

"Roll your tongue back into your mouth, Jase. You're in public." Mom chides while discreetly adjusting her shirt from sticking to her sides.

Jase sucks his tongue back into his mouth with a slurp. "I can drink the air. There's something so wrong with that."

"I'll get you an extra straw when we grab dinner so you can take a drink any time you're thirsty." Wesley grins and

both he and Jase mime putting a straw to their lips and slurping.

My brothers, ladies and gentlemen.

When we've all assembled and counted bags, checking and double checking that we have everything we boarded the plane with, my parents lead the way to the exit. Jase and Wesley walk ahead of me and Cooper, messing around like they're seven and five, not twenty-seven and twenty-five. Cooper and I walk far enough behind that we're not caught in their shenanigans.

After four straight hours of having Cooper's hand in mine, I feel oddly incomplete without it, but he's only a step away, wheeling both of our suitcases.

We follow our group until we're outside the airport proper and are waiting for our parents to finish renting the cars for our stay. My parents return from the counter with two sets of keys and hand one to me. Jase looks outraged that he, as the eldest child, was not chosen as the designated driver.

"I'll send the address to the hotel in the group chat. Why don't you kids grab something for dinner and meet us there?"

"You got it, Mom." I shoot a smug smile at my older brother, who still looks a little put out, but I can tell it's all an act. He goes and messes around like a little twerp on vacation because back at home, he has a Very Serious Adult Job where he has to maintain a level of professionalism that I don't envy. He's very good at his job, but I'll take my work-from-home set up any day.

The four of us kids make our way to our little rented sedan and load our bags into the back. I slide into the driver's seat and the three men do rock-paper-scissors to decide who gets the coveted extra legroom of the front passenger seat. I'm relieved when Wesley wins and takes the seat next to me.

We pull out of the lot, following the directions to a restaurant with takeout near our hotel, a heavy weight lifts off my shoulders as I let my *girlfriend* mask fall. At least for the ride to the hotel, I don't have to pretend to be anything I'm

not, and I can relax and enjoy a genuine moment with my brothers. And Cooper.

He's in the backseat, chilling with Jase, just like he did all those years ago before I yelled that I never wanted to see him again. Their friendship certainly hasn't changed in eight years, and the thought makes me smile. I glance at the rearview mirror to watch my brother enjoy a few moments with his friend, and I have to look away when I find Cooper watching me back.



My arms are full of food while my brothers and Cooper wheel suitcases through the spacious lobby. It's late, leaving the common area quiet, and I almost feel like I need to whisper as we approach. Dad is sitting on an uncomfortable-looking modern couch with Cooper's parents, shooting the breeze. Mom joins us moments after my brothers plop down on a matching loveseat, a nervous look on her face.

"So, there were some...complications," she announces to the group. I instantly zero in on her. She's making an effort not to look at me, and my stomach drops. "We booked the extra rooms so much later than our original ones that they didn't have much left to choose from. So we're going to make some changes."

Changes? Why do I get the feeling that I'm not going to like this?

"We're going to put Aaron and Evelyn in mine and Luke's double queen room, and we're going to take the new single queen." Mom passes Cooper's parents a small paper pocket with hotel keys tucked inside. Unease filters through every inch of my body. Surely, that second queen bed means that Cooper will be in that room with his parents...but Mom said something about rooms. Plural.

"Jase and Wesley, you're taking the other double queen room." Another set of keys is passed to another set of room occupants.

Wait, *I* was supposed to be in that room...

My heart swoops when Mom turns to me, an unreadable gleam in her eye.

Surely not.

Mom can't be *that* desperate for grandkids. But...there. I see it. I can read that gleam now. She did.

"Hannah and Cooper, I was able to get you your own room. It's not on the same floor as the rest of us, but maybe that's for the best."

Inside, I'm dying of mortification. But I can't let any of it show. The moment I do something that doesn't line up with mine and Cooper's narrative, Mom will know something's up. So I lay it on thick, making sure she can't see through my mask.

"Thanks, Mom!" Is that a little too chipper for just getting off a four-hour flight? I take the key cards Mom passes to me with a grin. "That will be perfect, won't it, Cooper Darling?"

I turn to Cooper, who has now occupied the chair that rounds out the matching set, and judging by the look on his face, I will *never* hear the end of this.

"Absolutely perfect, Hannah Dearest."

I slip the key cards into my pocket and pass out the bags of food we brought in.

Shuffling back to the loveseat and chair that have been claimed for the younger half of this family vacation, I find that all the seats in this small section of the lobby are taken. I guess I'll eat standing, then.

Something tugs on one of my belt loops, and my hips involuntarily swing toward Cooper. He tugs again, knocking me off balance just enough that I have two choices: 1) fall to the floor or 2) guide myself onto the chair and Cooper's lap.

Which means I really only have one choice.

Cooper's hand moves from pulling on my belt loop to wrapping around my hip as I fall as gracefully as I can onto his knee. I shimmy a little to make sure I'm not going to fall off as

soon as Cooper lets go and roll with the fact that *I'm on Cooper's lap*.

Well...knee.

He gives my hip a gentle squeeze before turning back to his dinner.

Conversation picks up around me, but I focus on keeping my mouth full enough that I can't answer any questions thrown my way. I'm the first to finish and am grateful when Cooper crumples up his bag seconds after me.

"Why don't we go up and get settled?" Cooper asks, more of an announcement that we're leaving than an actual question for me.

Yes. Anything to get some space. I'm already standing, combining his garbage with mine, and looking for the nearest trash can. When I get back to him, Cooper is on his feet, his hands on our suitcases.

"Well," I say to the group, avoiding any and all eye contact, "we'll see you guys in the morning! Good night!" I try to infuse all my remaining enthusiasm into those few words before I take off for the elevator with Cooper hot on my heels.

CHAPTER 10

BEFORE I EVEN OPEN the door, I know what I will find.

One bed.

I shouldn't be surprised, but my heart jumps anyway when my eyes land on that solitary king bed that fills the majority of the hotel room.

"I'm not sleeping on the floor." Cooper's deep voice behind me makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I

hear him drop the luggage in an unceremonious heap before the hotel room door clicks shut.

Time to take the mask off.

Glad my back is to Cooper, I roll my eyes, then turn and carefully pull my suitcase out of his unruly pile and move it to the end of the bed. I unzip and open it before turning fully facing him. “You’re in luck because you don’t have to.”

Cooper scoffs and his eyebrows nearly touch his hairline. “You’re joking, right? I know we’re pretending and all, but now you’re suggesting we *share a bed*?” He crosses his arms, highlighting the curve of his bicep. My eyes flick down, take notice, and I haul them back to his face before they do any *lingering*. I don’t need any of that nonsense going on this week. Rule Number Three.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” I reach inside my suitcase and grab the first fist-sized thing I can find—a balled-up pair of my socks—and throw them at him. He effortlessly catches them before they hit him in the face. “I’m not going to cuddle with you all night. There’s plenty of room in this bed for the two of us. You’re going to stay on your side and I’m going to stay on mine. It’s only for a few days, then you can go back to starfishing on your bed *all alone*.”

Facing my suitcase again, I pull out my toiletry bag and pajamas. I knock into Cooper’s shoulder as I pass to get to the bathroom. I hoped that this wouldn’t happen, but now I’m glad I had a contingency plan for this situation. But the reality of Cooper sleeping mere feet away still rattles me a little.

“Better get ready for bed. My mom set an early call time for tomorrow morning.” I slip into the bathroom and lock it before I can hear Cooper’s retort. Setting my things on the counter, I stare into the mirror and give myself a pep talk.

“You’ve got this, Hannah. Four days of sharing a room with Cooper and then you are home free.”

What has my life come to? I’m twenty-six years old, hiding in a bathroom from my fake boyfriend, while on a four-day vacation with both our families. This is ridiculous. But

even more ridiculous? Telling my mom to her face that I want her to stop meddling in my life.

“I can hear you, Hannah.”

Cooper’s voice is tinged with amusement, and I can practically feel his smug smile through the thin hotel walls. I scowl at Mirror Hannah and point my finger at her chest. *You. Got. This.*

A few minutes later, I step out of the bathroom, all traces of makeup washed off my face, thick glasses on, and hair up in a messy bun. My pajamas are old, but they’re my comfiest set, and I need all the small wins I can get to survive this vacation. At least I’m not wearing pajama shorts, since I didn’t shave before leaving Utah.

But that shouldn’t matter. My appearance isn’t anything new after he saw me like this in November. Plus, he knew me through my braces and Justin Bieber phase in junior high, and nothing is worse than that. There is no reason in the world that I should be self-conscious about how I look in front of Cooper.

I turn the corner to see him lying on the bed, and I catch myself before I drop my stuff.

Cooper is stretched on top of the comforter, his crossed ankles nearly reaching the end of the bed. Muscles that shouldn’t even exist do, in fact, exist in Cooper’s body. A pair of athletic shorts is the only thing obscuring his god-like physique, but even they can’t hide his muscular thighs. Cooper had been good-looking back when I crushed on him in high school, but those were puny, boy muscles compared to the visage before me now. My heart flutters, but I stomp down any rising attraction—Cooper hurt me once before, and I’m not going to let him do it again.

“Hannah,” Cooper’s voice breaks me out of whatever spell that was. “You’re drooling.”

I snap my mouth shut and glare at Cooper, heat rising in my cheeks. It’s a struggle to keep my eyes on his face and not let them drift down to biceps or pecs or abs. Just because I can

appreciate a well-built man's bare torso does not mean I am *into* him. Because I am not *into* Cooper.

I'm not.

I'm not.

I'm not.

“Put a shirt on.”

Cooper smoothly sits up, his easily-countable abdominals rippling with hardly an effort. “Why? Does this bother you?” The boyish sparkle in his eyes shines in stark contrast to his devilish smirk. My blush spreads down to my neck as I turn away and shove things into my bag. I'll probably regret the mess in the morning, but I need to slip into a few hours of blissful unconsciousness, away from Cooper.

“Nope, not at all. I just thought you might get cold.” Ha. We're in Florida, where we have to measure the heat by temperature *and* humidity. “I'm only looking out for my *boyfriend's* best interests.” I try to sweeten the words, but there's an unexpected bite to them. At one point in my life, I would have sold an arm and a leg to be Cooper's girlfriend—heck, to get Cooper to even notice me as anything more than a sister figure—but now I know better. I'll take one for the proverbial team and pretend, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

I shift my suitcase to the floor and climb under the covers on my side of the bed, keeping my body as close to the edge—and as far away from Cooper—as I can without falling off.

“Night, Coop,” I say as I flick off the bedside lamp without warning.

Cooper snorts and the bed shifts as he gets settled in the dark. I crane my neck to make sure he's staying on *his* side of the bed before snuggling deeper into the blankets. Only four more days.



A sharp yank on the blanket rips me from a dream I'd rather not be having. Dream Cooper is shirtless and kissing me.

Reality Cooper is also shirtless and stealing my blanket.

I sit up and try to tug the blanket back to cover my torso, but Cooper has it in a death grip. I huff and check my phone. *5:30 am*. In Utah time, that's 3:30 am. But no matter how much I want to go back to bed for a few more hours, trying to pry the blanket from Cooper will be like playing tug of war with an elephant. And don't even get me started on my mom. If I mess up her itinerary for an extra bit of shut eye, I will *never* hear the end of it.

The time change is brutal. It's the Daylight Savings of traveling, and it sucks.

I'm in for a very long day.

I flick on my bedside lamp and watch Cooper flinch. Ha. The karma.

I slide out of bed and noisily dig through my suitcase for my toiletries and clothes. Behind me, Cooper shifts and mumbles something into his pillow.

"What was that, Cooper?" I ask, a smidge louder than I need to.

"Could you be a little quieter?" He asks, his voice still muffled by the pillow.

I take a few steps to his side of the bed and crouch so I'm eye level with him. He swivels his head and cracks an eye to look at me.

"Nope." And I flip on his bedside lamp.

"What did I do in a past life to deserve this kind of treatment?" he moans, burying his head back into his pillow.

I stand, feeling the smug satisfaction of ruining his last thirty minutes of sleep. "Everything you've done has been in this life, but the final straw was stealing my blanket." I walk towards the end of the bed and scoop my clothes into my arms. "Dibs on the first shower."

"I wouldn't have to steal the blanket to stay warm if *someone* would keep her icicle toes to herself. What happened to staying on your side of the bed?"

I ignore his last sentence and duck into the bathroom. “Sounds like you were cold and should have worn a shirt,” I call, shutting the door. I can’t hear his grumbling over the hot shower water, and I relish in my petty revenge. It’s not often I get the one up on my brother’s best friend, and the feeling is addictive.

I take my sweet time in the shower, making sure to purge my legs of the sasquatch-level of hair that has grown in over the last few months. Winter in Utah is brutal, so why shave if I’m just going to cover my legs in jeans and fleece-lined leggings? Besides, the fur acts as a second layer of insulation. This trip to Florida is an anomaly, a blip in my normal No-Shave November-Through-March. As I towel off, my phone beeps next to the sink. Two quick notifications follow the first, and I lunge for it before the vibrations rattle it into the porcelain bowl.

Mom

Rise and shine, campers! It’s a beautiful day and Google says the weather is going to be perfect! Get your butts in gear and meet your dad and me in the lobby in 30 minutes!

Wesley

Be there in 15

Jase

Why are you texting before 7 am? I thought we were on vacation????

I’m prone to siding with Jase on this one, but *somebody* in the other room screwed up all those plans for me. I quickly type out my own response before setting my phone aside.

Me

Put your big boy pants on, Jase. It's Disney Day.

I shove my freshly-shaved, slightly damp legs into my shorts—what is it with this humidity that makes everything stick to what it's not supposed to?—and am pulling on a sports bra when a loud knock on the bathroom door scares the living daylights out of me and sends me careening towards the tub. My arms are caught awkwardly above my head, held hostage by the tight compression fabric, as I crumple into a crouch, hoping my knees will hide everything my useless arms can't.

“Hurry up, Hannah,” Cooper's voice is all grumble, like boulders tumbling down a cliffside, and that deep timbre begs to soothe my racing heart. “I have to pee.”

Did I lock the door? With a quick glance, I can't tell from this vantage point. I hold my position near the ground for a minute, desperately tugging on the boob deathtrap caught around my shoulders, and cursing the sticky humidity, before my heart settles enough for my brain to articulate that Cooper isn't going to just barge in. Standing, I yank my bra the rest of the way down and hurry to slip my t-shirt over my head.

There's a soft thud, and Cooper's voice comes through the door again. “Hannah...”

I sweep my dirty clothes and toiletries into one arm and jerk open the door. Cooper's big body falls forward before his eyes fly open and he catches himself, leaving his face a handful of inches from mine. He blinks in the bright bathroom light and sweeps his eyes from the top of my tangled, wet hair, past my *I'm so fly I Neverland* t-shirt, and down to my paler-than-death, yet oh-so-silky-smooth legs.

I clear my throat, and he pushes himself upright before we do the weird shimmy past the bathroom sink. Escaping the muggy bathroom, I swing the door closed behind me. I busy myself with reorganizing my suitcase, blocking out the sounds and what I know is going on behind that closed door.

I'm organizing and packing a day bag for the park when the shower turns off. I stiffen, my wallet—halfway into a

zippered pocket—forgotten. I didn't see Cooper take anything in with him during my escape, which means...

The door to the bathroom opens and I squeeze my eyes shut, not caring that I'm not facing that direction anyway. I hear a gentle *swish, swish* from what I assume is a towel being run through Cooper's hair. *Please, please, pleeeaaase let him have a towel around himself. Don't you dare look, Hannah.*

I peek over my shoulder.

A drop of water runs down the center of his stomach before being absorbed into a *very lowly* slung white towel.

I bite my lip to keep myself from saying anything I will regret later and squeeze my eyes shut so hard I see stars. I didn't catch a glimpse of anything more than what I saw last night, but the difference is that Cooper is one loose tuck away from showing me way more than I bargained for.

Anger bubbles inside me, replacing any embarrassment I feel. What an absolute *Neanderthal*. I fully understand that we're faking a "serious relationship," but that level of familiarity is going to get him maimed by my own hand. We have rules! Rules that are supposed to prevent this sort of thing from happening! And Cooper's throwing them out the window on day one!

Your cover will be blown if you kill him on your first day out here, Hannah. That thought alone brings my anger from a rolling boil down to a simmer.

"*Cooper!*" I hiss. "What are you doing out here?"

"Getting dressed?" he says in a tone that conveys he thinks I'm dense. It's a tone I remember from those rough few years in junior high, when he and Jase decided little sisters were icky. But there's also a hint of amusement he can't keep hidden from me.

"I swear if you drop that towel in here, I will—" I have no idea what I will do because my brain is short-circuiting from trying too hard to forget what Cooper looks like standing behind me. I take a deep breath to calm the anger that's pulsing in my veins, replacing it with a deadly, calm iciness.

“You’re going to take your clothes and get dressed in the bathroom before you find your body six feet under.”

He snorts. *He snorts*. But then I hear rustling and the slight creak of the door hinge before the click of the bathroom door closing again.

All the tension leaves my chest in an exhausting whoosh and I flop back onto my side of the bed. Maybe I should have risked my mother’s wrath and gone back to bed.

CHAPTER 11

FASTER THAN IS FAIR—WHY can't *I* get ready in five minutes?—Cooper walks out of the bathroom, fully clothed. In the time it takes him to get dressed, most of the anger I have towards him is replaced with a nagging irritation. We'll need to compromise to get through this vacation, so I can give a little and forgive him. I didn't actually see anything. But I'm going to have to be even more vigilant over the next few days to make sure nothing like that happens again.

Fabric smacks me in the face and brings me back to the present. I peel it off and hold the shirt out at arm's length. The white t-shirt has "He's my Mickey" emblazoned on the front, with the unmistakable mouse outline around the words.

"What's this for?" I think my Peter Pan pun shirt is great. Disney enough, but not so Disney that it looks like I'm trying too hard to be one of those overly obsessed girls.

"So we match. I thought it would help us sell it."

I look away from the shirt in my hands to see a matching "She's my Minnie" stretched across Cooper's chest. He smirks and props his hands on his hips. "Well, go on. Change. We don't want to be late."

"But what about my shirt?" I gesture to the Peter Pan silhouette before holding the tee from Cooper out like a smelly piece of trash. "I don't want to wear this."

"Well, I didn't bring any extra shirts, so unless you want us to look ridiculous in front of our parents, you'll put that on."

Bossy.

But he speaks reason.

And I can still be irritated about it. For six more minutes until we have to meet our families in the lobby of the hotel.

I quickly swap shirts, and standing side-by-side with Cooper, I have to admit that it looks good. Very *couple in love*, which is what we need our parents to believe. I slip my repacked backpack onto my shoulders and double check that I have the room key in my pocket before I head towards the door.

"It's showtime," Cooper says as he reaches for my hand. When I make a gagging face, he laughs, deep and clear, and I can't help the little half smile that lifts my cheeks. He grips the doorknob, and I blow out a breath, morphing my face into one of a girl in love with Cooper. Pulling deep from my database of Being In Love With Cooper—a little outdated since high school, but still archived and functional—I don my giddiest smile and swing our entwined hands lightly between us as we make our way to the elevator and down to the ground floor.

“Laying it on a little thick, eh, Hannah Dearest?” Cooper gestures to my over-exaggerated facial expression.

“I’m warming up my heart eyes, Cooper Darling.”

“I thought you always had those babies ready to whip out at a moment’s notice.”

I huff a small laugh and roll my eyes, settling my face into a more relaxed smile. Yesterday, despite my initial nervousness and then the near-fiasco on the flight, was a lot of good practice, and I’m not feeling nearly as weird about being affectionate with Cooper this morning. I’m still a little off-kilter about the towel incident, but give me a few more minutes and I’ll be fine.

A few more minutes is all I have anyway.

We make it to the lobby. Two minutes late.

“Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in.” My dad chuckles as he embraces me, and his hug makes up for his teasing words.

As I step out of the embrace, my hand finds its way back to Cooper’s without a thought, and we stand in the small circle with our families, shoulder to shoulder.

“Yeah, it was just so hard to get out of bed with this cuddle bug.” Cooper raises my hand, still interlocked with his, and gently presses it to his lips. To anyone else, it looks like he’s kissing it, but his mouth is completely closed—lips tucked in, not a dot of saliva swapping surfaces. Is it skating the “no kissing” line a little? Yeah. But it’s not *actually* kissing.

It’s all about the optics.

And Cooper is giving off very good optics right now. I mentally applaud him.

“You two look adorable,” Mom says as she glances between us with a smile, admiring our matching shirts. A good call on Cooper’s part. “Now that Hannah and Cooper are here, we can get going.”

My mom is extra chipper this morning. Even though she’s fifty-eight, Disney World has a magnetic draw that no one can

really explain. I know it's the stop she's most excited about, but her abundant exuberance grates a little on my jet-lagged self. Mom tries to shoo us towards the door, but I protest by pulling on Cooper's hand and running back to the free breakfast offered by the hotel. I grab four large muffins and hurry back to my waiting boyfriend. Fake boyfriend. I pass two to Cooper and bite into one of mine.

Mom rolls her eyes. "You wouldn't have to eat on the run if you would have gotten up earlier, dear."

"I know," I mumble with a mouth full of blueberry muffin. Very ladylike. "Now let's go."

Cooper places his free hand on my lower back and guides me to follow the rest of our families—two sets of retired parents and my two brothers—out the door and toward the rental cars.

I'm surprised when, instead of my brothers climbing into the back seat, Cooper's parents join us. When I catch Jase's eye as he's climbing into the other car, he mouths, "Sorry," and tips his head toward our mom.

Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker make polite small talk, and even though I'm holding hands with Cooper across the center console, I am comfortable. At least more so than I would be if I were stuck in the same car as my parents. I don't feel judged or scrutinized by Mrs. Whittaker, and the subject of Cooper and I dating hasn't even been brought up.

Like at all.

Not even a passing, "So you and Cooper, huh?"

Just a lot of commiserating about the humidity and being excited about taking a few days off of work. The feeling of being almost...overlooked...makes my chest hum with a lightness I haven't felt since I left California. Cooper doesn't let on that this is anything out of the ordinary, and thanks to Rule Number Two, I won't be asking him about it anytime soon.

Before we know it, we're parking and being herded toward the rapidly growing line, joining the throng of people waiting

to get inside the Happiest Place on Earth.



You'd think we're a group of six-year-olds with how obviously we gawk at everything once we've passed through the front gates, but Mom ushers us along the main pathway deeper into the park.

“We have to get pictures by the castle!”

Everyone under the age of thirty groans. Good-naturedly, but still. My mom has an obsession with pictures, hence the wall full of them in her home. But beyond that wall, she doesn't do anything with them, so those of us who have sat through hundreds of pictures don't understand why she can't take one or two and move on.

Like good little children, we obediently follow our parents down the main thoroughfare towards the iconic castle. The crowds are still thin, and everyone outpaces Cooper and me as we lag behind, walking slowly, hand-in-hand.

“Are you ready for today?” Cooper murmurs with a small smile on his face. He seems content to be here, and I suppose an unexpected, last-minute trip would be a refreshing change in pace, even if he got roped into this under false pretenses. He looks down at me, his smile widening, and waits for an answer.

“Yes.”

Cooper snorts softly, but his smile grows. I observe him out of the corner of my eye and he does the same to me. “Care to elaborate on that, Hannah Dearest?”

How to answer without breaking our “Fake Dating is Fight Club” rule? I finally settle for, “I wore my good tennis shoes, so walking around all day with you won't be a problem.” Will it be a problem that I'll be forced into Cooper's proximity for a long, hot, and humid day? No. It can't be, or else this whole charade is for nothing. So there's no sense in hoping for a Cooper-free day when it can't be anything else.

“Excellent,” Cooper says, as we approach where our families have stopped to gather for a picture. Mere steps away

from joining the group, Cooper tugs back on my hand. I don't realize he slowed down until my steps try to take me farther away from him than our connected hands will allow.

I turn when his hand pulls me back, and panic squeezes my heart as Cooper drops to one knee.

“Look! He's proposing!” a voice shouts. Cooper buying matching shirts to help sell our charade is one thing. Planning a surprise fake proposal is another.

And completely not what I need right now.

There's a few whistles and I register more than one person slipping out their phone to begin recording. I'm frozen in place, unable to move, unable to speak. My brain grasps for words, but they're as slippery as a greased pig.

Unfazed by the attention of the other park guests, Cooper lets go of my hand.

And reaches down to tie his shoe.

One beat.

Two beats.

Cooper's head pops up, and he finally notices the people around us staring and videoing, waiting for him to pop the question. His eyes widen in surprise, and he raises his hands like he's surrendering.

“I'm just tying my shoe,” Cooper announces to our growing audience. There's a collective disappointed sigh, and I watch everyone who was excitedly recording drop their phones and tap on their screens, probably deleting the now useless videos.

Cooper stands and slips his hand back into mine. When we turn back to our group, the reactions of our loved ones range from eyes full of twinkling amusement (our parents) to lips rolled together, barely holding in laughter (my brothers). I glare at my brothers as my face heats with embarrassment.

“You really could have picked a better time to tie your shoe,” I grumble at Cooper. We sidle up to the rest of our family, squeezing into the edge of the picture.

Jase claps Cooper on the back and shakes him a little. “You better not be proposing to my little sister without my permission, bro.” His words are serious, but the smile across his face is huge. He knows this whole thing is fake, and now he’s just trying to get a rise out of me and Cooper. Okay, mostly me. It’s what brothers do.

“I’m not asking Hannah to marry me yet.” Cooper responds, elbowing Jase lightly in the ribs.

Yet.

This is all pretend, but why does that word send shivers up my spine?

Mom finishes tweaking the settings on her phone that she clamped into her tripod. “Alright, everyone scooch in and say, ‘Mickey!’” She taps her screen and scurries back to where Dad is standing on the opposite side of the group. Cooper hauls me into his side and wraps one large arm around me as he smiles for the camera.

“Mickey!” we all say through the wide smiles we hold for what feels like a full minute. Nobody moves until we’re sure the countdown timer has passed and we’re not ruining the picture.

Once Mom checks that we all made it into the shot, she gives us the go ahead to relax.

“Cooper. Hannah. Why don’t we get a picture of the two of you in front of the castle? It’s not every day you go on your first vacation together.”

I open my mouth to let her down easy, but Cooper beats me to it. “Sure thing, Mavis.”

There’s no way for me to ask Cooper what the heck he is thinking while surrounded by the family we’re trying to fool, so I have to play along. Everyone else scatters to the side while Mom lines up a shot of us with the iconic castle in the background. Cooper tightens his arm around me and smiles, so I do the same.

I know these pictures are going to make it onto the wall at my parents’ house. And when Cooper and I “break up” after

all of this is said and done...will Mom take the pictures down? Or will I be forced to relive this entire trip every time I visit my parents?

Mom takes a few pictures, and then leans back to inspect the photos. Cooper and I stand still, waiting for her to give the signal that she's done.

"Why don't you give Hannah a little kiss, Cooper? It will make for a great picture to show at your wedding."

First off, WHAT?

MOM.

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRECK YOURSELF.

But Cooper is unruffled by my mom's announcement that we're headed toward matrimony. Instead, he reaches his free hand over to turn me to face him. I slide both of my arms around his waist, and he locks them in place by slipping his hands around to my lower back. Without moving the smile from his face, he whispers, "It's just a little kiss."

I barely move my lips to answer him. "No. The rules, Cooper."

"Optics, Hannah. And the optics demand that we look like we're kissing."

I glance at my mom. She's shifting her tripod around, checking the phone screen every few steps. "Whenever you're ready, you two. I'm just trying to get the best shot."

I look back at Cooper. His smile is easy where I feel mine slipping. "It's not a big deal, Hannah. One little kiss."

One. Little. Kiss.

"Fine," I grit through my teeth. "But this means absolutely nothing."

Cooper nods and slowly lowers his head to mine. I watch his eyes drift closed as I extend my neck to meet him in the middle. My eyelids flutter shut just before his lips press softly against mine.

CHAPTER 12

ONE ETERNITY LATER, COOPER pulls back with a sweet, adoring look on his face. I didn't even hear my mom say she was done taking pictures. I hurry to slide my practiced smile onto my face before someone sees the battle that's raging in my brain. But I know Cooper sees it. He lifts a hand to my face and lightly cups my cheek, forcing me to look directly into his eyes.

Isn't there a thing about if you look into someone's eyes long enough, you'll fall in love? I'm definitely not doing that

today. So I turn my head to watch my mom start breaking down her tripod, but the movement only kicks Cooper into action. Like a flash of light, he gives me a quick peck on the cheek that I just exposed to him before replacing his hand on my lower back.

Was that how I wanted my first kiss with Cooper to go? No. I didn't even want a first kiss with Cooper to begin with, at least not recently. Because now that I know the feel of Cooper's soft mouth and how I can taste the faintest trace of his mint toothpaste through our barely parted lips, I know I'll never be able to go back to how it was before.

I liked it too much. I knew I would like it too much, which is why I made the rule in the first place. And why we can never do it again. Because at the end of this trip, I'm walking away from Cooper. I'll walk away and put all of this behind me and move on with my life. I was fine without him, and I'll be fine after everything is said and done. But if I let him kiss me again, I know that whatever heartbreak I felt all those years ago will pale in comparison to the heartbreak of letting myself fall before walking away again.

Cooper runs his hands up and down my arms. "Hey, are you still with me?"

I shake my unruly thoughts from my head and turn back to Cooper with a bright smile. "Yes." I ignore the way his brow is creased with worry and take the smallest step away. Cooper's hands slide down to mine and we interlock our fingers. "Now let's go and enjoy this vacation!"

My enthusiasm feels a little forced, but I can't dwell on... all of that. I need to put it out of my head and get back in the game. Mom finishes packing up her tripod, and I follow her over to where the rest of our party is waiting, pulling Cooper behind me. I glance back at him, and he smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling with the small movement.

Gosh, even his eye crinkles are cute.

This is bad. We're only on our first day out here. I can't be thinking things like that.

When we reach the shady area where my brothers are waiting, I want to sock them in the arms. But I don't.

Lucky them.

Wesley's face is slightly red, and with his lips pinched into a smile, I know he's holding back laughter. I'm sure he thinks it's funny that I was so vehemently against kissing Cooper for practice, but caved so quickly to Mom's whims. I roll my eyes and lock gazes with my older brother. He's not hiding his amusement, but he's not laughing at me either, which I guess is a step up from Wesley's reaction. He gives me a little thumbs up before his attention shifts to Cooper behind me. I don't miss his subtle head nod, but the look he's giving Cooper is unreadable. Definitely much more serious than the smile he had for me. Is he angry with his friend for kissing me? He seemed fine with the idea of Cooper and me fake dating a few weeks ago, but did that kiss change his opinion?

I fight down my rising blush. Why would I be blushing over kissing my *boyfriend*? The longer this charade goes on, the more I realize that I really didn't think it through. If I would have brainstormed for a few extra minutes, I'm sure I could have thought of something infinitely better than this mess.

Oh well.

It's just my heart anyway. It probably needs a good stomping every now and then.

C'est la vie and all that.

When Cooper and I join the rest of our party, we fall into step, following my parents to our second stop in the park. Cooper stays silent, merely leading me along by the hand with a generic, happy smile, like nothing about the last few minutes was a big deal.

I mean, it shouldn't be a big deal.

It was just a kiss. A teeny, tiny kiss.

With someone I am *not* attracted to.

(I repeat: I am NOT attracted to Cooper.)

Maybe if I say it enough, it will come true. What do they call it? Manifesting. I'm manifesting my unattraction to Cooper.

In the end, it will be fine.

It's going to be fine.



I have never posed for so many “candid” pictures in my life. Cooper and I couldn't walk anywhere without my mom commenting something along the lines of “you two are just *adorable*.” She never pries any more than that, but the constant reminder that I have to be “on” is more exhausting than the thirty thousand steps my smart watch tracks.

By the time the fireworks are over and we're all but limping back to the front of the park, I've half convinced myself that Cooper is in love with me because he's just...*so good* at all the acting. After all of the canoodling and hand holding required during long lines and lovey dovey posed pictures, the awkwardness of being closer to Cooper than I ever have in my life is all but gone. But being physically close is only half the battle. There are times, when Mom's eyes would linger on me a moment too long, that I wonder if I'm convincing enough. Am I getting the heart eyes right? The smiles, the lingering looks, the off-cam swooning over Cooper? (Because if I was his real girlfriend, I'd definitely be swooning over him.)

Even though I've settled into this part I'm playing, there's still a small thought niggling at the back of my mind. So far back that even the dopamine from riding rides all day can't touch it.

Why was Cooper so quick to break our no kissing rule?

The walk back to the cars is a blur of sore feet and yawns. I rely on my tether to Cooper to prevent myself from getting lost in the mass of people exiting the park. Splitting ourselves between the cars, we follow my parents to a cheap fast food restaurant near our hotel. All of us stumble inside like zombies and order before claiming a corner of the restaurant. I scoot

into a booth and kick my feet up onto Cooper's knee when he slides in opposite me.

If I thought I was going to make it through a quiet, late dinner, I was wrong. As soon as we sit down to wait for our food, my mom gets her second wind.

She lured me into a false sense of security by avoiding the one question I knew she was dying to get an answer to, plying me with a full and exhausting day at Disney World, only to upend the semblance of calm I had carved out for myself with her curiosity.

"So, you two lovebirds." Mom smiles, clasps her hands together, and leans across the table, trying to block my vision of anything but her. "Why don't you tell us the story of how you started dating?"

"Mom," I groan, stretching the one syllable into four. I shift, trying to pull my feet off Cooper's lap, but his hand wraps around one of my ankles, preventing my retreat. *Don't get defensive*, I remind myself as I settle back into a comfortable position. "Really?"

Cooper smiles faintly. Well, this is a two person charade after all...

"Cooper Darling, why don't you tell the story? I'm sure my mom would *love* to hear your side of things." I smirk and nudge his fingers with the toe of my opposite shoe. Cooper slides his hand up and down the six inches around my ankle, sending a zing up my leg.

"Of course, Hannah Dearest." He winks at me, then turns his attention to my mom. "Jase invited me to the Black Turkey Bowl game, like he does every year. After the game, we went back to his and Wesley's place to grab breakfast. It was like any other year. I didn't even know that Hannah was back in town."

Cooper turns to look at me, and his charming smile for my mother shifts into something softer.

"When Hannah shuffled out of her room that morning, I was so surprised. I hadn't seen her in eight years, but I

immediately recognized her. It was like a missing piece to my puzzle finally clicked into place. Even in her pajamas and glasses and messy hair, she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.”

To everyone else, his little look screams loving tenderness. And it’s *so* convincing. For a second, he almost convinces me. But I know better.

My cheeks heat, but I shove the bubbly feeling in my chest back down and force my smile to remain on my face. Cooper’s just laying it on thick for my mom. Taking the truth and elaborating it until it fits our narrative.

“She ran back to her room right after,” Cooper laughs, and I laugh along too, despite the new ache in my cheeks and tightness in my throat. “I only caught glimpses of her the next few times I went over, but I finally cornered her and asked her out. And she completely surprised me by saying yes.”

Cooper’s eyes roam over my face as he pauses, and it’s a battle to keep my expression even. “And I’m lucky she wanted to stick around.” Cooper’s thumb softly brushes up and down my shin.

“Well, we knew it was all a matter of time,” Mom chimes in. “After all, she had the biggest crush on you in high school...”

“MOM!” I’m sure my cheeks go from rosy pink to flaming red, and I lean forward to bury my head in my arms. “Can we please never bring that up again?”

Everyone at the table laughs good-naturedly at my profound embarrassment. Sure, it was eight years ago, but being reminded of it at every turn—especially in front of Cooper—isn’t how I want to spend the next week. If something had come of that crush years ago, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, but bringing it up now just makes me look desperate...like I had been carrying a torch for him this whole time.

Which is ridiculous.

I'm saved from death by embarrassment by the teenager calling our order number. Jase and Wesley retrieve our food and return to the table to divvy out the cheeseburgers and french fries. I busy myself with my cheeseburger, but I didn't need to worry in the end. Everyone is too busy filling their own mouths to bother running them with more questions for Cooper and me. On one hand, it's a relief that it's over with, but I suspect that my mom isn't done with her questions. And there's no way to know for sure.

By the time we get back to the hotel and into our room, I'm practically asleep on my feet. As soon as Cooper shuts the door, I drop the act and drop onto the bed, exhausted. Cooper chuckles as he kicks off his tennis shoes by the end of the bed. Lifting my feet one at a time, he pulls my shoes off to set them on the floor next to his.

Even though I want to crawl under the covers and go to sleep, I roll myself to the edge of the bed, and drag my aching body to the bathroom to dress in my pajamas. Cooper is already under the blanket with his bedside lamp turned off by the time I shuffle out and collapse onto my side of the bed, barely remembering to turn off my own bedside light before falling asleep faster than I ever have in my life.

CHAPTER 13

I AM SO DEAD.

Usually, when I wake up in the morning, I have an arm hanging off the bed, fingers nearly brushing the ground. This morning, I can't even find the edge of the bed. I crack open my eyes, afraid that even that miniscule movement will wake Cooper. My arms and legs stick out perpendicular to my body, and there's a good six inches between the tips of my fingers and the edge of the bed. If I point my toes, I might be able to

curl them around the corner, but I don't need to risk the movement to know that I am *not* on my side of the bed.

Cooper certainly won't be complaining about my icicle toes this morning, but I'm giving him *plenty* of other ammo, especially after my vehement "you stay on your side of the bed and I'll stay on mine" speech from our first night. My back is pressed against his, from shoulders to hips. It could definitely be worse. Accidental back cuddling is lower on the embarrassment scale than waking up with my arms tangled around Cooper, or even worse: both of us with arms tangled around each other. While I lay still, debating if accidental spooning or accidental cuddling is worse, Cooper shifts behind me.

It's barely a nudge, but I slam my eyelids shut so fast. If he thinks I'm asleep, I can potentially play the "I didn't do it consciously" card, and even though it's completely true, it will be harder to sell if I'm caught awake.

I focus on keeping my breathing even as Cooper's twitches become stirrings and stirrings become stretches. When Cooper's warmth leaves my back, I flip a little farther onto my stomach, feigning a sleepy adjustment, and squish my face into the pillow. I'm not sure if I can convincingly act like I'm asleep if Cooper looks at my face.

I keep my breathing as steady as possible as Cooper shifts to sitting, pausing for a minute before standing. What feels like ages is only a few minutes as Cooper walks to the end of the bed, quietly sifts through his suitcase, and pads into the bathroom, gently shutting the door behind him. Based on how careful he was being, he obviously thought I was still sleeping. Score one for Hannah!

I wait another minute until I hear the shower before I move to sitting cross-legged and grab my phone. After our long day yesterday, Jase begged our mom to let us sleep in today. Seeing as how today is Beach Day, our schedule is much more flexible, and my mom graciously acquiesced. And sleep in we did. It's nearly ten o'clock. I have a few unread texts in the family group chat, and I click into those first.

Mom

Good morning everyone!

There's a long time gap between her text and the next one.

Wesley

Morning. What's the plan?

Jase

Sleeping, if you guys will stop texting.

Mom

Dad and I are already eating breakfast downstairs.

Jase

How long does that go for?

Dad

Until 10

Wesley

Jase and I will be down soon.

Wesley's last text came in at 8:57 am. I'm just grateful there weren't any "Hannah and Cooper sure are taking a long time to come downstairs" texts. Fighting off insinuations like that is not something I want to do first thing this morning.

Me

We just woke up. Be down as soon as we can.

After clicking through all of my other notifications, I climb off my side of the bed and gather my clothes for today—my swimsuit and a tank top and shorts to wear over it—and an extra set for my day bag. Cooper eventually comes out of the bathroom, wearing a loose-fitting tank top and bright blue swim trunks with...are those rubber duckies?

“What’s with the ducks?” I ask, my eyes wandering up from his outrageously patterned shorts. When I meet his eyes, I try not to blush because Cooper just watched me check him out.

Cooper shrugs, a tiny smile gracing the corner of his mouth. “Thought it would be fun.”

When he doesn’t offer up any more information, I tell him, “Breakfast ends in just a few minutes. If you want to run down and grab something, I’ll meet you down there after I shower. Everyone else is already awake.”

“Right, yes, I’ll do that.” Cooper strides to the dresser and shoves his wallet and room key into his pockets before hurrying out the door without saying goodbye. I half expected him to drop a kiss to the top of my head or something, but then I mentally kick myself.

It’s not real.

He doesn’t owe me a goodbye kiss and a “see you in a few minutes.” All of our lovey-dovey stuff is reserved for out there. Behind these doors, I’m just his best friend’s little sister. Nothing special.

I shake off the disappointment and hop in the shower.

After, I get dressed in my swimsuit and check myself from all angles before slipping on a tank top and shorts. I’m not super fit. There’s plenty of soft spots and jiggle. But I can’t expect anything else when most of my days are spent on my computer for work and then on my computer for fun. When I’m not on my computer, I’m more prone to chill and watch than to actually participate in anything physically active.

It was the same way back in high school. If Jase had a game, I was there, watching and cheering, but I never joined

any sports teams myself. My non-active extracurricular count was zero, too—even Wesley beat me by participating heavily in drama club, which led him to his current career as a high school drama teacher. Back then, I was more than happy to let my brothers take the spotlight, completely content to fade into the background with a book or homework.

And that’s what I’m hoping to do today with my nondescript, yet flattering, swimwear.

I don’t bother with any makeup, knowing it would either get washed off in the ocean or sweat off in the unending humidity. Tucking my e-reader into my day bag with my extra clothes, I strap on my sandals and head out to meet my family—and Cooper’s—in the lobby.

Everyone is gathered in the area of the lobby set apart with short couches and chairs. I ignore the protest of hunger from my stomach, but it’s my fault for sleeping so late that I missed breakfast. Mom and Dad hop up from their couch and start for the doors before I even join the group. Cooper sidles up next to me as we all fall in step behind Mom and Dad and holds out a blueberry muffin and a bagel.

“There wasn’t much left at breakfast, but I snagged these for you before everything got cleaned up.”

Something warm and fuzzy crawls up my spine. “Thank you,” I say sincerely, as I take a few bites on our way to the car. Fortunately, we’re back with my brothers today.

Cooper opens the door and gestures for me to get in. Who says chivalry is dead? I smile and thank him before ducking into the car. I’m not entirely without manners. Besides, Cooper has been on his best behavior so far—aside from that one kiss—and I can’t find it in me to even be annoyed by that. Plus, he saved breakfast for me. That’s got to be worth some points in his favor.

“Dibs shotgun,” Cooper says casually as my brothers open both back doors, and he walks around the car. When everyone is seatbelted, I follow my parents’ car out of the hotel parking lot and to the beach.



What does one *do* at the beach?

Build sandcastles? Lay out to get a tan?

Despite living only a half hour away from the coast for eight years, I never went to the beach in California. These pale legs and this jiggly booty didn't just happen overnight. They're the product of years of computer reclusing. And Utah...Utah doesn't have beaches. Shorelines of lakes and reservoirs don't hold a candle to this picturesque, white sand paradise.

The Atlantic Ocean stretches out before us as far as the eye can see, the beautiful blue water in stark contrast with the white sand that's dotted with people of all ages, from elderly couples to kids in brightly colored swimsuits and flotation devices.

Our parents decide arbitrarily that "this is a good spot" and stake their claim by placing their rented gear around the area. My brothers and Cooper are a few steps away from all the unfolding and opening and spreading of beach gear. Like the overgrown children they are, they dump their stuff in one enormous pile and start toeing off their shoes.

And then their shirts come off.

My brothers...pssh. Whatever. But *Cooper*...

Ugh! Cooper sleeps shirtless, for Pete's sake! I should be used to his naked torso by now, but I still can't help how my eyes are pulled toward his defined dips and ridges when he reaches for the hem of his shirt and pulls the thin fabric over his head. It's all about the optics...

And Cooper has some very nice optics.

The sexy maleness of his body clashes with the boyishness of his shorts, but when he smiles that dazzling smile, the two meld together to create the most irresistible man I've ever seen. I catch myself ogling a little too much, but before I can chide myself and look away, a tiny voice tells me that a little bit of ogling is girlfriend territory. *I'm just playing along*, I tell

myself as I watch Cooper crumple his shirt into a ball and toss it on the pile with my brothers' things.

He stands and reaches his arms above his head, stretching this way and that, and I *fully* enjoy the show. As Cooper's girlfriend, it is my civic duty to appreciate the fine specimen of a man that I'm dating.

Er, fake dating.

Fake girlfriend.

Right.

I've got to get this attraction under control. Because attraction isn't the problem. It's what the attraction leads to that will eventually upend my life.

When Cooper sees me watching him, he flashes a brilliant smile at me and winks for good measure, and I have to look away before the blush on my cheeks becomes too noticeable. I hide my reflexive smile by busying myself with sliding off my sandals and shimmying out of my shorts and tank.

I need to fight the emotions that Cooper dredges up from the depths of my past. I can't allow myself to break Rule Number Three in any capacity. Giving in to those silly emotions will only set me up for more heartbreak, which is not in my plans. But I look back at Cooper anyway, a smile on my own face. Because what's more convincing than a real smile for my fake boyfriend?

I realize I'm standing like an idiot with my clothes in one hand and my day bag in the other, halfway between the pile of boys' things and the beach umbrellas my parents set up. How long have I been frozen here watching Cooper and thinking things I can't let myself think? Long enough for Cooper to cross the space between us and lean down to lift the strap of my day bag out of my hand.

"You look beautiful," he says quietly as his mouth passes my ear. The shiver that speeds down my neck to my fingertips has nothing to do with the temperature.

My feet are rooted to the spot. Because Cooper just complimented me. Complimented me quietly enough that I

know neither our parents nor my brothers could hear, so it's a compliment...just for me.

My brain and body don't know what to do with that.

It's not breaking any of the rules...so I can't call him out on it. If anything, it's inching me closer to that line—the growing feelings line.

So I stand motionless as Cooper takes my bag and sets it in the sand. I can only watch as *this man*—chiseled abs, bright duckie shorts, sweet smile—takes my ball of clothes and sets them on top of my bag, careful to not get sand on them. He smiles at me when he straightens, and I smile back because he complimented me when he didn't need to.

And that soft, genuine smile he's smiling at me is telling me he meant it.

Cooper thinks I'm beautiful. Me, in my one-piece swimsuit, jiggly arms out for everyone to see, and legs so white they could blind you.

Me.

Beautiful.

Warmth spreads through my chest and to the apples of my cheeks that ache just the tiniest bit from how big my smile stretches. I should be shutting down the feelings that are invading my body. Rule Number Three. But reminding myself that I can't be falling for Cooper would be closing the door on this happiness, and wouldn't it be a shame to deprive the world of a little happiness?

Cooper leans closer, dipping his head toward mine, and in my semi-dazed state, I move on instinct. That pessimistic voice in my head is nagging me about the rules—how Cooper and I agreed to no kissing—but we broke the rules once before. Once more won't hurt.

Before his lips touch mine, his gentle smile morphs into a mischievous grin, and I can't react quickly enough to stop what happens next.

One second, Cooper is millimeters away from kissing me, and the next, he's throwing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and running across the sand toward the ocean.

Resistance is futile. If I fight him now, I'll end up on my back in the sand with no breath in my lungs, so I let myself be carried like a ragdoll to the edge of the water.

But Cooper doesn't stop there. No. He runs—knees high as he tries to overcome the rolling waves—into the ocean. I'm being flung from side to side and up and down until he's thigh-deep in the water. He pauses, and I lever myself slightly upright, but then I'm being flung backwards. I have the presence of mind to take a deep breath and slam my eyes shut before my back hits the water and Cooper dunks me.

CHAPTER 14

COOPER SMILES LIKE A doofus when I come spluttering up for air. Even though he just dumped me in the ocean, I can't help but grin and send a cascade of water towards him. Jase and Wesley run-wade out to us, and I splash them, too. Leaning back, I push myself out farther into the warm ocean. Cooper follows me, dodging the splashes I send toward his face, until the water is up to my shoulders. Each rolling wave lifts me high enough that my toes come off the ocean bed, but deposits me gracefully to my tiptoes when they pass. Cooper,

with his height advantage, stands flat-footed and is hardly rocked by the waves.

I lean back and float for a few moments while Jase and Wesley splash attack Cooper. He moves to the side and retaliates, taking the brunt of the spraying water away from where my face bobs just above the surface.

The ocean is warm, and I can taste the remnants of salt on my lips from when Cooper dunked me under. The water covering my ears muffles the sound of my brothers, and I close my eyes, enjoying how my body floats and drifts with the gentle waves.

A hand wraps around my ankle, and I peek an eye open. Cooper smiles when he sees me watching him, and he pulls me in a slow circle, the water fight between him and my brothers over. I'm dragged through the ocean, and I sink into the feeling of being towed along, turned this way and that, as Cooper carves a trail through the water back to where my brothers are bobbing in a peaceful ceasefire.

This is the most relaxed I've been in weeks. The stress of pretending for my parents floats up to the surface and is pulled away by the waves as I let Cooper steer me. Out here, in the ocean with my favorite people in the world, everything is wonderful and peaceful and...

Fun.

Disney World was...stressful. Constantly having the reminder that my mom was watching sucked what little joy I found in walking all over the park. But the small separation between land and sea—parents and brothers—creates a space where I don't have to be Cooper's girlfriend or Jase's little sister. I can be...Hannah.

Cooper tugs on my ankle, and I float closer until he puts one hand on my waist, keeping me tethered to him. Out here in the water, it's just the four of us, messing around and poking fun at each other, like we had erased nearly a decade of adult stress and worry. The easy friendship the four of us shared comes back without awkwardness or reminders that Cooper and I are faking a relationship. And that brief moment of

peace, where I can forget the mess I got myself into, makes this whole vacation worth it.



We do end up building a sandcastle. After adequately pruning ourselves in the ocean, Jase and Wesley challenge me and Cooper to a friendly competition. After forty-five minutes and a round of judging from the parents, it's safe to say that Cooper and I *crushed it*.

Cooper high fives me and pulls me in for a sweaty, sandy hug, and I couldn't care less that my skin is sticking to Cooper's and sand is smooched into my face as I press my cheek to his chest. I pull back and smile at him like we just won a gold medal. Cooper's eyes flick towards our parents for barely a moment, then back to mine, and I understand what he's asking with his raised eyebrows.

I hesitate.

But only for a moment before I press up to my toes and wait for Cooper to meet me in a short kiss.

Cooper's arm bands around my lower back, anchoring me to him. His other hand comes up and brushes the sand off my cheek before he gently guides my face closer to his. Our mouths press together once, and then again, more firmly. Time stops, and all I can feel is the softness of his lips against mine, taste the fading mint of his toothpaste, smell the salt and sand. I know I should pull back and break the kiss. I know my resolve to keep Rule Number Three is crumbling. But it's *Cooper*. The boy I liked before he was really a man, and now the man himself, who's showing me that he's still all those good things I remember.

I was doomed from the start of this harebrained plan, and if I'm going down the path of heartbreak, I might as well enjoy the trip. At least, that's the idiotic excuse I give myself to stay in this moment of perfection a little longer.

Cooper's arm flexes behind me, and we both inhale at the same time, pressing us closer to each other. But as I feel his lips part open, I pull away. Cooper blinks down at me for a

few seconds, his jaw loose and mouth slightly agape, before that winning smile of his takes over.

The part of my heart that was in love with Cooper as a teenager knocks at the door to my brain, reminding me that it's still alive and kicking. I want to kick it in the butt as I slide my arm around Cooper's waist and turn to the two losers, throwing a casual and very mature L to my forehead.

Pretending to be unaffected by that brief kiss is my best acting job yet. On the outside, I'm playful, smug in my and Cooper's sand-based victory, and happy. But on the inside, I'm panicking. The feelings I tried to stuff down time and time again are beating at my brain in an overwhelming wave. I can recite our rules, but no rule can change the emotions coursing through me.

I'm losing my grip on my feelings.

But I can't let Cooper know that.



“We’re going to head back to the hotel,” Mom says as she and Mrs. Whittaker start packing up their bags. Dad and Mr. Whittaker struggle with folding the beach umbrellas, so Cooper steps over to give them a hand. “The humidity is just too much today. Why don’t you kids find something else to do until dinnertime? There’s no sense in you coming back to the hotel to watch your parents nap.”

The four of us nod in understanding, and the looks we shoot at each other say we know exactly why the “humidity” is too much. Mom is getting up there in years, even though she doesn’t want to admit it, and she definitely overdid it yesterday at Disney World. None of us are surprised that she and the rest of the “elderly folk” want to turn in early.

“Don’t you worry, Mom,” Wesley pipes up. “We’ll find something to do.”

“And don’t go getting into trouble,” Mrs. Whittaker adds.

Wesley over exaggerates his slumped shoulders, like he was actually hoping to get into some trouble later. His acting makes me giggle a little. You can take the teacher off the

stage, but you can't take the drama nerd out of the man. Thanks to Wesley, my act with Cooper this week is really giving him a run for his money.

"Don't worry, Mom," Jase says, "no trouble will be had. We'll just..." He comes up short for any ideas. Mom planned this vacation, and every step of the way, we've been following her carefully laid out itinerary. "Entertain yourself" wasn't an option she listed.

"We'll go to Kennedy," I pipe up. Jase cocks his head in a question. "Space Center?" My intonation says *ring any bells?* "It's where they launch all the rockets for Starlink and the ISS." My voice falls flat when neither of my brothers recognize the very recognizable name of the NASA field center.

Cooper finishes helping and walks over to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as he settles in beside me. When my brothers don't have any better ideas, I speak up again. "That settles it. We're going to Kennedy."

"Space Center?" he asks.

"Thank you!" I laugh and lean into him. Cooper drops a kiss to the top of my head while both of my brothers stare at us in confusion. Then, to my mom, I add, "I'll text you when we're headed back to the hotel."

The four of us help return the rented beach gear, and then we load our crunchy, salt-covered selves into the car. I pull up directions to KSC on my phone and hand it to Wesley, who's riding shotgun. It's a quick thirty minute drive from the beach we were at, and then we're turning into the visitor's complex, where we can see the tops of a collection of rockets rising above the buildings.

"That's the Rocket Garden," I explain when we get out of the car. Cooper's eyes scan the structures, rising high into the sky.

"You sound like you did your research," Cooper says, as I lead him and my brothers through the ticket booth and the

entrance. “Were you planning on sneaking off some time while you were here?”

I laugh. “No, but this is a happy little accident.” We walk through the complex and head toward a building that Jase and Wesley agree “looks cool.” “I watch a lot of the Starlink missions. I love seeing the rockets land on the drone ships, although the land landings are my favorite. When Mom told us we were going to Orlando, looking up how far away Kennedy was from our hotel was the first thing I did.”

Aside from panicking about flying and silently cursing my mom for handing out my phone number.

“How serendipitous that you got to visit, then.” Cooper’s smile is warm and genuine, and it makes me want to melt into a puddle more than the humidity. Wesley pulls open the door to the building, and we file inside. Cooper puts a hand on my lower back, letting me enter before him, and that simple touch sends a thrill up my spine.

We’re miles away from anyone who needs a show of our relationship. *Our fake relationship*, I remind myself. Jase and Wesley aren’t watching us, and they’re in on the whole deal anyway. So why?

Why, why, why?

And *why* does my body have to physically react to Cooper’s small touches?

We spend hours walking around the various buildings and exhibits, and I take turns reading from plaques and rattling off random bits of information I’ve gathered over the years as I’ve watched rocket launch after rocket launch on YouTube. We take the bus tour out to the Apollo/Saturn V Center, past the iconic Vehicle Assembly Building, all while listening to subject experts educate us on the wonders of space exploration.

As we walk beneath the real Saturn V rocket, I rattle off more random facts. “Every human who set foot on the moon flew in one of those rockets.”

“Wow,” Cooper says, in awe of the technological marvel above us. “To be one of those few. What would it be like to be an astronaut?” The smile on his face reminds me of all the times I dreamed of the same thing.

“I wanted to be an astronaut when I was a kid,” I say simply. “I looked up all the requirements and everything in high school, so I knew what to study in college.”

Cooper’s head swivels to me, and his eyebrows meet his hairline. While most kids, at one point or another, dream about space wistfully, I actually researched it and was going to go through with it until...

“What stopped you?”

I tilt my head toward him and give Cooper a side eye and a small smirk. “Did you learn nothing on the plane?” I laugh. “After my first flight—for my college visit—I knew I could never do it. So I switched career paths and went into programming instead.”

Cooper smiles, a small, sweet thing just for me. “It’s a good fit.”

“I think so, too.” I return his smile. My hand itches to reach for his, but we’re nowhere near our parents. There’s no need for me to hold his hand. It’s just a want—a want I can’t indulge myself in. I already kissed him more times than I said I would. I shouldn’t throw all the rules to the wind. In reality, I shouldn’t be throwing *any* rules anywhere. We have them for a reason.

“So...” I trail off when Cooper’s attention moves from the displays around us to me. But the question I’ve wanted to ask since he agreed to our fake relationship keeps nagging at me, so I ask it. “Why don’t you have a real girlfriend?”

“Isn’t this breaking Rule Number Two, Hannah Dearest?” Cooper narrows his eyes at me, but I can see the mischief sparkling in them.

I exaggerate the motion of looking around us. The tour group we took the bus with has scattered throughout the large

room, and Jase and Wesley are way ahead, reading some other plaque and ignoring us. It's just me and Cooper.

Cooper shakes his head as he laughs at my antics. When he doesn't immediately answer my question, I nudge him with my elbow.

He shrugs. "I just haven't found the right girl."

Oof. The self-doubt hits like a truck. I'm obviously not *the one* he's looking for. I mean, if he wanted to date me, he could have. Today. Yesterday. Eight years ago.

But he didn't. Doesn't. Won't ever.

So here we are. Just fake dating.

But that's got to count for something, right?

"Mmmm," is all I can manage to fill the silence between us. But I'm saved from any more awkward conversation by Jase and Wesley speed walking back to where we've stopped.

"Did you know that every human who walked on the moon flew on a Saturn V rocket?" Jase asks when he gets within earshot. He and Wesley both have goofy little smiles on their faces, like their inner children have been positively satisfied by learning about the wonders of space.

Cooper casually bumps me with his shoulder as he turns to follow Jase. "Yeah, I did know that."

The little wink he throws over his shoulder is enough to send my heart into orbit, and I'm not sure it has the automated landing to make it back to Earth safely.

CHAPTER 15

I'M NOT USUALLY A picky eater. On principle, I'll try everything at least once, so I can give it a definitive *no* instead of a "I do not like it Sam I Am." So our parents picking a Peruvian place for dinner isn't out of the ordinary. With the help of Google Translate, most everything on the menu has a fairly self-explanatory name. *Papa a la huancaína* is potatoes with some sort of mild, traditional sauce. *Lomo saltado* is sautéed beef, and turns out to be a delicious steak stir-fry with peppers and onions. *Aji de gallina* is chicken chili, which

makes sense because it's chicken over rice with a spicy yellow sauce.

So when my brothers order *anticuchos*, I don't really think anything of it because it translates to "meat brochette." Who can argue with meat on a stick? It's basically a Peruvian shish kebab.

I really should have backed out of Google Translate and straight up googled what *anticuchos* are. Because as soon as I start chewing the deliciously marinated meat, my brothers laugh at me from across the table. I keep chewing and alternate looking between Jase and Wesley.

"What's so funny?" I ask after swallowing.

"Do you know what you're eating?" Jase asks, his cheeks turning pink.

"*Anticuchos*? It's just...steak on a stick, right?"

RIGHT?

Jase's laughter fills the restaurant, and I turn to Cooper, who is seated next to me. He pulls out his phone and starts typing a new Google search.

Cooper presses his lips into a firm line and turns the phone to me so I can read the search results.

"*Anticuchos* are popular and inexpensive meat dishes that originated in the Andes..." I scroll down a little further. "Alternative name: *anticuchos de corazon*."

I know enough Spanish to know what a *corazon* is.

I'm also very aware that I just ate cow heart.

For a minute, I stare at Cooper's phone, just processing the information. Cow. Heart. The heart of a cow. The organ of an animal I normally wouldn't bat an eye at eating, but the fact that it's the *organ* and not the muscle...

But then I get a hold of myself. The heart is a muscle. Well, a muscular organ. I eat cow muscles on the reg, so what's so different about eating a cow's muscular heart?

I shock my brothers and go in for another bite.

“You guys should try this. It’s *really* good.” I extend the skewer toward them. As I chew, I study them, and both Jase and Wesley look a little green around the gills at the prospect of eating the cow heart.

“I’ll try it,” Cooper says from my side, and I swing the skewer his way. He uses his fork to slide one of the meat chunks onto his plate, and then he politely cuts a smaller portion off of it, instead of taking a big bite out of it, like I had.

I finish my bite and peek down at the other end of the table to make sure Mom isn’t watching before I stick my tongue out at Jase.

“Joke’s on you, Jase, because I actually like it.” Jase shakes his head a little before going back to his plate of international cuisine.

“Joke’s doubly on him because it’s much better than it looks and sounds.” Cooper’s voice is close to my ear, and I turn my head out of reaction. The movement puts my cheek brushing his, and I instinctively inhale, filling my senses with his uniquely Cooper scent. There’s no cologne to mask it, it’s just Cooper and the salty ocean, still clinging to him after a morning at the beach. Cooper smiles, the end-of-day stubble on his cheek brushing mine a little more, and I know it’s because I just sniffed him in the middle of the restaurant.

But I just ate cow heart, so sniffing Cooper is not the weirdest thing I’ve done today.

We both go back to eating, like nothing weird just went on between us, and as I’m nearly clearing my plate, Dad gets my attention from the other end of the table.

“You should try the ceviche, too, Hannah,” Dad says as he passes a bowl of what looks like a medley of peppers, onions, and some sort of seafood. Not one to make the *anticuchos* mistake again, I set the bowl down near my plate, and I google ceviche.

While not as shocking as the *anticuchos* entry, my eyes snag on the “raw fish” part of the search result.

Remember how I said I'll try anything at least once? Well, I've eaten sushi. While I can palate a few California rolls, the rest of it...no. Not for me, thank you. There's just something about the texture and flavor of the raw fish that makes my whole body shudder.

But as I keep reading, entry after entry *swears* that the lime juice ceviche is marinated in "cooks" the fish. So I scoop the remaining ceviche from the bowl onto my plate. And I eat it all. If I can eat cow heart, I can stomach a few forkfuls of raw, Peruvian fish.

It's not...*bad*. But my stomach does a little flippity flop after that last bite.

And suddenly, the rest of my meal doesn't look too appealing. Grateful I'm only a few bites away from finishing my plate, I sit back and wait for everyone else to finish while my insides throw a little party. And not a cute, little baby shower. Nope. It's one of those frat house ragers where everyone gets wasted and the house gets trashed.

Cooper finishes and puts an arm around me while we wait. I'm quiet, but Cooper doesn't comment on it. The wonkiness in my stomach has made me lose my appetite for conversation, but something about Cooper's warm arm across my back and his fingers tracing little patterns on my shoulder, makes me feel nice.

As nice as I can feel with a growing upset stomach.

When we get back to the hotel, Jase and Wesley, and even our parents, are wanting to head down to the hotel pool for a little late night swim. But I just want to go to bed and sleep off my tummy ache.

One look at me and my less-than-chipper face, and Cooper wraps his arm around me again. He steers us toward the elevator with a, "We'll catch you guys tomorrow," thrown over his shoulder.

CHAPTER 16

FINISHING OFF THAT CEVICHE before leaving the restaurant is the worst idea I've had on this trip, and that's really saying something, since I'm the one who suggested that Cooper and I share a bed. Which is a huge problem because he's inconveniently in between me and the bathroom.

The lurching in my stomach demands quick action. I don't have time to creep out of my side of the bed and tiptoe daintily to the bathroom, turning on the light only after closing the door. I fling myself across the bed, body slamming, kneeling

on, and jostling Cooper until I shimmy off the far side. I haul open the bathroom door and flip on the light, not caring that it's sometime after midnight but before sunrise. My stomach heaves again, and I throw myself in front of the toilet, ignoring the jolt of pain as my knees hit the cold tile, just in time for the contents of my stomach to reverse trip into the porcelain bowl.

“Hannah?”

I vaguely register Cooper's sleep scratchy voice near the door. My stomach revolts again and I grip the sides of the toilet tighter, squeezing my eyes shut as tears spring to them.

I've officially hit the lowest of lows. Forget my Justin Bieber phase, this is the most humiliating situation Cooper has ever seen me in. But I can't stop my body's reflexes as it purges that dang ceviche and anything else I've eaten in the last twelve hours.

Cool fingers brush across the back of my neck, gathering the wayward hairs that have fallen out of my ponytail and pulling them away from the pukefest in front of my face. Tears slide down my cheeks as Cooper gently removes my hair elastic with one hand, still securely holding my hair away from my face. His body heat warms my back as he squats behind me, putting him close enough to tie my hair into a new ponytail. The heat at my back shifts to my side, and Cooper's hand drifts to my back, smoothing my sleep shirt in lazy, comforting circles.

My heaving stops, and I lean my head on the arm that's propped across the toilet seat. I'm debating whether or not my abs will ever feel the same again when I hear the telltale sound of toilet paper being unrolled. I crack an eye open as Cooper extends a small wad of toilet paper towards me with one hand while still tracing soothing circles on my back with the other. I accept the small offering and wipe my mouth before flushing the toilet and resting my head and my eyes.

My stomach swirls, even though I'm pretty sure there isn't anything else left to be swirling in there. Cooper's large hand changes patterns, abandoning the circles in favor of running up and down in long, goosebump-raising strokes.

“Do you think you can make it back to the bed?” Cooper asks, his voice quiet and rumbly. If I had the energy to shiver, I would, but I’m drained. I shake my head lightly, not wanting to leave the cool porcelain. “The bed is more comfortable than the bathroom floor.”

I moan quietly, but open my eyes just enough to plan my trajectory.

Closing my eyes again, I shift to the side, and my forehead guides itself to the center of Cooper’s chest. Cooper lifts and repositions his arms around me as I scoot myself marginally closer to him. I’m not proud of the depths of embarrassment I will be putting myself through later when I recall cuddling into Cooper like a child, but at the moment, I’m tired and sick and Cooper’s comforting warmth and solidness is a cure-all for my ailment.

Cooper runs his hands up and down my arms as he hugs me to his chest. Exhaustion from the early hour and my unplanned workout drags my eyelids down, begging me to fall asleep on Cooper right here in the tiny hotel bathroom.

“Let’s get you back to bed,” Cooper’s low voice rumbles into my ear. He pulls me to standing, and I take one step before I’m lunging back towards the toilet for round two. I hear Cooper step out of the bathroom and turn on the room lights before the toilet in front of me becomes the focus of my world.

While I’m grateful that my stomach is devoid of anything resembling food, the heaving and the stomach acid are no more pleasant than losing my dinner a few minutes ago. My abs ache when the heaving finally subsides, and I moan into the toilet bowl after flushing again.

I’ve resigned myself to my fate of sleeping on the cold, kind of gross bathroom floor, when Cooper comes back into my new bedroom, holding the small hotel ice bucket. He crouches down and presses it into my hands.

“Leave me here to die,” I moan as my hands close around the tan plastic.

“Not on my watch.” One side of Cooper’s mouth tips up in a small smile. If I didn’t feel so crummy, I would admire it a little more, but I only acknowledge it by cradling the ice bucket to my chest like a teddy bear.

Cooper slips his hands into my armpits and lifts me to my feet. When I don’t immediately follow him out of the bathroom, he steps back to me. Before I can really register it, he scoops me up, one arm under my knees and one under my back. I groan and clutch the ice bucket to my chest as my stomach swoops, but not exactly for the same reason it did a minute ago. Since all my dignity went out the window when Cooper saw me throw up, I tuck my head under his chin and let him carry me to the bed without complaint.

Cooper gently sets me on the bed, and while he goes back to turn off the lights in the bathroom, I scoot myself up to the pillows like a caterpillar. I shimmy under the covers, curling up and propping the ice bucket between my thighs and my stomach, and close my eyes. I hardly register the dip in the mattress when Cooper climbs into bed before my exhaustion drags me into sleep.



I wish I could say that was the end of it, but I wake up twice more. Too exhausted to move, I end up throwing up into the ice bucket. And each time, Cooper calmly takes it from me after I’ve finished, and dumps it out in the bathroom, returning it to me once he’s rinsed it out. He slips back into bed like it’s not a big deal that he’s seeing me at my most vulnerable, and that wall I’ve kept around all those old feelings drops like a drawbridge.

I may as well be escorting Cooper straight into my heart and giving Rule Number Three a big ol’ middle finger. But forcing Cooper out of my heart takes more energy than I have in this state, so for now, he stays. I’ll figure out what to do once I’ve recovered from this bout of food poisoning—because it *has* to be the ceviche—and once I do, Cooper will be none the wiser that I broke Rule Number Three.



I don't know what time it is when I wake up. The sun is streaming in through the sheer curtains, and Cooper is breathing evenly next to me.

I repeat.

Cooper.

Is.

Next.

To.

Me.

Right next to me.

Cooper's wrist is propped on my hip, his fingers dangling into the ice bucket that's still tucked into my body. I try to shift to look at Cooper, and he is instantly awake, springing into a sitting position, his hand splaying on my hip. When he sees that I'm not moving to throw up again, he visibly relaxes and lays back down, a tender smile on his face.

His hand is still on my hip.

"Good morning, Hannah Dearest," he says. Did he just scoot closer? There's still space between my back and his chest, and in the light of day, I'm grateful for those few inches of clarity.

Cooper is my *fake* boyfriend. Not real. None of these lovey-dovey touches are real. His hand is only on my hip as a puke alarm system. *Not* because he wants to cuddle.

Because you can't want to cuddle, I remind myself. *Remember the rules!* But no matter how much I remind myself, I can't rebuild my wall of rules fast enough.

I slowly shift onto my back, moving the ice bucket in between me and Cooper as a barrier and a reminder of why he slept so close to me last night. Cooper's hand falls away from my hip and he tucks it into his body as he watches me move.

"Good morning, Cooper," I say once I'm finally facing him. Concern lines his face as his eyes sweep over me.

“How are you feeling?” He untucks that same hand and gently brushes my forehead with the backs of his fingers.

I don't want to admit how wonderful his cool hand feels against my skin, how much that gentle touch sets the butterflies in my stomach fluttering.

“I don't want to immediately run for the bathroom, so I guess better?” I reach to rub the sleep from my eyes, and Cooper begins to move his hand away, but on impulse, I grab it and press those deliciously cool fingers to my cheek.

“You're still really warm.”

I shrug and rearrange his hand so his palm is pressed against my face, with my hand covering it. He swipes his thumb, gently brushing my eyelashes, and I blink a few times.

Butterfly kisses, my mom used to call those when I was a little girl, when she would lean in close and blink her eyelashes against my cheek, just to make me giggle. Am I fully aware I'm giving Cooper butterfly kisses? Yes. Do I care at that moment? Not one bit. I'm too exhausted to care that I'm letting my heart control my actions.

“I'll be fine.”

Fine physically? Yes, with some time, maybe a Tylenol, and some sleep. Fine emotionally? The jury is still out on that. I let my heart get way too invested in this charade, and eventually our vacation will come to an end, and so will this relationship. But while it lasts, I'll keep Cooper's cool hand right here, and pretend that he feels that same way I do.

Because pretending is the name of the game, isn't it?

“You should go down and get some breakfast before it's over.” A thought hits me. “What time is it anyway?” In all of the midnight madness, I have no idea where my phone got off to.

“Nine-ish. Are you sure you'll be okay if I go?”

I pat the tan plastic bucket. “We'll be fine. I think I'm going to go back to sleep, anyway.” Cue my yawn. “You have

fun today. Let everyone know I'm okay." I snuggle deeper into the blanket and close my eyes before Cooper gets off the bed.

A light touch on my shoulder prompts me to crack an eye open. Cooper sets my phone in front of me and smiles softly. "In case you need me." And then he's out of my line of sight, and I hear the bathroom door open and close.

My heart flips as I close my eyes again. Need Cooper? What I need is to stop myself from getting my hopes up.

CHAPTER 17

THE NEXT TIME I open my eyes, the room is quiet. The blackout curtains are drawn, and only the smallest sliver of light escapes from between the panels of fabric. I have no idea what time it is or how long I've slept, but at least I'm feeling better. I sit up in bed, trying to untangle myself from the sheets, and look around the room. Cooper's wallet and key card are gone from where he usually puts them on the dresser. I find my phone in the disheveled bed to check my

notifications. The only one is a text from Mom in the Bradford Family Group Chat.

Mom

We're headed to SeaWorld. Hope you feel better soon, Hannah!

So the ceviche only took me out. Well, whatever. I'm glad no one else got sick because that means they didn't have to halt the entire vacation due to a bout of food poisoning for everyone. It was just me.

I feel a little better knowing that the rest of my family and Cooper and his parents are having fun without me. But while I'm glad I'm the only ceviche casualty, being left by myself is a little weird.

It's not that being left alone is weird. I've traveled on my own to a few places before. But it's the fact that everyone else I came on this vacation with is out there, having fun, while I'm in here...not having fun.

At least I'm not still throwing up. My rabble rousing stomach has finally quieted, and I no longer feel like I'll be making the bathroom my second home. I ease myself off the bed, finding my tan plastic ice bucket tossed onto the floor, and I replace it on the dresser before I head into the bathroom to take care of my morning needs and brush my teeth.

I brush them twice, for good measure.

On my way back to the bed, I grab my backpack from where it's stashed on a chair, and I pull out my laptop. I settle back onto the bed, but instead of propping myself against the headboard, I lay down with both pillows underneath my neck, and balance my laptop on my chest. My right hand, holding my wireless mouse stays at my side, and my left hand is still able to reach the W-A-S-D keys comfortably. Ultimate comfort for the lazy gamer.

I launch my favorite game, *Skyrim*, and settle in for some Nordic side questing and dragon slaying.



Cooper's back.

And he's lifting my laptop off my chest and sliding my mouse out from underneath my limp fingers.

I blink the sleep from my eyes as he smiles down at me and sets my computer on the side table, keeping it open because I haven't saved my game in...

"What time is it?" I ask.

I shimmy toward the middle of the bed, giving him room to sit next to me. Cooper kicks off his shoes and swings his long legs up onto the bed.

"Nearly noon," he says and he gets comfortable on my side of the bed with his back against the headboard. "I brought you some food. Crackers and Gatorade, but there's also a frozen pot pie I can heat up. I didn't know if you'd feel up to eating yet." He nods towards the dresser, and I notice the white plastic bag that's undoubtedly filled with all sorts of sick day goodies.

"I thought you went to SeaWorld with everyone else." I shift my pillows until they're touching Cooper's hip, and I scoot in closer, rolling onto my side so I can look at him. He brings an arm around and rubs my shoulder.

"I stayed."

Whatever little builders were scrambling to rebuild the wall around my heart are now clearing away the rubble, like it was their first and only job. *Don't worry, boss. When we're done, you won't be able to tell there was even a wall in the first place.*

This absolute gem of a man. I don't deserve him.

He's not really mine, I remind myself. This is all an act for him. He stayed because how bad would it look if he went off gallivanting around a theme park while his poor *fake* girlfriend wasted away with food poisoning in a hotel room?

No matter that every effort of mine to keep him firmly out of my heart has been an absolute failure. Like an idiot, I've

gone and fallen in love with him while he's just been doing it for the optics.

I don't need to repeat myself, you heard me the first time.

But how could I not? For years, he was always there for Jase, and by extension me because I was the little sister who always tagged along. And even though I went and messed things up and gave him the cold shoulder for eight years, he just as easily walked right back into my life and tucked himself into that Cooper-shaped hole in my heart.

And when I have to give him up at the end of all of this...

No, I'm not going to think about it right now. I'm going to forget that Cooper and I have an expiration date, and I'm going to keep pretending that I haven't broken the biggest, most important rule.

So I snuggle into his side, but withhold myself from throwing my arm over his legs, and gesture to my laptop. "You can play a little, if you want."

"What were you playing?" Cooper asks, as he pulls the computer toward himself. I know he recognizes it in an instant because we were both teenagers when it came out, and he played just as much as I had back when it first released. "*Skyrim*?" He asks, a smile growing on his face. "I haven't played that in ages!"

Cooper settles the computer on his lap and looks down at me. "Are you sure? Do you want me to create a new character?"

My smile stretches the sleepy muscles in my face. "I'm sure. And just play on mine. That intro takes forever."

Cooper settles in, and I scoot up a bit more, resting my head against his elbow so I can see the screen a little better. This takes me back *years*. Back to when the game first came out and I spent hours upon hours watching Jase play while patiently waiting for him to complete the game so it could be my turn to slay dragons and *fus roh dah* bandits off cliffs. Sometimes, Cooper would be there, too, and we'd Shout along

with the Dovahkiin and laugh until our stomachs hurt because our pronunciations were never very good.

I'm near the end of the main questline, but instead of continuing where I left off, Cooper sets a familiar side quest as active and follows the new marker. I watch him gallivant my two-handed, heavy armor-based character across the map of Skyrim, running collection quests and clearing out bandit camps. I point out interesting, undiscovered markers, and Cooper helps me complete my map a little more.

I spend hours here, content to just be close and watch him play my favorite game.

Until he opens the final chest in the depths of a draugr-invested crypt.

“Don't pick it up.”

“Why not? If I leave it here, it won't spawn in another location.”

“Because. I'm not doing the daedric quests for this character.”

“Come on, Hannah. Don't you want to hear it?”

“No, Cooper, I do not.”

“Come on.”

“No.”

“Just this once.”

“Cooper!”

“A NEW HAND TOUCHES THE BEACON!” blasts from the computer speakers. My head is closer to them than Cooper's and at this range, the voice clip is nearly deafening. I sit up, pushing myself away from him.

Cooper laughs, and I swat at his arm. I come back to rest with my arm pressed against his as I join him in leaning against the headboard.

“Not funny, Coop. I think I lost hearing in my left ear.” But I laugh, too. For a minute, we stare at each other with silly

smiles on our faces. How have I looked into this face so many times and never seen everything there is to look at? Every path my eyes take uncover something new, something...magnetic. The way his brown hair flops over his forehead when he hasn't styled it. His eye crinkles that make him seem like he's smiling without moving his mouth. His green eyes that skate across my face and land squarely on my mouth.

In an instant, my eyes are drawn to his mouth. I'm mesmerized by the way his tongue parts and wets his lips. I roll my own lips over my teeth and glance up to see if Cooper is still looking at my mouth. But my eyes find his.

And it's those green eyes that are my undoing.

I don't know who leans in first, but then our noses are brushing and our mouths are millimeters from each other and I can feel his breath on my lips. Looking into Cooper's eyes from this close feels like I'm staring directly into his soul.

Away from the judgment and approval of our parents, my soul is saying yes to every question Cooper is silently asking me.

Hannah?

Yes.

Should we?

Yes.

Do you want to?

Yes.

May I?

YES.

Cooper leans in and claims my mouth with his. This isn't a closed-mouth kiss for a photo-op or an impromptu celebration for building the best sand castle. This is a kiss that says *I want this—I want you—and not because someone else is telling me to.*

At first, his lips are gentle against mine, exploring one side of my mouth and then the other, but slow and languid isn't

enough. Our kisses become deeper and more fervent as Cooper reaches up a hand and threads it through my hair, pulling me in close and keeping me right where he wants me.

But Cooper is right where I want him, too, and I'm not letting him go. One of my hands latches onto the front of his shirt, and the other slides around his side, holding onto those obliques that I want to run my hands over again and again.

Reluctantly, Cooper breaks the kiss, leaning his forehead against mine.

“Hannah,” he whispers. “What are we doing?”

It's the regret in Cooper's voice that breaks me out of the brain fog his kiss put me under.

What are we doing? We're kissing...but it's a mistake. We just got caught up in the moment and our time faking an emotional connection has muddled reality. The zips and zings don't mean that Cooper feels anything, they're just the indication that I've let myself go too deep.

We're breaking the rules. Rules that *I* put in place. The plan is to break up at the end of this vacation. Our relationship—real or fake—has a timeline that can be counted in hours. What are we doing by throwing everything to the wind now, when we're so close to the finish line?

CHAPTER 18

IN AN INSTANT, I'M crawling off the other side of the bed. I just kissed Cooper. With a kiss that was so far outside our rules that even Cooper didn't know why we were doing it. My brain is malfunctioning, and it needs a reset.

"Hannah," Cooper says, louder than his intimate whisper from a minute ago.

"It's fine, Cooper, it really is." I start looking around the hotel room that suddenly doesn't feel big enough for the two

of us. My eyes land on my toiletry bag on top of my suitcase. “I just need to take a shower.”

Without making eye contact with Cooper, I gather my shower things and a set of clothes and disappear into the bathroom. I lock the door behind me, but stop myself from giving Mirror Hannah another talking to because I know the walls are too thin. So I jump in the shower and hope that the sound of the water will drown out the thoughts that are shouting loudly in my mind.

What am I doing running away from Cooper? Is it just so I don’t have to answer his question?

What are we doing?

What are we doing—kissing like the world is about to end when our relationship isn’t real? Or does he mean what are we doing fake dating in the first place? He may have suggested the fake relationship as a viable option for this trip, but it was my lie that got us here in the first place. It was my thoughtlessness that threw us into this situation.

What are we doing—kissing when we shouldn’t?

And now he wants out. He regrets my stupid lie and the unwanted forced proximity.

I let the hot water run over my face, begging it to wash away the tears that are now coming to my eyes in waves that can’t be stopped.

Grateful I’m not a loud crier, I don’t count the number of minutes I stand there, emptying my body of every ounce of tears.

I messed up. Big time. Maybe even bigger than the fiasco on my driveway eight years ago. Because back then, I thought I knew what it was like to love Cooper and have my heart broken. But the hurt of that teenage love being shattered by a few words can’t even compare to the physical ache inside my chest right now.

I fell when I shouldn’t have.

And now I’m paying the price.



My skin is pink and pruney when I exit the bathroom more than a half hour later. I'm hoping the effects of the hot water will hide the puffiness of my eyes and splotchiness of my face.

"I saved your game," Cooper says as I walk past him. He's on his side of the bed now, and my laptop is closed and resting on my side table. I give him a small nod and a tight smile without making eye contact. If I look him in the eye right now, I might burst into another round of tears, and I don't know if I can explain why without admitting that I've fallen in love with him. And I don't want to admit that when it's clear he doesn't feel the same way. It would be more humiliating than having him watch me throw up.

"Thanks, Coop." I fall into a squat, putting all my attention on packing my toiletries back into my suitcase. It's getting close to dinner time, and everyone should be back at the hotel soon.

"Hannah, talk to me." Cooper's voice is strained, and it pulls on my raw heartstrings. It's a voice that says, "Let's clear the air because I can't have you reading into that kiss. Because I don't like you like that. You'll always be Jase's little sister to me." I should know. He said the same thing years ago.

I feel his distinct steps across the room, and when I stand and turn around with my sandals in my hand, he's only a handful of feet from me.

I take a fortifying breath and meet his eyes. "We don't need to talk about it, Coop. I understand. It was a mistake, and we can just forget about it."

I try brushing past him to get to the bed so I can put on my shoes, but a hand on my upper arm stops me. "A mistake? Forget about it?"

My resolve solidifies the more the thought runs through my mind. "Yes. A mistake. We can group it in with Rule Number Two. We don't talk about fake dating or the kiss that shouldn't have happened."

With a boldness I don't really feel, I look up at Cooper. His eyes fix on mine, never straying to places they shouldn't. What is only seconds feels like an eternity.

I feel like an egg ready to crack from the pressure of his scrutiny when he nods once—definitively—and drops his hand.

I look away and sit on the end of the bed, sliding my sandals on just as my phone lights up with a new notification in the family group chat.

Jase

We're on our way back. Do you want to come to dinner or for dinner to come to you?

Seeing Jase's name on the screen is a death knell—the final nail in my coffin—solidifying me as what I'll always be to Cooper. Jase's little sister. I answer immediately.

Me

I'm feeling much better and would love to get out of the hotel.

And away from Cooper. But some wishes are too outlandish to even voice out loud.

CHAPTER 19

I WAKE UP COLD, which is not something I thought was possible in the Orlando heat. But after an awkward dinner last night where Cooper and I sat next to each other with our fingers interlocked, but hardly speaking to each other, I doubled down on staying as far away from him as I could during the night.

Every shift of the bed or twitch of the blankets reminded me that Cooper was within an arm's reach, but I wasn't going to turn and look at him. This is how it should have been the

entire week, but I crossed so many lines and broke all the rules...it's better that it ends this way. With us doing exactly what we should have been doing the whole time.

It wasn't easy to fall asleep. And it was even harder to stay asleep. I nearly fell off the bed twice trying to scoot closer to the edge and away from Cooper and his warm body.

I must be the first one awake because there hasn't been any jostling from Cooper's side of the bed. I reach my arm out of my sad cocoon of warmth to check the time on my phone. It's not too early or too late, and I don't have any notifications from the family group chat. It's our last day in Orlando, and with our flight scheduled to leave mid morning, Mom didn't plan anything for today. For once, she's actually letting us rest and relax on this vacation.

I quietly set my phone back on the side table and try rolling over with as little movement of the bed as possible.

But Cooper's eyes are open when I settle onto my opposite side. He's tucked the blanket underneath his arm, leaving his bare shoulder and chest exposed, while I have it pulled all the way up to my chin in an effort to conserve whatever body heat I've created. I ignore the way the muscles in his arm shift as he tucks his hand underneath his head.

Nothing good came from me appreciating those this week, so now I need to keep a handle on myself.

"Hey you," he says quietly as he studies my face. His features are open and inquisitive. "You're finally awake."

Normally, I would laugh at a good *Skyrim* reference, but not this morning. Not when nothing is normal between the two of us.

"You can take the first shower," is the only thing I say. Cooper's expression shutters as he nods. He does one more visual lap of my face and then sits up, and I have to look away when the blanket falls away, revealing his bare torso.

I keep my eyes averted as he climbs out of bed and gathers his things, taking them into the bathroom.

We're back to where we need to be.

We barely talk as we finish getting ready for the day and pack up our suitcases. *This is how it should be*, I remind myself. If I had kept things between us like this the whole week, I wouldn't be in the pickle I am now, with my heart on the chopping block.

For the first time, Cooper and I aren't the last ones down to the lobby. But we don't have to wait long for everyone else, either. Jase and Wesley are the first to join us, and by the way Jase looks between the two of us, he can tell something is different. When he cocks his head at me, I glare and shake away his unspoken question. He shoots Cooper an unreadable look, but I wave him off when he steps toward me.

To Jase, this is a complete flip from last night. Maybe we hadn't been as affectionate at dinner as we were the rest of the trip, but there had been some flow between us, not this disjointed silence.

Wesley looks down at his phone. "Mom and Dad are on their way down."

I feel the buzz of the notification in my pocket, and I turn toward Cooper, taking a deep breath and letting my shoulders drop away from my ears.

"Ready for our last show?" I ask, meeting Cooper's clear green eyes for the first time since leaving our room.

Cooper gives me a small, sweet smile as he takes my hand in his. I'm dying on the inside, knowing that everything he's doing is fake when all I want is for it to be as real as my feelings for him. "Let's do this," he says as he leans down and presses an equally soft kiss to my cheek.

In an instant, our heart eyes are out, and I'm pressed up against Cooper's side, but everything feels too forced. Cooper's arm around my shoulder isn't relaxed; it's stiff, like a poseable action figure. I try to relax into it, but my brain wins the wrestle with my heart and it refuses to let me fall back into the same mess from yesterday.

Which we're not talking about.

The elevator doors ding open and our four parents come out, led by Mom, who has a frown on her face. When she reaches us, she puts her hands on her hips and her gaze sweeps over us.

“Well, our flight got delayed. We won’t be leaving until later this afternoon. I didn’t plan anything for this morning, but we can talk about what we want to do over breakfast.” Mom glances back at the hotel’s breakfast area that’s full of parents shepherding their young children around in a noisy parade. “Why don’t we go out to eat?”



My blood runs cold when Mom announces that she wants to ride with me and Cooper to “make sure Hannah’s feeling alright.” I keep my groan trapped inside my chest with all my other unpleasant feelings and smile a little wider to hide my discomfort. Jase looks positively overjoyed when Dad hands him the keys to the second car.

My cheeks are aching from holding this smile on my face, and my hand is starting to sweat in Cooper’s, even with the A/C on full blast. Our sticky palms are pressed together and neither of us wants to shift them to a more comfortable position because it would cause more friction between us than we can stand.

Luckily, the drive to the diner is short-lived, and Cooper and I get some space to breathe—as much as one can breathe with 74% humidity. I’m grateful when Jase and Wesley carry the conversation about what to do while we wait for our flight. We all agree that hanging out at the airport for longer than necessary is our last option.

Whatever appetite I lost yesterday after my bout with the bad ceviche comes back with a vengeance this morning, and I easily polish off everything on my plate. When I scoot my plate toward the middle of the table to clear some space for me to rest my arms, a hand pushes a half-finished plate of hashbrowns and bacon in front of me.

My raised eyebrow speaks the volumes I can’t seem to find words for. Cooper smiles and announces, “Gotta keep my

woman full and happy.”

I dig deep and find a small smile for him, for the sake of the show. Cooper leans back and puts his arm around me, but instead of resting on my shoulders, it's fully resting on the back of the bench.

I don't fight to push his plate back in front of him, that would throw a red flag for my mom to zero in on, so I grab my fork again and finish the rest of Cooper's meal. And with every bite, my heart sinks a little bit further, knowing that all this will be over in less than twenty-four hours.

When the topic swings to what to do before our flight, I'm glad it's Jase and Wesley who have been carrying the conversation because I'm out of ideas. I had one good idea for this trip, and I used it up on the second day here. My brothers start throwing out options like a park or a movie, or lots of things that could also be done in Utah, but before long, their meager lists empty, and they have to resort to googling “things to do in Orlando.”

Even our parents perk up when Jase suggests Madame Tussauds. I mean, who wouldn't? It's inside and air-conditioned. Two things I'm craving after spending two hot and humid days outside, and one day inside, but feeling like crap.

My final stroke of luck is that Jase and Wesley ride with Cooper and me on the way to the wax museum. But the car ride is silent, a stark contrast to our trip to Kennedy Space Center a few days ago.

The whole trip to Madame Tussauds is a study in contrasts, it turns out. Gone are the easy moments between me, my brothers, and Cooper. In its place are stilted conversations and tense silences as we ooh and ahh over the detailed wax statues with our parents.

At first glance, being able to see all of these celebrities and influential figures is fascinating. We walk through halls of athletes and film stars and musicians, and we take selfies with our favorites. (Hello, Henry Cavill.) Some are set in full scenes that we can join in, others are standing alone, but the

more I look—the closer I look—the more unsettling all of these life-like figures become.

Observing the realistic wax renderings is like a snapshot of how Cooper and I have been since *The Kiss That Shouldn't Have Happened*. From far away, everything looks normal—totally fine and exactly how it should be. Our hand placement is just right, our proximity is appropriate. Perfectly perfect at first glance. But upon closer inspection, there's something not quite right about the faces. The sculpted emotions don't telegraph exactly how they're supposed to, and each expression is forced and unnatural.

There's no accidental eye crinkles. No warmth in Cooper's vacant smiles. My mouth stretches ever-so-slightly too wide.

Upon closer inspection, it's not real.

CHAPTER 20

WHAT'S WORSE THAN A flight delay?

A second flight delay.

But this time, we're already through security when Mom gets another notification from her flight app that we'll be here for at least another two hours.

Thank heavens for e-readers.

I pick a book and settle into the seat next to Cooper's. If I'm too absorbed in reading, then I won't have to make heart eyes at him. His arm rests on the back of my chair, and I figure that's good enough for the final stretch of our charade. He's absorbed in his conversation with my brothers, I'm absorbed in my book. It's fine.

Everything's fine.

Two hours turns into three. Three turns into four. Mom tells us there's a bad storm over northern Utah, and it's delaying all of the flights. By the time the airline employees finally call us up to start boarding, I'm halfway through the book I started when we got here.

"This is your four-day chance to see what dating Carter would actually be like."

I shut my e-reader and stand. Who thought it would be a good idea to read a fake dating rom com when I'm living one in real life?

Dummy Me, that's who.

The sudden end to my distraction brings my phobia front and center.

What starts as a subtle discomfort as we file into the plane grows into an all-encompassing panic as we reach our seats. Even the relief of discovering Cooper and I are separated from my parents by several rows isn't enough to put me at ease. Cooper slides into the row first and takes the window seat, without me having to ask him to. As the fear settles over me, I grip the armrests on either side of me like they're the only thing standing between me and falling out of the airplane. Would it be too much for me to ask Cooper to hold my hand like he did on the flight out?

After the awkwardness of the last day and a half, I don't want to find out. The same part of me that is scared that Cooper will say no, leaving me to deal with the crippling anxiety on my own, is terrified that Cooper will say yes. That I will spend the next five hours holding his hand and reading into it more than I should. So I don't ask.

As the flight attendant starts her safety briefing, I double check that my e-reader is tucked between my hip and the edge of the seat, so I won't have to bend down to pull it out of my backpack while we're in the air. I try to remember everything that was on the list of tips Cooper had found for me on the way out, but the only one my brain can remember is to distract yourself. And I'm going to distract myself by finishing that book.

Are safety briefings always so short? Though it seemed like the flight attendant had barely started, she's already sitting down now, just as the tires bounce over the tarmac.

As we trundle along to the runway, I press my back into the seat and shut my eyes tightly. If I can't see, I won't be scared, right? It's one of those *I can't see you, you can't see me* moments.

Strong fingers slowly peel mine from the armrest and weave themselves through mine before I can latch back on. I don't open my eyes. I don't want to know what Cooper looks like as he sits there cradling his hands around mine, brushing the backs of my fingers in gentle caresses.

Because his touch is agony.

If I squeeze my eyes shut to block out the exquisite feel of his gentle hands on mine, I can blame it on the flight. If I don't look into those eyes, I won't have to admit to Cooper how much this is killing me.

We taxi and take off, and after all of the swooping in my belly subsides as much as it's going to while I'm in this death tube, I crack my eyes open. Peeling my other hand away from its armrest, I fumble across my body to where I've stashed my e-reader.

I extend the fingers of my right hand, hoping that Cooper will get the message and let go, but he calmly pushes each finger back down, one by one. I try wiggling my hand a little, but Cooper has it locked up tight.

"Don't worry, Hannah," he murmurs without looking at me. "I've got you."

Tears spring to my eyes, but I blink them back.

I finally reach my e-reader and pull it out, putting all of my focus on it and the love story I wish I could have, and not the one that's currently breaking my heart.

I wish it could be different.

I wish I wasn't just Jase's little sister.

But wishes are for shooting stars and birthday candles, and I have neither.

CHAPTER 21

THE AIR IN THE car is thick with unsaid things. When Cooper turns off the engine in the driveway of my house, I immediately pull open the door, ready to escape the tense silence. Ignoring the way the fresh snow slips into my tennis shoes, I hurry to the back of the car, but Cooper is out of his side just as quickly, like he's racing me to my suitcase.

The charade is over now. I don't need a fake boyfriend to get my things out of the back of the car. I start to lift it open,

but Cooper, a second slower than me, puts his hand on the trunk and shuts it with a thud.

“Cooper, I need to get my stuff.” I tug at the hatch, but it’s locked tight, and this isn’t my car. I’m at Cooper’s whim right now. “Open the trunk.”

“No,” Cooper says simply. I tug some more, to no avail. My feet are starting to freeze and my fingers are already pink. The storm that delayed our flight left a fresh layer of snow that is worming its way into my sneakers, and the dip in temperature is wreaking havoc on my bare hands. I may have brought my coat to Florida, but I hadn’t expected to need gloves or boots.

“Hannah, talk to me.”

“Alright, let’s talk. We did what we set out to do—all of our parents think we’re dating. And now that the vacation is over, we continue with our plan to break up and ‘wallow in our misery,’” I say as I raise my hands into air quotes, “thus encouraging them to leave us alone to ‘process our feelings.’” More air quotes there.

We laid it all out in the beginning, and now it’s time to execute the second stage of our plan, even if it does break my heart.

But that’s my own fault. I broke the rules and now I’m dealing with the consequences.

“I’ll refer you to Rule Number Three,” I say, trying to ignore the stabbing pain in my chest caused by my own hand, “We’re going to part ways as friends and nothing more.”

It’s a battle to keep the emotion out of my voice, but I manage to sound normal enough that it doesn’t make Cooper suspicious. I swallow tightly and paste a dazzling smile on my face to distract him from my shattering heart.

“Friends, Hannah?” Cooper asks.

I nod. “Yep. Friends.”

It’s hard to read Cooper’s expression in the dark, but that’s for the best. Now I just need to get my luggage and get inside

before I completely crumble.

“Can you open the trunk now? It’s freezing out here.” I tuck my fingers into my armpits to illustrate my point. I can’t feel my toes, and I know my socks are wet. It’s late, and I’m sure the temperatures are below freezing.

I hear the click of the trunk unlatching, and I throw it open, avoiding looking at Cooper as I haul my suitcase and backpack out of there. I slam the trunk shut—maybe a little harder than necessary—and turn toward the house.

“Night, Coop,” I say without meeting his eyes, and I race through the freshly fallen snow as quickly as I can without busting my butt on any hidden ice.

I know I shouldn’t, but after I get the front door open, I look back at Cooper. He’s standing on the driveway, next to his car, watching me. At least this time, he never said those words.

You’ll always be Jase’s little sister to me.

He didn’t have to.

CHAPTER 22

NOW I REMEMBER WHY I took my brothers up on their offer to move in with them. Apartment hunting—especially apartment hunting without tipping off Jase and Wesley—is a pain in my butt. I need something spacious enough to be comfortable, not falling apart, and affordable. But whoever is in charge of the apartments in my area is laughing at me and saying, “Pick two of the three.”

I’ve managed to slip out of the house without my nosey brothers asking where I’m going enough that I’ve seen six

apartments, but they were all a bust. Big enough to prevent me from developing claustrophobia and affordable? The amount of things that needed fixed for it to be livable in the winter was up in the double digits. Livable and in my price range? How about we put the bed right next to the refrigerator. A decently sized apartment that wasn't falling apart? My bank account cried when I saw the rent.

But I'm determined to get out of this house. Because even a spacious house like this one can feel claustrophobic when you're spending most of the time hiding in your room to avoid your brother's best friend.

Cooper has stopped by every day since we got back from Orlando.

It's been two weeks.

If I thought avoiding him before during his occasional visits was difficult, I've had to become a hermit now.

I'm not even safe during regular office hours. A few days after we got home, Cooper showed up in the afternoon—after lunchtime, but before the end of the work day. I was lucky I could see him through the open blinds from my desk, and I managed to make it to my bedroom just as he opened the door.

It's been much easier to ignore the pangs of sadness when I hear him in the house than directly confront the fact that I let myself get carried away on our fake vacation. I had set rules to protect my heart, and I had walked right past them like they were a warning and not an exception in my code.

When I'm not avoiding Cooper or looking for apartments, I'm slowly packing away the more nonessential things in my room. I have a growing stack of boxes in my closet, tucked away so Jase and Wesley can't see them if they happen to glance in my room. I thought about packing my books back up, since they were the last things to be unpacked, but my bookshelves are visible from the open door, and I've been drowning my broken little heart in romance novels.

I can't even bring myself to play Skyrim, which is a tragedy.

It reminds me too much of Cooper.

And the kiss.

And to make matters worse, remember how I thought my mom would leave me alone to wallow?

Turns out, she doesn't know the meaning of the phrase, "I'm processing this on my own terms," because she's called nearly every day.

I thought I would be free after this whole mess, but instead, I'm more smothered than a Café Rio burrito. A sad, broken-hearted, romance-reading, human burrito.

I'm not surprised to hear Cooper out in the kitchen one day after work. It's been twelve days. He's stopped by every day and stayed until late in the evening for at least ten of them. I *am* surprised to hear what sounds like an argument between him and Jase. I can't tell exactly what they're saying, and being the nosy little sister I am, I creep to the door and press my ear against it. Their voices are faint, but I can barely make it out.

"Cooper, I don't think this is a good idea," Jase says.

"I have to keep trying, Jase." That's Cooper's voice.

"It's been two weeks. She's hardly come out of her room."

I frown when Jase mentions me. That familiar frustration of being talked about behind my back—or, in this case, behind my door—flares in my chest, but the desire to avoid any sort of interaction with Cooper smothers everything else. Let them talk about me. Because I'm *not* leaving this room.

"I can't give up now, we were so close."

"She obviously doesn't want to see or talk to you. It's not a good idea to poke the bear."

Cooper doesn't respond, and I wish I could see their faces so I could read whatever silent conversation they're having. But that would involve leaving the safety of my room—and seeing Cooper—so that will never happen.

"One last time," Cooper finally says.

I don't hear Jase say anything, but I do hear footsteps coming down the hall, so I jump back onto my bed as quietly as I can. Those might be Jase's footsteps, and although we are both adults, I wouldn't put it past him to barge into my room without knocking for a "last confrontation." I don't need to get smacked in the face if he decides to barge in here. Or worse: be caught listening at the door.

The footsteps stop in front of my door, and the shadows of feet come through the crack. Whose feet, I can't tell, there's an equal chance it's Jase or Cooper. I want to dive back into the book I'm reading, but I can't make myself pick it up from where I tossed it on the bed. Call it curiosity. Or masochism.

I take a deep breath and hold it in my chest, waiting for whoever it is—Jase or Cooper—to say something. When it gets too painful, I want to release it all in one loud whoosh, maybe with some lip fluttering, but I desperately don't want whoever it is to know I've been listening for them. I slowly release it through my nose, trying to not make a sound. And then he speaks.

"Hannah," Cooper says, quietly, but clearly. There's a long pause before he speaks again. "I know you're in there. And I know you can hear me. I just want you to listen—you don't have to say anything."

There's another pause, and a deep inhale. But he continues, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what happened between us all those years ago. I'm sorry we lost touch. I'm sorry I didn't try to reach out, but by the time I realized that not talking to you was making my life feel off-kilter, it felt like it had been too long, so I didn't reach out. I'm sorry I let the weirdness continue when you moved back. I'm sorry I didn't try harder. And I'm sorry for whatever I did on the trip to make you not want to talk to me. Because it must have been something I did, and I wish I could take it back."

When he stops speaking, I ease off my bed silently and creep to my door, thankful that there aren't any creaky floorboards in my room. I stop in front of the door.

But I can't bring myself to open it.

Cooper might be sorry about what happened, but he hasn't changed where I stand with him. He came for an apology, when I wanted an expression of love.

For a few minutes, I just listen. And wait. Is that everything he has to say?

"Hannah?" Cooper asks again.

I want to respond. I don't want to say anything. I'm torn between throwing the door open and never seeing Cooper again.

I never want to see you again. It's like that dumb argument all over again, but this time, I can't bring myself to say the words.

Cooper's sigh hisses through the door. "If this is what you want, Hannah, then I'll leave you alone."

Emotion stuffs itself into my throat.

"Goodbye."

Just as my hand shoots out to fling the door open, my phone goes off with my mom's ringtone. My hand stops inches from the doorknob, and I turn back to my phone to silence it.

The stupid stunt I pulled didn't do anything but land me with a heap of heartbreak. I'm still not talking to Cooper and my mom won't leave me alone. It's like the last month never even happened.

Something has to change.

I hear murmurs from the front room and then the front door opens and closes. I listen to Cooper slam his car door and drive away.

I can't change things with Cooper. I can't make him feel anything for me that he doesn't want to.

But I can put my foot down where my mom is concerned.

CHAPTER 23

THE NEXT MORNING, I'M distracted at work. I've never been so happy to have a remote job in my life because I've hardly done any coding. Cooper's final goodbye from the night before is still floating around in my head, and I hate that I can't shake how much he's invaded my thoughts.

But what do you expect when you fall in love with a man who doesn't love you back?

No one ever said getting over something like that is easy.

I've also been rehearsing the speech I'm going to give my mom. It's time I finally set some solid boundaries with her, and I want the conversation to go as well as it can when you're telling someone to butt out. Nicely.

I don't like confrontation.

Hence why I've been hiding out in my room for two weeks like a hermit. If I never *see* Cooper or my mom, then I'm in the clear, right? I'm basically giving them the "if I can't see you, you can't see me" solution—and so far, it's not working.

Cooper has constantly been on my mind.

My mom has constantly been calling.

But this Big Confrontation with my mom has been a long time coming...I just need to be extra prepared for it.

At lunchtime, I finally give up on trying to work today and find something else to keep my hands busy. And that's how I wind up hauling all of my packed boxes out into the living room. I stack them neatly, and then peek out the front room windows to see what the weather is like. Snow is in the forecast, but not until later tonight. I should have enough time to visit my mom and still get these boxes out into my trunk with plenty of time to spare. My brothers will be none the wiser about my plans to move out.

The tightness in my chest from the anticipation of finally confronting my mom makes it hard to focus, even though the task is as simple as stacking boxes in the living room and taking a few of them out to my car. I glance at my watch for what feels like the millionth time, only to find a few minutes have passed since the last time I checked. As the hour creeps closer to three, I decide to give in and visit my mom. Get this over with.

I take a final box to my car and climb in the driver's seat. There are still a few boxes left in the living room, but they can wait until after I talk to my mom. *It's just a conversation with Mom, I tell myself. As soon as I get it done, I can go back to my life of packing boxes and looking for apartments.*

I don't even have the mental headspace to get angry at the dumb Utah drivers during the thirty-minute drive to my parents' house.

I walk in without knocking, as is the standard when it comes to their home, and find Mom in the living room, reading a book. I don't know where Dad is, but I don't need him here for this conversation—no, this is between me and Mom.

She looks surprised to see me—I would be too if I blew in unannounced and didn't stop to take my coat off in the entryway—but her surprise quickly morphs into worry when she realizes it's me standing in front of her.

Mom tucks her bookmark in and sets her book on the cushion beside her.

“Hannah! You haven't been answering my calls and I was starting to worry—“

I cut her off. “Mom, I need some space.”

Worry slips back into surprise and then confusion. “What do you mean?” Her focus is entirely on me—hands on her knees, leaning forward, and eyes never leaving my face. It's time to remove the careful masks I've kept on around her—it's time to reveal all the things I've never wanted to show her.

“I need you to stop calling,” I begin reciting the speech I wrote in my head. “I like talking to you—that's not the problem—but since I moved back, you've called every day. And I'm suffocating. I don't know what about being closer makes you think that I want to talk all the time, but I need some space. I know I'm back, and it's easier to see me and to talk to me, but I still have my life. I'm still an adult with an adult job and adult responsibilities, and just like when I lived in California, I need my own time to do those things.”

Wow, this is incredibly freeing, to get these words off my chest. This morning, when I was writing my little speech, I had imagined Mom getting ruffled and affronted and trying to excuse her actions, and I was prepared with a rebuttal, but

she's...not. She's just sitting, listening patiently to everything I have to say.

“You never bother Jase and Wesley about their lives. And I want you to treat me the same. What I do with my free time is my own thing, and I don't need to explain what I do—or who I'm dating—to you. I don't need you handing out my number because you think I can't get a date. I can. I did in California. I just wasn't ready for that step yet, and you forced my hand.”

And time for the big reveal.

“Cooper and I weren't even really dating.”

A raised eyebrow is the only movement from Mom since I started my rant, but she remains quiet, letting me finish.

“I was so tired of you butting in and giving people my number when I didn't want you to that Cooper and I made the whole thing up. I wanted you to stop with all of the meddling, and at the time, I thought that would be the easiest solution. It was so exhausting turning down all of those guys you pushed at me that I figured pretending I had a boyfriend would get you to stop.

“Cooper wasn't even supposed to be at the Cheesecake Factory when you called. He surprised me and then went along with it. I didn't think you'd go and invite the whole Whittaker family on our trip because of it!” I'm losing steam, and I know it. Mom knows it. So I've got to wrap this up before I turn into a pile of goo and regret everything I've said.

“Look,” I say as I bring my arms up and then drop them to my sides, letting my hands slap my thighs loudly, “I love you. I always have, I always will. That's not going to change. But I need you to let me go and let me live my own life. In my own time. I need you to stop setting me up with the sons of random friends. While I'd love to find someone and settle down, there's no shame in waiting to start dating or get married or have babies. And I want to do it on my own terms and not because you set me up.”

Did I hit everything? I quickly do a mental tally of the talking points I compiled this morning. *Give me space, Cooper*

and I weren't dating, please stop setting me up, I love you. Satisfied that I've covered everything I wanted to, I shrug and smack my lips together.

"Okay, I'm done."

Mom nods. I watch her closely as she pushes up from the couch and crosses the few feet between us. We're within hugging distance, but instead of pulling me into a hug, she opens her arms and waits.

She waits for me to close the distance between us.

I wrap my arms around her waist, and she settles her arms over mine, pulling me in tightly. The huge weight I've been carrying for years lifts off my chest. Mom's hug says more than words ever could, but she doesn't let me fill in the gaps with my own thoughts. Instead, she places a kiss in my hair and says words I never expected from her.

"I'm sorry, Hannah. I didn't know you felt that way. I only did it because I love you and didn't want to see you so... lonely."

I refuse to let Mom go, even though my eyes well with tears and my nose gets runny. "I'm not lonely," I say, holding in my tears. "I have friends. I have Jase and Wesley. I have you and Dad."

"And you have Cooper," she states.

Mom's arms tighten around me, and I bury my head into her shoulder. "No, I don't. It wasn't real—we weren't actually dating." I want to tell her that I was pretty sure I messed up the friendship aspect of me and Cooper, too, but...baby steps.

Mom's hands slide to my upper arms and she pushes me away so she can look at my face, which I'm sure is red and splotchy from trying not to cry. "Hannah," she states like she's telling me the sky is blue, "you're not that good of an actress. That's always been Wesley's forte."

My mouth makes an O shape, but the, "What?" is stuck in my throat.

Mom pats my shoulders and smiles gently. Her eyes get that mischievous sparkle that make her look pleased as punch. “You couldn’t hide your crush on Cooper in high school. And not much has changed in that department.”

“So you’re telling me,” I say slowly, my brain struggling to process everything she’s implying, “*you knew it was fake the whole time?*”

Mom’s smile brightens and she guides me toward the couch, where I sit, still in shock that *she knew* and never said anything.

“I didn’t bring it up because it was obvious every time he looked at you that Cooper wasn’t faking anything.”

You could knock me over with a feather.

My brain understands the individual words Mom is saying, but putting them together and understanding their meaning as a whole is on a plane of comprehension that I can’t access at the moment. Everything is conflicting with what I know as fact.

Cooper only sees me as Jase’s little sister. Whatever Mom saw from Cooper was an extension of that. There’s no other explanation.

My mouth opens and closes like I’m some busted Big Mouth Billy Bass. But the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, “No.”

Mom smiles and pats me on the shoulder like she’s trying to reset something in my body. “Let’s change the subject. Is there anything else you wanted to tell me?”

Like someone force rebooted my internal computer, a thought jumps to the front of my brain, and, in the spirit of honesty and vulnerability, I go for it.

“I really, *really* hate flying.”

CHAPTER 24

THE GARAGE DOOR IS open when I pull into the driveway, and Jase is halfway in the house, about to hit the button to close the door. When he sees my car pull in behind his, he throws me a thumbs up and walks inside.

I was too slow. I spent too long at my parents' house, telling Mom things I hadn't been brave enough to tell her for years. I lost track of time, and now Jase is going to see my boxes before I have a chance to explain.

I throw my car into park and dash into the house without shutting the garage.

But I'm not fast enough. Jase is standing in front of the tower of boxes that didn't make it out to my car. I thought I had more time. I was going to take them out to my car before either of my brothers could notice, but once again, my plans are upended by unfortunate timing.

Jase stares at the boxes while he undoes the cuff buttons on his dress shirt and rolls up his sleeves. "What's all of this, Hannah?"

He turns to me, and I take in his scrunched brow and frowny mouth.

With the little bravado I still feel from conquering a Big Confrontation with my mother, I casually toss my purse onto the kitchen table and shrug off my coat, slinging it across the back of a chair.

"I'm moving out." I cross my arms and look up at my older brother, with a posture that says *I dare you to try me*.

"No, you're not." Jase places his hands on his hips. This has become an official sibling standoff, and I need to get it over with before Wesley also gets home from work and I'm outnumbered two-to-one.

"Yes, I am. You can't tell me what I can or can't do." I will hold my ground. I will show no weakness in the face of my older brother.

"You're right. I can't," Jase says as he takes a step forward. He's so much taller than me, and I know he's trying to use that height advantage to intimidate me, but I confronted my mother today. I can take on anything and anyone. "But I can tell you when you're being a boneheaded idiot."

I roll my eyes and smirk. "Please, compliment me more, Dear Brother."

"Do you know how utterly senseless and short-sighted you're being right now?" Jase takes another step forward, crowding me back against the table.

“I’m not senseless or short-sighted.” I am calm, but I am frustrated that my brother isn’t even trying to see things from my perspective. “I need my own space. It’s getting too cramped here, with you and Wesley. You don’t need me invading your lives.”

Jase’s head rears back slightly. “You’re not invading our lives.”

But I press on. “But you’re invading mine. I don’t need or want you two all up in my business, and I especially don’t want Cooper knocking on my door anymore.” I move my hands to my hips, mimicking Jase’s stance.

“Cooper?” Jase asks. “This is about Cooper?”

I tip my chin in a tiny nod.

“Hannah, he doesn’t even live here!”

“He might as well, for as much as he’s over here! I can’t do anything without running into him in my own space!” I can feel myself getting worked up. My voice is getting louder, and my pitch is rising to *seriously intense*.

Jase snorts and turns away from me, running his hand through his hair. I’ve won. I’ve beaten him back. I take a step forward and open my mouth to continue, but Jase spins around and zeroes in on me. “You can’t just throw away everything we worked for!”

I haven’t seen Jase this upset in years. In fact, I haven’t yelled at Jase like this since our rough patch in junior high, but the way he’s telling me what I can and can’t do makes my blood boil.

“We?” I yell. “Who is we? Because it’s certainly not you and me, buddy. And yes, in fact I can throw away whatever I want because *you are not the boss of me*.”

Jase scrubs his hands down his face and takes a few deep breaths. Watching him make an effort to calm down slaps me in the face with the realization that I’ve also been yelling at my best friend with very little reason. The pent up emotion from the last two weeks—all of my heartache and uncertainty

—needs to go somewhere, but not at Jase, and not in anger. My chest deflates and fills with regret.

“Jase, I’m sorry,” I say quietly, still waiting for him to say something.

“Do you really think I would ever miss a chance to have lunch with you?” Jase pulls his hands away from his face and looks at me seriously. This is a weird turn in the conversation. Is this about the Cheesecake Factory debacle? Why bring it up now when it’s practically ancient history? But the more I study my brother, behind the firm set of his jaw and the tight press of his lips, I see there’s a softness in his eyes. Maybe even a little bit of desperation.

“No,” I admit, but I’m unsure of the direction Jase is taking this. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“And how do you think Cooper knew exactly where you were going to be?”

Cooper? This is about *Cooper*? I mean, my reasons for moving out have everything to do with Cooper, but why would Jase bring him up in regards to his beef with me?

“Does it matter? I thought he ran into me by accident. What does any of this have to do with Cooper?”

“You just said you’re moving out because of Cooper! So yes, Hannah, it’s about Cooper! It’s been about Cooper since the day you moved home! It’s why I told him where we were meeting for lunch, and then I didn’t show.”

My anger is replaced by confusion. By absolute bafflement. The whole Cheesecake Factory run-in was manufactured by *Jase*?

“You sent Cooper on purpose?”

Jase throws his hands in the air and spins in a circle, like he’s at his wits’ end with me. But I’m lost in the twists this conversation has taken. When he looks back at me, exasperation coats all of his features. “Of course I did, Hannah! Cooper tried so hard to talk to you for months! And all you did was ignore him or walk away, so I had to find a

way to get you two to sit down together to talk without you running off.”

“Why would he try so hard just to talk to me? We didn’t have anything to say to each other.”

“Nothing to say to each other? Hannah, I spent eight years being the go-between. I had to constantly filter my conversations with my *best friend* because you didn’t want me to talk to him about you. You had *eight years* of things to talk about. Don’t you get it? He spent eight years waiting for the chance to apologize to you, but you wouldn’t even give him the time of day.”

An apology? What did Cooper have to apologize for? I was the one who messed up, who blew up in his face and said some things I regret. Everything that day was my fault, not his.

When I don’t say anything, Jase shakes his head. “I see that avoidance is still your M.O.”

“I’m not avoiding him,” is my knee-jerk reply, but that is the biggest lie to ever come out of my mouth. I’m trying to avoid Cooper so hard that I’m willing to give up living in my brothers’ very nice house for some tiny apartment somewhere that I’d have to pay for on my own.

Jase senses that this conversation isn’t getting him anywhere. “Whatever, Hannah Banana,” he says as he turns and walks down the hallway to his bedroom, leaving me standing in the kitchen, reeling.

CHAPTER 25

THERE ARE ONLY A few truly defining moments in your life. They're not as easy to pick out as big milestones like graduations or weddings—those are moments that lots of people have that can change their trajectory in life. But those moments, the ones that change the way you experience the world, are so subjective to the person that someone from the outside wouldn't be able to understand how deeply moving that small, seemingly insignificant moment in time is.

Standing alone in my brother's kitchen, faced with boxes I intended to move out of the house, is one of mine.

Every moment, every interaction with Cooper over the last four months, is colored a little differently now. I go back through my memories with a fine-toothed comb to more fully understand what was happening beyond my limited perception.

When I saw Cooper for the first time on the day after Thanksgiving, I was terrified. Terrified that he'd remember how poorly I treated him all those years ago before running away and never looking back. So I ran away first. I've always been trying to run away from him because I've been embarrassed about myself and my actions.

But if I look a little closer at the memory, through my new lens, I can remember how Cooper's eyes had quickly swept from my head to my toes before he smiled at me and said, "Good morning, Hannah."

That look wasn't the look of someone who wanted me to run away. It was the look of someone who was happy to see me. The look of someone who was pleasantly surprised because his best friend hadn't told him his sister was moving into the house. The look of someone who was seeing a chance to apologize after eight years of radio silence.

I thumb through more memories, landing on the one of us at the Cheesecake Factory. Every word he said had been layered with a mocking tone, but upon further inspection, I realize the meanness I'd sensed had been nothing but harmless teasing. The same harmless teasing that saturated every one of our interactions in Orlando.

I thought he was going to be upset about running into me. Agitated because I constantly ran away any time he was near. So that's how I read every word he said, every movement he made, every look he gave.

I let the memory run its course in my mind, and I stop on a mental image of Cooper's face after I told my mom I was "with my boyfriend." He looked surprised and disbelieving, but the disgust I originally read on his face? It's completely

absent. Instead, it's replaced with...amazement. Like he thought he would never hear those words come out of my mouth, but he wasn't upset by them.

Someone upset that they had just been referred to as a boyfriend wouldn't have played along like Cooper did.

Someone who didn't like me and didn't want to be around me wouldn't have agreed to fake date me for a week while on vacation with our families.

Cooper didn't have anything to lose. He had no real reason to pretend to date me. But he did it because *I* needed it. Because *I* asked. Because I somehow thought, in my frazzled, messed up mind, that it would be the cure to my problems with my mother.

He never complained. He never said the idea was stupid. He just went with it and immersed himself in the role.

"Sweetie, you're not that good of an actress."

My mom's words snag in my brain.

I'm not that good of an actress. But neither is *Cooper*. Memories of years of helping my younger brother rehearse for his parts in the school plays flood the forefront of my mind. Jase, Cooper, and I would try our best to read the lines and move around our living room like it was a stage, but we never attained the easy way Wesley fell into character. The three of us would sound like robots and move stiffly, earning us eye rolls from the most dramatic member of my family.

We messed up holding hands during our practice night, when we were pretending to be boyfriend and girlfriend in front of Jase and Wesley. Cooper is just as bad of an actor as I am.

So every glance...

Every touch...

Every kiss...

I had misread everything. I had messed up—big time.

And now I need to fix it.

CHAPTER 26

I WHIP MY COAT off the chair and grab my purse, throwing it over my shoulder as I rush out of the house the way I came in.

If I've learned anything from the romance books I've been reading since getting home from Orlando, it's that in the end, someone is always groveling. And today, it's me.

The light has completely faded, leaving me to fumble around unlocking my car door in the dark. In my rush, I didn't

even think to turn on the outside lights. My hands are shaking from a mixture of frigid temperatures and adrenaline as I struggle to get my key into the ignition. I need to fix this mistake before I lose Cooper forever—there are only so many times I can turn him away before he'll stop coming back.

Headlights flash outside my window, and I hear a car door as I finally get the key in and turn it. As the engine purrs to life, there's a knock at my car window.

I scream.

I shut my eyes like that's going to save me from being murdered, and I scream like death is on the way. When sense returns to me, I mumble curse words under my breath because I'm not going to *die*, it's just Wesley messing with me because he just got home.

But when I open my eyes and turn, it's not Wesley I see through my rapidly fogging window, it's Cooper.

For a second, I'm frozen. My heart is still racing from the scare, and it's taking my brain longer than it should to process everything my senses are telling me.

Cooper.

Here.

Cold.

Fog.

My short breaths obscure Cooper's face in my window, and the break in eye contact restarts my brain and kicks my body into gear.

I rotate my key, turning off my car. The door alarm dings as I open and shut it, reminding me my keys are still in the ignition. But that doesn't matter because in a matter of seconds, I'm nearly nose to nose with Cooper, our warm breaths clouding the air between us.

"Cooper," I breathe, another white puff swirling upward in the frigid night.

“Hannah,” he replies. In the dark, I can’t immediately read his face, but I want to know if it’s confusion or relief splashed there because it’s certainly not the joy I hoped it would be.

“I’m sorry,” we both say at the same time.

“You go first,” I say, inching closer to Cooper, hoping the dim light from the moon will illuminate his face enough.

He shakes his head, his eyes still roaming across my face, and says, “No, you.”

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly, watching the white cloud drift away before I dive into the tangle of thoughts that started forming the second Jase walked away from me tonight.

“I’m sorry for the way I’ve been treating you these last few weeks. After everything hit the fan at the end of our trip, I didn’t think you’d want to be around me. I made a mess of everything, and I hid because it hurt too much.”

I take another deep breath to fortify myself for the hard truths I’m going to lay at Cooper’s feet like an offering. “I broke the rules, Cooper. I broke them all, but most of all Rule Number Three. In faking all of those emotions, it became very real for me. And I screwed it all up with that last kiss, and if it meant losing you as a friend, I would take it back if I could. Because having you as a friend is better than not having you at all.”

Cooper slides closer, placing his hands on my elbows. Holding me in place with his hands and his eyes as he looks directly into mine. Like he can read every unsaid thought whizzing through my head.

I’m sorry. Please don’t go. I love you.

His thumbs move to the inside of my elbows, and even though my coat separates our skin, I’m dying at the slight pressure he’s putting on a part of my body that I didn’t know was a conduit for this intimate feeling.

Cooper doesn’t say anything for a moment, but I let him pull me closer until our chests are nearly touching. When he speaks, his voice is low, but filled with a warmth that wraps

around my bones and seeps into my body from my head to my toes.

“Over the last two weeks, I have been dying a slow death, knowing I had you for one brief moment and I let you walk away. That kiss...” he trails off, his eyes dipping to my lips.

My mind is in chaos, processing what Cooper is telling me. I set out to apologize, clear the air, and hopefully get Cooper back as a friend, regardless of my big feelings towards him. But what Cooper is saying...confirming everything that I suspected...makes my brain swirl with possibilities. *Is this real life?*

“That kiss?” I prompt.

“That kiss was not a mistake.”

I open and close my mouth, and Cooper’s eyes follow the movement. *Because you don’t feel the same way about me as I do about you* was my motivation behind everything. *Because I love you and I didn’t think you loved me back.* But Cooper is standing in front of me, telling me that I’m wrong. I’ve been wrong about him this whole time. Because people can change and their feelings can change and maybe...just maybe...

“What are you saying, Cooper?”

“I’m saying I love you, Hannah. I love you and I can’t let you walk away again.”

Cooper’s head dips again, our noses brushing together. Our noses may be cold, but our lips are warm as they meet in the middle for a soft, barely-there kiss.

“I love you, too, Coop,” I breathe against his mouth as he presses another soft kiss to my lips. The not-a-mistake kiss in Florida may have knocked my heart into a new orbit, but Cooper’s slow, soft kisses are the gravity that keeps me tethered. These gentle brushes of our mouths convey more than words, a deeper feeling that can only be felt when two hearts connect on some other plane.

Without warning, Cooper breaks the kiss and presses his forehead to mine, his warm breath washing over my frozen face.

“As much as I’d like to keep kissing you right now,” he says, “I prepared a speech.”

That makes me pull back with a smile. “A speech?”

Cooper leans in for a quick peck to my forehead. “You had your chance to say your piece, and now it’s mine.” He closes his eyes and clears his throat, and I laugh at his silliness. But when his shoulders drop and he opens those beautiful green eyes and looks directly into my heart, the smile falls from my face.

“I said a lot of things I regret. I was young and dumb and didn’t think of the consequences of what I said to you all those years ago. But after that day, you stopped responding to my texts and calls, and I realized what a big hole you left in my life. And it ached. It ached and ached to have you missing from my life, but it was my fault that you left. It was my fault you stopped talking to me, so I felt like I deserved the pain.

“You don’t know what it felt like every time Jase got up and left the room to take a call from you because you didn’t want to be around me—didn’t want to hear, see, or think about me. Every time, it hurt the same way it did when you left after you graduated. And so when you came back...I knew I had to make it right. I knew I had to make amends. I thought I would be dealing with the girl who left all those years ago, but when you walked out of your room the day after Thanksgiving and you *weren’t*...you were this...beautiful woman...I couldn’t stop myself from falling.

“So I begged Jase for help. For anything he could do to get the two of us in the same room together so I could properly apologize for the stupid actions of a nineteen-year-old boy who was scared that feelings would cost him one of his best friends. Nothing worked for months until you agreed to meet him for lunch, and I jumped at the chance to corner you somewhere you couldn’t just slip away to your bedroom or put on your headphones and tune me out.”

“And look at the mess it got us in,” I joke, but my voice is tight with emotion. I went to find Cooper to grovel to him, never expecting he would come grovel to me.

“It did get us in quite the mess,” Cooper says with a smile, “but in the end, it turned out alright.” He presses a kiss to one chilly cheek and then the other.

“I think back then,” he continues, “when we were kids, maybe I was a little in love with you, too. It just took you leaving for me to see it.”

“I love you, Cooper,” I say, and I reach up on my toes to press the same small kisses to his cheeks.

“Does that mean I can kiss you whenever I want?”

He doesn’t need to ask me twice.

Everything is cold except for my mouth. That’s exceptionally warm, courtesy of Cooper and his *explorations*. I don’t know how long we stand out there, kissing like teenagers.

Or two people who have a lot of years to apologize for.

Cooper’s hands roam from my elbows to my back to my face, never staying in one place for more than a few minutes before he’s finding a new way to hold me and keep me close. My hands are just as greedy as his, brushing across his end-of-day stubble and into his deliciously silky hair, down past his shoulders and slipping around his waist.

A flash of light and a honk makes us jump apart from each other, like we’ve been caught doing something we shouldn’t, but all I know is that kissing Cooper—*loving Cooper*—is something I should be doing today, tomorrow, and forever.

When my eyes adjust to the beams of light that are illuminating me and Cooper, I can see Wesley behind the wheel of his beat-up car. He rolls down the passenger window and calls out, “Can you two lovebirds move so I can pull into the garage?”

Cooper hooks one strong arm around my waist and steers me to the side and into his warm body. We watch as Wesley pulls into the garage and cuts the engine.

“Carry on,” my younger brother says as he steps out of his car, waving at us to keep doing whatever we were doing. He

hops the few steps up to the door to the house, where Jase is waiting. They slap hands and turn toward the interior of the house, shutting the door behind them.

I watch the door for a second before turning back to the man who holds my heart in his freezing, freezing hands.

“How much do you think we could annoy Jase and Wesley?”

“Plenty,” Cooper says with a mischievous smile. He places one last lingering kiss to my lips. “I think they’re due for some annoyance, don’t you?”

“You read my mind, Cooper Darling.” I snake my hand behind me and interlock our fingers before pulling his arm away from my body.

“Then what are we waiting for, Hannah Dearest?”

And the answer makes me smile. *Nothing.*

EPILOGUE

Seven Years Later

JENNA TEARS UP FROM the basement in one of my old Halloween costumes. On some visits, she's a ninja. Other times, she's a fairy. But judging by the fluffy pink dress and sparkly crown, I'd say today is a princess day. She twirls a few laps around the living room before darting into the front hallway.

I hear the front door open and close, and I get up from where I'm sitting at the kitchen table with my parents to make sure my three-year-old didn't just run out into the snow without a coat or shoes in the dark.

I round the corner to the front hallway in time to see Cooper lift Jenna into his arms and plant a big kiss on her cheek. She giggles and wriggles herself out of his arms. I lean over our daughter and press a quick kiss to his cold mouth and pull back when he runs his icy nose across my cheek.

"Can we get your parents a snowblower yet?" Cooper asks as he shrugs off his coat.

"They don't have enough driveway for a snowblower to be worth it. Shoveling isn't that bad." I pat Cooper's nice chest. "Besides, it keeps you in shape."

Jenna pulls on the hem of my sweater, and I turn and look down into her sweet green eyes.

Cooper wraps his arms around my waist from behind and pulls me close to him, his cold nose tickling the shell of my ear. “I can think of a few other forms of exercise that would keep us both in shape.” The warm breath of his laugh skates across my face as I swat him away and bend down to Jenna’s level. He shoots me a wink as he walks farther into the house.

“Mommy, I want to see your princess picture.”

I scoop up my daughter, fluffy pink dress and all, and walk to the end of the hallway where my parents have hung all their kids’ wedding pictures. My wedding dress wasn’t a fluffy ball gown like the princess costume Jenna is wearing, but I felt like a princess that day.

Cooper certainly looked as handsome as a prince in his tuxedo, and the beaming smiles on both of our faces as we posed for the camera were just the tip of our happily ever after iceberg.

I point to the three pictures in turn, showing Jenna her Aunt Callie and Aunt Brooklyn’s princess pictures, too.

Jenna throws her arms around my neck for a quick, but sweet hug. “Where’s the *castle* princess picture?”

Realization dawns on me, and I walk to the other end of the hallway, where my parents still display the picture of Cooper and me in front of the Disney World castle. It’s the only picture they’ve kept up from that trip all those years ago, but we’ve added a fair amount of new ones in the years since.

I smile, remembering that day so vividly. I was so terrified that my mom would keep this picture on display long after Cooper and I parted ways. I lean back and peek around the corner to see Cooper at the kitchen table with my parents, trying desperately to convince them that it’s time to buy a snowblower. His eyes catch mine and he blows me a little kiss.

“You’re a pretty princess, Mommy.”

I look away from my husband and into those same eyes he passed to our daughter. “You’re a pretty princess, too, Jenna.”

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ALSO BY ASHLEY FUNK

Cookie Bait

Like Cabins On Fire

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley grew up near the mountains, where she dreamed of being a fantasy author from a very young age. Imagine how surprised she was when she fell in love with and began writing romantic comedies. When she's not writing or wrangling her kids, she loves going on long-ish runs, avoiding the laundry, and drinking Dr. Pepper. She now lives in a small mountain town in Utah with her husband and five children.

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