

Maggie
Dallen

ONE
LITTLE
KISS.



ONE LITTLE KISS

FIRST LOVES SERIES

MAGGIE DALLEN

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Out of His League](#)

ONE

Noelle

AS A RULE I don't hide out in guys' bedrooms.

Actually, I don't hide. Period.

But this has been a *day*. And while the pounding bass coming from downstairs is a dead giveaway that the party is still raging, I can't bring myself to go back down there.

Instead, I sink down further into the pile of pillows on Elijah's bed. My friend's got the sort of memory foam mattress and thick comforter that make me feel like I'm being swallowed alive, and I'm here for it.

I groan as my character dies on the screen, and click the button on the controller to start a new game.

My friends are all caught up in their boyfriends downstairs, and I'm in no rush to head back home and face more lectures from my parents. So here I am. A useless pile of limbs in a way-too-comfy bed.

I am sloth, hear me roar.

Honestly, I have no idea how much time passes before Elijah finds me. Video games are awesome time-sucks like that.

But at some point, Elijah opens the bedroom door and stops. I don't glance over. I know it's him. And out of the corner of my eye I see his long, lean silhouette resting against

the doorframe as he crosses his arms. “Of all the hot girls to find in my bed...”

I glance away from the screen to give him a little smile of welcome. It is his room, after all. But he doesn't see my smile because he's eyeing me from head to toe. And that's when I remember what I'm wearing.

Or...not wearing.

“I know your parents have dress codes for their dinner parties, but I promise Friday nights at *Casa de Elijah* are a far more casual affair.”

I look down at my little black dress with a wince of feigned embarrassment. “Too much?”

He chuckles, pushes away from the doorframe and joins me on the bed, sprawling out beside me. His head's close to mine on the stack of pillows and the weight of his body makes me roll slightly toward the middle before I adjust.

We're silent for a while as he watches me play the game. Then he says, “You okay?”

That's it. *You okay?*

Not a million questions and looks of concern. No hugs and well-intentioned pep talks. Just “*You okay?*”

I love my girl friends but they'd never be cool with my answering shrug. And this is why it's Elijah's room I escape to on days like today. Days when I'm in a “mood” as my dad calls it. *Just like your mom*. As if down days are exclusive to females.

“Fine,” I eventually sigh. Which I know Elijah will accept, even if he doesn't believe it for a second.

But I love his silence so much right now, I feel my chest swell with gratitude even as I smack the controller in a rage when I miss the freakin' target for the fifth time in a row.

“I'd be better if I could beat this stupid level,” I mutter.

He reaches for the controller. With a few quick moves he clears the level and hands the controller back to me.

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

I love this guy. Have I mentioned that? I love all my friends, but there’s a comfort and understanding with Elijah that is so soothing right now, I know I made the right decision having my date drop me off here tonight rather than taking me back home.

I focus on the game again as Elijah scrolls on his phone beside me, like he doesn’t care that his first floor is currently swimming in friends and hot girls who are no doubt waiting for their favorite host to do what he does best.

Elijah’s one of those natural born extroverts with the sort of innate charisma that even talk show hosts and A-list celebrities would envy.

Everyone likes Elijah. Especially girls. And the feeling is mutual.

He shifts on the bed beside me, and I don’t realize what he’s doing until his hoodie lands on me in a pile, partially covering my bare thighs and the tight bodice of my dress. “What’s this for?”

“You look cold.”

I realize belatedly that I *am* cold. I sit up and slide the hoodie on. “Thanks.”

I’ve only just laid back down beside Elijah, who’s got his knees up now and is frowning as he tinkers with something on his phone. No doubt some new app he’s trying out.

The boy acts like a fool, but he’s way smarter than he lets on.

The door opens again and a smiling blonde enters. That smile fades fast when she spots me. It’s clear, at a glance, that she’s perplexed. I can practically hear the questions in her mind.

Is she competition?

Should I be jealous?

The answer is a resounding *no* as any girl in our school could, and probably would, tell her the moment she rejoined the party.

Which is why I don't bother. Let the gossips fill her in. I don't have the energy to fake nice right now, so I turn my attention back to the screen.

"Eli, are you coming back down?" Her voice is high and just a little whiny in the doorway.

"Be there in a sec." He gives her an absent smile, not even looking up from his phone.

I know that's how he is when he's engrossed in a technical problem, but I still feel a little sorry for the girl when she backs out with one last wary look.

The door snaps shut behind her and I let my head inch to the side. It falls against his shoulder with a thud.

After a while, he breaks the companionable silence. "What are you all dressed up for?"

Ugh. I don't even want to talk about it. "My parents set me up with one of the interns at my dad's firm."

"What?" I don't have to see his face to know his expression. He's giving me the 'your parents are crazy' look I know all too well. "Aren't they supposed to wait until you're in college, or...I don't know, over eighteen?"

"I'll be eighteen in six months."

Not the point, and we both know it.

"He's still in undergrad, just doing a part-time internship... or something." I shrug. "He's basically our age."

"Must've been a great date," he murmurs.

"So good." I answer in the same flat, sarcastic tone.

"Getting married?"

"Probably."

"Cool, cool."

Truth is, my date bailed early. For work. Because apparently interns can get called into the office on a Friday night. He offered to drop me at home, but I couldn't deal with my parents.

Don't get me wrong, they're not *bad* parents. I love them and they love me. Unlike Elijah's mom and dad, mine actually care what I do with my time. Maybe too much so. I mean, seriously, who sets their daughter up on dates these days?

They're *too* involved if you ask me.

But today after school we had one of those talks. The kind that still rankles hours later, and the reason I told my preppy, brown-nosing date to drop me off here rather than at home.

My grades aren't amazing, but they're not awful. I'm a solid B student. Okay, maybe B-minus. Fine, maybe I'm more of a C kinda girl. Not for lack of trying, I've just never been good at tests. But today in the midst of a talk about my grades and my college prospects—or the lack thereof—my dad made a joke about how it was a good thing I had my mom's looks.

He was kidding. Kinda.

My mom, let it be known for the record, refers to herself as a trophy wife. Jokingly, but only kinda. Other people call her the same...and they're not joking.

Fifteen years younger than my dad, she was one of those models at car shows before he came along and married her. She'd only ever wanted to marry rich and that was precisely what she did.

It was around junior high when I finally made sense of the whispers from grown-ups. That was when I realized that as far as my friends' parents were concerned, my dad had tossed aside his first wife for "a younger model." And I'd heard more than a few hints that they may have gotten together before he was divorced.

So, yeah. I love my mom, but she's not exactly my role model.

And yet, the moment I filled out and started to resemble her, the day random strangers started praising my looks...it

was like a given that I must be just like her. That my end goal in life must be to find a rich guy who'll take care of me.

The sound of shrieking laughter coming from the ground floor has me coming back to reality, only to discover that in my angsty stewing, I've totally let my character die on the screen. Again.

"Crap," I mutter.

"Language, young lady," Elijah says automatically. And he sounds so much like my uptight father that I snort out a laugh in response.

I glance over to see that he's texting with someone. Probably that blonde chick with some excuse about why he's taking so long.

Much as I love that he's here beside me—and honestly, the feel of his warm, hard bicep next to my head is weirdly soothing after the day I've had—I'm keenly aware that there's a party full of people waiting for Elijah, including a cute blonde, and I'm being greedy.

"You don't have to babysit me," I say after I pass the next level with no help from him.

He shrugs and my head moves with the gesture. "I needed a break."

It's a lie and we both know it. Elijah never needs a break from parties. I'm the one who needs down time after too much peopling, but he's energized by a crowd.

"Go," I say. "I'm fine. And Mara will give me a ride home later."

Our friend, Mara, doesn't really drink, so she ends up being everyone's designated driver. I know she won't mind giving me a lift too.

Elijah shifts beside me. "Last I saw she was having fun playing foosball with Ryan—"

"And by having fun you mean..."

"She was kicking his butt."

I nod. Sounds about right. Mara and her boyfriend are notoriously competitive with one another. Hilarious to watch, but once they get into a battle, they tend to lose track of time.

My friend Celia doesn't drink either, but I didn't see her or her boyfriend Heath in the short time I'd hung out at the party, so odds are they bailed to have a night to themselves. Which means, I'm stuck waiting for Mara to win.

And she *will* win. That girl won't stop playing until she does.

"I can give you a ride home," Elijah says. "If you're ready to go back."

I shake my head. "I'm not."

He nods and shifts slightly. I lift my head from where it's resting against his shoulder so he can wrap his arm around me, and then I settle back down with my head on his chest, his heart beating in my ear as I continue the game without missing a beat.

If that blonde chick came in now and saw us cuddling, she'd probably storm out in tears. And the thing is, I wouldn't blame her. If this were any other guy, I'd think he was making a move. And if I were any other girl, Elijah *would* be making a move.

But this is us. This is what we do.

Maybe it's because we've known each other for so long, or because we're so similar in so many ways, but we've never had that awkwardness between us. He doesn't make things weird. Unlike just about every other male I know...

Believe it or not, once upon a time I was a tomboy. No one who knows me now seems to remember that, but back in grade school, I only ever hung out with the boys in our class...Elijah included. Back then we all hung out.

But something happened in middle school.

And by that I mean, boobs happened. My chubby cheeks slimmed down and my body filled out, and seemingly

overnight I went from being one of the boys to a girl that most of the boys in our class were intimidated by.

Or, as they got older, the girl they tried to hook up with.

Elijah was the only one who never changed. He's the only one who kept treating me the same, not expecting me to suddenly act all girly just because my mom bought me makeup and taught me how to blow out my hair.

With his free hand, Elijah holds his phone in front of my face, interrupting my game. "You'll never guess what lunatics popped up in the scavenger hunt app tonight."

I shake my head as I look at the app, because honestly, I'm still a little in awe of my crazy friend. Not only did he create this great senior class scavenger hunt, and promise three grand as prize money for whoever completed all his crazy tasks, but he even went so far as to create his own app that tracks each player's status.

I know, right? That's Elijah right there. So committed to making sure everyone is having fun, he's basically made a career out of it.

The scavenger hunt had started off pretty simply, but Elijah kept adding to it, making it more difficult just to amuse himself. I drop the controller and snatch his phone from him. I can't help but giggle at the sight he shows me. I know the photo well. It's of Mara, Celia and me dressed in fireman outfits at the fire station.

We took it two days ago when I sweet talked our way into the fire house and explained why we were there. Mara must've just gotten around to uploading it to Elijah's app tonight.

"That's hot," I say.

I'm obviously joking because we're all making goofy faces and we're drowning in the too-big uniforms. But I adore the picture because each one of us is wearing an idiotic grin and I can feel the fun we were having when the photo was snapped.

"Guess this puts Mara back in the lead," he says as he takes his phone back.

I frown, returning my attention to the video game. “I’m up there too.”

“No way,” he says, his voice pitching with obvious interest.

I don’t argue. The numbers speak for themselves. I’ve done just as many items on the list as she has.

“Wait, you seriously are tied.”

The disbelief in his tone rubs me the wrong way and I sit up to face him. “It’s not my fault you made the game too easy.”

He scrolls through. “You’ve done them all with different teams.”

I shrug. “So? Is there some rule that you have to stick with the same teams?”

“No.” But he doesn’t sound sure.

“Why are you so shocked that I might be winning this stupid thing? You know I love pranks and games as much as anyone.”

“Yeah, but...” He shrugs. “I didn’t expect you to take it seriously. I mean... You don’t have to work for it.”

His offhand words sting, but it’s not his voice that echoes in my head.

Good thing you’ve got your mom’s looks.

My dad’s amused voice is still ringing in my head and my tone comes out too harsh. “What does that mean?”

Good friend that he is, he lets my tone slide with just a ‘whoa, weirdo’ look in my direction. “I just meant, you don’t need the money that badly.”

“Oh.” I deflate, sinking back into the stack of pillows. He has me there. Unlike Mara, my parents had more than enough money to help me through college.

It’s just the fact that they don’t seem to expect me to make it there that bothers me.

Elijah's phone dings with a text and he slides his legs over the edge of the bed. "I should go."

I nod, picking up the controller.

He turns to face me. "You should stay. The night, I mean."

"You sure?"

"Of course."

It wouldn't be the first time I've crashed here. Elijah has what some call "the fun parents." They don't seem to care much about what we do just so long as it doesn't interfere with their lives.

Some might call them fun, but I don't see it that way. There's nothing fun about how they ignore Elijah. Luckily, his cousin Leah's been staying with them this year, and he always has friends around, otherwise I'd feel sorry for the guy.

Maybe he's thinking something similar because he gives me this long look that's not pitying, but it holds a whole lot of empathy. "Holler if you need anything?"

I nod.

"Help yourself to whatever," he says.

We've done this so many times I know what 'whatever' means.

I know where their housekeeper stocks the spare toothbrushes and which drawer has his comfy old T-shirts to sleep in. I also know which of his pillows is my favorite.

I glance toward the door where the blonde disappeared. "I won't be cramping your style?"

"Nah." He heads back toward the party, but then turns to face me with a ridiculous, lopsided grin. "This house has three extra guest rooms, remember?"

He winks. And I roll my eyes because...he may or may not be kidding.

I know for a fact that Elijah's player reputation isn't nearly as bad as the gossips would have you believe.

I also know he's not a saint either.

"Don't be gross," I mutter as he heads out the door.

He turns back after he's walked out and leans in so his head pokes through the open doorway. "Goodnight, babe."

"Night."

He disappears and I fall back into the cocoon of pillows. Although without Elijah here beside me...it really isn't as cozy.

TWO

Elijah

I'LL BE the first to admit, I am not a morning person.

Especially not the morning after I throw a party that didn't end until the sun was rising. It doesn't help that I'd spent the night in a guest room, which didn't have my room's comfortable mattress or the shades that could block out every last hint of the sun.

My vampire shades, as Noelle calls them.

Running a hand through my hair, I don't bother to swing by my room to see if Noelle's still in my bed. I know she isn't because I can hear her voice as she talks to my way-too-perky cousin, Leah, in the kitchen.

"Morning, sunshine." Leah laughs when she sees me squinting against the bright light coming through the kitchen's floor-to-ceiling windows.

Noelle's hair is tossed up in a messy bun as she eats cereal across the table from Leah, her legs curled up under her.

I swallow hard as the sight of her wearing one of my T-shirts hits me like a punch to the gut.

Crap. It's too early. My head hurts too much. For a second I'm helpless against a shock of awareness that's as annoying as it is inevitable.

Noelle can't help it that she's hot.

And I can't help that sometimes...I notice. But I'm not supposed to, and we both know it. It's an unspoken rule. This mutual apathy toward each other's sexuality is kinda our thing. It's the linchpin upon which our friendship was founded.

But damn, some days it's not so easy to remember, and this morning is one of them.

Noelle swallows what she's chewing and shoots me a sidelong glance. "*Oh, hiiii Mark.*"

She draws out the words in a terrible Eastern European accent and I snicker despite the throbbing in my skull.

I laugh harder at Leah's look of confusion. She clearly doesn't get that Noelle's quoting a movie.

Noelle loves terrible movies as much as I do, and the one she just quoted is widely regarded as one of the worst movies of all time. We must've watched *The Room* no less than a hundred times, and Noelle loves to randomly toss out a quote when I least expect it.

One of my favorite things in the world is watching guys drool over her in the hallway only to have her come up to me at my locker and whip out this awful impersonation.

If only those guys could see her doing a bad Arnold Schwarzenegger accent. They wouldn't recognize her.

Not many people outside of her closest friends realize what a dork she really is. All they see are the crazy high cheekbones, the too-big eyes and the ridiculously full lips. Not to mention the curves in all the right places.

The girl is hotter than hell, and that's all most guys see. The fact that she can quote horrible movies and kick my ass in MarioKart?

Those are secrets I hold close. They're what make me her best friend and everyone else...

Well, everyone else.

"Want some breakfast?" Leah asks. She's already jumping up to fetch me food, but I wave her off.

Noelle meets my gaze for just a second, but it's long enough to see that she saw it too. We've talked before about Leah's gratitude, and how I can't stand it.

I love my cousin. Adore her, really. She's the closest thing I have to a sibling. But ever since I found out she was being bullied at her own school and intervened, convincing my parents to let her live with us and go to my school, she's been trying way too hard to make it up to me.

Worse, I suspect it's not just gratitude at play. There's also a hint of pity there, and that I can't stand. But I guess it's one thing to visit me and my family every summer. It's another to experience it day in and day out. More than once she's come home with me to an empty house and winced. *Do they always travel this much?*

The answer is always yes. They do. They always have. They likely always will. Their careers keep them on the road, and considering their guilt gives me more freedom and money than any other seventeen-year-old I know, I don't think it's such a bad deal.

Most of the time.

Leah sets down a tray of store-bought muffins and Noelle lunges for one.

I arch my brows. I know for a fact that she gets her fill of junk food at my house, since her mom is obsessed with dieting. But lunging for a muffin is intense, even for a carb-deprived Noelle. "Didn't your date feed you?"

Noelle gives a little snort of amusement. "Oh, he did, but it was some uppity spot with super tiny dishes. I didn't want to look like a pig by ordering two entrees."

I snicker. I could totally see her doing that.

"Just once I wish a guy would take me somewhere I can wear a T-shirt and yoga pants and stuff my face." She feigns a sigh as Leah and I laugh.

"You're the one who insists on dating older men," I say.

“With age comes small plates,” Leah says in a faux sage tone that makes me and Noelle laugh.

“Too true,” Noelle agrees, going along with the serious tone. “Next time I agree to go out with a guy I’m gonna insist on casual attire and a trip to Madeline’s Bakery.”

I grin as I pour myself some coffee. “I’d love to see one of your frat boys sit there and watch you stuff your face with eclairs.”

“Hey.” Noelle snags the mug from my hands and I give it up with a sigh, already reaching for another one. “I eat eclairs with class and grace.”

I laugh at her haughty tone, but Leah’s bustling around again.

“Do you want some eggs?” She grabs a frying pan out of the drawer. “Or how about pancakes?”

Noelle dips her head, and I know she feels it too. This awkwardness when Leah tries too hard.

She doesn’t owe me anything. Her being here is just as much a gift to me as it is to her. For the first time in years, I don’t dread my parents’ trips away, and the echoing silence they leave behind.

“Relax, Leah, I’m just grabbing some coffee. You don’t have to cook for me, you know.”

“I know.” My sweet cousin slides the drawer closed again and sinks back into her seat. “I like taking care of people, that’s all.”

“Ben’s a lucky guy.” Noelle grins around a mouthful of muffin. A few crumbs pop out as she’s talking and she chases them across the marble counter.

Leah beams. She connected with the nerdy yearbook president this past summer and they’ve been making puppy eyes at each other ever since.

Not that I’m complaining. If my sweetheart of a cousin has to date some guy at our school, she could do way worse. Ben

clearly adores her and is intimidated by me. I have no doubt he'll treat her right.

“So...” I slide into the seat beside Noelle. “What did I interrupt before? Any girl talk I need to catch up on?”

Noelle rolls her eyes but then gives into a smile that quickly becomes smug. “We were just talking about how I'm winning the scavenger hunt.”

She's freakin' cute when she's competitive. But she's not normally. Except for video games, at least.

“I see you're in a better mood.” I nudge her elbow with mine.

She dips her head and shrugs, but she's still smiling and that little smile shows off that dimple of hers. “Thanks for letting me crash.”

“Anytime, you know that.”

A silence falls, which wouldn't be awkward except for the fact that Leah's watching us in a way that's...weird. Her gaze is way too intent, and curious, and...is that sheer romantic hopefulness I see in her eyes?

Of course it is.

I know my cousin well, so I can guess exactly what she's thinking. No matter how many times I try to tell this optimistic little Pollyanna that Noelle and I are just friends, she seems determined to find proof to the contrary.

Honestly, I think she's just desperate to pair me up with someone. Anyone. Or...anyone who's not a one night stand or a random hookup.

Just like the rest of our friends who've paired up into happy, lovey-dovey couples this year, Leah wants everyone she loves to experience the same bliss she's found. Which is sweet and all, but totally misguided.

With her muffin quickly devoured, Noelle finishes the last bite of her cereal and hops up out of her seat.

“Need a ride?” I ask. I’m already shifting to stand and throw on some jeans because I’m assuming the answer is yes, but she shakes her head.

“I texted Heath. He’s giving me a ride.”

I frown. “Heath?”

He’s one of our friends, sure, but I’m in the same house.

“I didn’t want to wake you.” She breezes past me, heading toward my room again. “And I knew he’d be up for basketball practice.”

I nod. “Right. Yeah. Of course.”

Leah nudges my arm. “What’s wrong?”

I blink. “What?”

“You’re frowning at your coffee like it just dissed your mama.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Just a wicked headache, that’s all.”

She lets me drink my java juice in peace as she texts someone—I’d bet my college savings it’s Ben. But my peace doesn’t last long, because soon enough I’m choking on my coffee as Noelle waltzes back into the kitchen wearing...I don’t even know what to call it.

This is not what any girl I know wears. It’s the sort of slinky, form-fitting dress models in New York wear to nightclubs, not what seventeen-year-olds in Upstate New York lake towns wear on a Friday night.

Leah pounds my back, calling more attention to the fact that I just inhaled my coffee at the sight of my best friend.

So yeah. The whole not noticing thing isn’t working out great for me today.

Noelle tips her head to the side and arches a brow, one hip stuck out. I swear she’s posing on a runway right now. She’s taken her hair out of that messy bun and her shiny locks are falling around her shoulders in dark waves that have that tousled, just-got-out-of-your-bed vibe.

Because she *did* just get out of my bed.

Just...not like that.

I dip my head to take a sip and compose myself.

When I look up again, Noelle's gaze is narrowed on me. "What's wrong with you?"

It takes me no time at all to recover. "Just thinking about the scavenger hunt."

The lie rolls right off my tongue.

"What about it?" She perches on a barstool at the kitchen island in this kitchen which is way too big considering it's usually just me puttering around this house.

"You said last night it was too easy."

She pouts, and the expression makes my lips twitch with the urge to smile.

"It's a lot of money on the line," I point out. And it is. A few grand would go a long way. I didn't think anyone was really playing *just* for the money—except maybe Mara, that girl is determined to get money for college and no one blames her.

"So, what? You're gonna add even more new challenges?" Noelle asks.

"Ooh, fun." Leah wiggles her eyebrows.

Noelle shoots her an arch look. "You only say that because you're not competing."

"True," Leah concedes.

I told Leah she could compete, but she pointed out that it would be nepotism if she won. I'm still not sure if that's true, but she and I are having fun creating new tasks and working on the app together, so I'd say she's not missing out on much.

Leah looks at me eagerly. "What kind of new challenges?"

I don't look away from Noelle. I can't, for some reason. Those dark eyes of hers are oddly intense when she stares right at me like this and I'm rarely the one to break eye contact. I

think about what she said the night before. Of how she's been tagging along with all these other teams. Something about that strikes me as...

Not *unfair*, necessarily.

But not in the spirit of the game, either.

"I'm thinking of adding some challenges that are solo. No teams."

She blinks at me, and I see her mind working. No one would ever call Noelle dumb. She might not get the best grades like Celia and Mara, but she's smart in a more worldly street-smarts sort of way that I admire. Other times, it makes me feel a little sorry for her.

No seventeen-year-old should be so jaded.

She tilts her head to the side, and it's only a little tick of a muscle near her mouth that lets me know she's feeling something. "You think I don't deserve to be winning."

It's not a question, and I'm not sure how to answer. It's not that I don't think she deserves it, it's just...

Things come easily to Noelle. I didn't need Mara to tell me the tale of how they'd gotten into the fire station or who had sweet-talked the firemen into letting them wear their clothes.

But I'd bet money that some of the guy-centric teams she joined for the more difficult tasks wouldn't let her lift a pinky to...say, dig through the dumpster behind the school to find one of the empty cigarette cartons Mrs. Mallonick swears she doesn't smoke.

I'm sure Noelle pulls her weight. No...I'm sure she *wants* to pull her weight. But like it or not, life is not fair, and hot girls like Noelle don't always have to work for what they get.

I feel like a traitor just thinking it, and I would never say it aloud.

But I hesitate too long and Noelle...who knows me better than anyone... pinches her lips into a thin line.

A flicker of hurt passes through her eyes, and I feel like an ass.

Suddenly, I'm desperate to rewind and say the right thing. I start to stand, "Noelle—"

Her phone dings. She casts a quick glance at her screen, and then her face is transforming into that wide model-like smile that knocks most guys on their butts. All hints of any negative emotion are wiped away as she beams at Leah and me. "That's Heath. I gotta go." She pauses on her way out and calls back to me. "Movie night on Sunday?"

Some of that tension in me releases as we quickly return to normal. "You know it."

"It's a date," she calls out.

The door swings shut behind her, and I know what Leah's going to say before I even turn to face her.

"A date, huh?" My cousin's eyes have an amused glint to them, and then she bursts out laughing when I look to the ceiling with a groan, shake my head, and walk right out of the kitchen.

THREE

Noelle

PEP RALLIES AREN'T EXACTLY my thing.

But calculus is kicking my butt, so I'm not gonna complain if cheering on the football team before the next playoff game means escaping one of Mrs. Mallonick's lethal pop quizzes.

Celia waves me over to where she and Heath are sitting, all cuddled up on a bleacher seat in a way that's so adorable, it kinda hurts to look at them.

I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm not all that into the idea of a boyfriend. I have yet to meet a guy who makes me smile, let alone who I want to cuddle up with on a bleacher seat, whispering and giggling like I'm back in middle school.

And that's exactly what Celia and Heath are doing, although they try their best to make me feel welcome.

I don't think Mara even realizes that I've joined them. She's in the row ahead of the happy couple and she's grinning and clapping like a lunatic as Ryan takes the stage with his fellow team leaders.

Elijah's not up there, but he's not one of the starting lineup. He probably could've been if he wanted to be, but he's never taken any sport that seriously. Actually, Elijah's never taken anything seriously. Except maybe his games and parties.

No one in the entire auditorium misses the way Ryan seeks Mara out in the crowd and gives her a wink that's anything but subtle.

Gah! All these couple vibes are gonna be the death of me.

I'm not jealous. I'm really not. It's just kinda hard not to feel a little like a permanent third wheel. Or fifth wheel, as the case may be.

But what makes it even worse is that Celia, Mara, Leah, and even our friend Addie have become obsessed with spreading their joy like they've gone and joined some love cult when I wasn't looking. It feels like every time I turn around they're trying to figure out who would be a good match for me—not a high school boy, that much I've made clear—and who they can set up with Elijah.

Celia straightens beside me and waves to someone in the aisle. I turn, half expecting it to be Elijah, but it's one of the new kids who just transferred to our school this year.

Sadie, I think her name is. She's a junior, super cute in a petite, adorbs kinda way. And she must be pretty smart because she's in my calculus class and she always knows the answers.

Celia waves and I flash the girl a smile. She gives us a shy little wave in return but makes no move to join us, instead walking to the back of the bleachers to sit by herself.

Celia turns to me with a little frown. My type-A, preppy friend looks worried. "Should I go ask her if she wants to join us?"

I glance back at the girl who looks absorbed in her book. "I'm not sure she wants to make friends right now..." Wrinkling my nose, I can't quite fight my smile. "Who brings a book to a prep rally?"

Celia grins. "I think it's cute."

"Totally cute," I have to admit.

But then Celia sighs. "I can't help but worry about all the new kids after watching what Addie went through."

We have three new kids this year, which for a school our size is more than usual. There's Sadie, and then the twins, Dominic and his sister Jazmyn.

Since Dominic got insta popular thanks to the basketball team, and Jazmyn seems to have found her niche with the theater crowd, poor Sadie is the odd one out and it's clear that Celia means to do something about it.

If Sadie will let her.

Before I can make Celia feel better by reminding her there'll be plenty of chances for us to include Sadie, Heath is stroking her arm and whispering something in her ear that makes her giggle.

I look away with an eye roll and a grin. The two of them are painfully cute together.

"Ooh, Elijah!" Celia blurts in a voice loud enough that I think she's trying to get his attention.

I look around, assuming she spotted him, but then she continues, her voice all high and excited. "Sadie's super cute and she seems sweet...she and Elijah would be perfect together."

I blink in surprise. Really? She thinks so?

Heath gives me a look that says he's not buying it either.

"I don't know, Cece." He winces down at his girlfriend and I back him up all the way, shaking my head harder than necessary.

"You said it yourself. She seems sweet....and shy. Let's not traumatize the poor girl by siccing loverboy on her, hmm?"

Heath laughs and Celia grins. "Maybe you have a point. I just feel like he needs someone though, you know?"

I'm about to point out that lately, she, Mara, and Addie seem to think all of us single folk need someone, but before I can, my phone rings with a video call. I grin as I answer, knowing it's gotta be my other favorite swooning friend. Sure enough, Addie's face lights up my screen, and Celia, Heath,

and Mara scramble to surround me so we can all say hi to our bestie who moved away at the start of the school year.

It's no shock to anyone that Addie's new boyfriend Vince is in the background. It looks like they're outside for their lunch break and Vince has a protective arm around her shoulders as she beams at the camera and fills us in on her plans for her next visit home.

"Wait, where's the man of the hour?" she asks, interrupting our chat.

I lift the phone over my head so she can see Ryan and his pals on stage.

"Hi, Ryan!" she calls out. Not that he can hear her.

I bring the phone back down just as she asks, "Where's Eli?"

Where was Elijah? Before I can even turn to look, I feel him behind me. He must have slid into the row behind us because suddenly his head's resting on my shoulder and his face fills the screen of my phone.

"Hey, A." He gives Addie a crooked grin that's somehow charming and flirty without being so overtly flirtatious to cause Vince to scowl.

Vince is very prone to scowls. And growls, much to Elijah's and my amusement. Who would have thought that sweet, innocent Addie would be the one to fall for the bad boy?

"Vince, man, how's it going?" Elijah continues.

Vince's response, if the quiet dude was in fact going to give one, is drowned out when our principal takes the stage and calls everyone's attention to announce the team captains.

I wince. "Sorry, Addie, we've gotta go."

She waves us off. "Go, go. I'll catch up with you guys later."

I turn off the phone, but Elijah makes no move to lift his head from my shoulder. "What'd I miss?" His voice is low and

this close to my ear, it makes me shiver. I swat at his head, making him laugh as he pulls back.

We all pretend to pay attention as the principal does his best to engage the crowd.

I'm guessing just about everyone is here for the sole purpose of skipping class and not because we're so darn jazzed about football.

I mean, I'm happy for the guys, but not even the players seem as excited about playoffs as the principal is.

"Where do you think he gets his energy?" Elijah asks as he slides down to sit on the seat beside me.

"No idea, but whatever drug it is, I want some."

He snickers and winks at me, showing off his lopsided grin. "So?" He nudges my shoulder. "What'd I miss?"

I shrug. "Addie didn't get a chance to say much. And before that, you missed Celia trying to set you up with the new girl."

Elijah straightens and looks around. "Dominic's sister?"

"I'm pretty sure Dominic would kill you if you tried to go for his sister."

Elijah turns to face me with puppy dog eyes. "What do you mean?"

I give a snort of laughter at the fake innocent routine and he grins. He knows exactly what his reputation is, and he loves it.

"She was talking about Sadie." I nod toward the back.

Elijah half turns. "Oh yeah. She's hot."

I glance back too. Her head's still buried in a book. My brows furrow as I turn over his comment. "Is she?"

"Yeah, she's cute."

"Is she hot or is she cute?" I sound annoyingly peevisish and I don't even know why.

He arches a brow and I look away, but not quickly enough.

“What’s with you?” he asks.

I shrug. “Nothing.”

And it is nothing. I definitely shouldn’t be stewing over what he’d said the other day, hinting that I don’t deserve to win the scavenger hunt.

But I can’t help it. Ever since then, I’m annoyingly irritated when I’m around him. Like, some part of me wants to call him out on what he said—and what he didn’t say. But also, I really don’t want to go there.

So instead, I’m just kinda...irritated. And I’m not doing a great job of hiding it, that much is clear.

I probably should’ve just called him out on it and asked him what he’d meant when I’d gone to his place for movie night. But there’d never been a good time and now too much time has passed and...

And now I should just let it drop.

Which is what I’m trying to do, except Elijah chooses that exact moment to bring up the stupid scavenger hunt topic all over again.

“Leah and I came up with some new challenges,” he says, obviously pleased with himself and just waiting for me to beg him for details.

As if.

Three grand is nothing to sneeze at, but he’s right about the fact that I’m not really in it for the money. It’s hard to get too excited about splurging on new clothes when I know very well that Mara actually needs the money.

I already know that if by some chance I do win, I’m gonna give it to her. She deserves it.

So why am I even playing?

I don’t know.

But all I do know is that I want to win now more than ever. So after bouncing my knee for a while, pretending I don’t

notice Elijah smirking at me out of the corner of my eye, I give in with a sigh.

“Okay, fine, what are the new challenges?”

A wide grin takes over his whole face.

I can't help but smile back even though I'm still a little annoyed with him. This is my favorite of his smiles. It reminds me of the enthusiastic, nerdy little kid he used to be. Back then he was just as geeky as the rest of us when it came to video games and computers. And he was always the first one out to recess, so he could make up the craziest games. We'd follow along, not caring how stupid we looked.

As he got older, his love of all things technology grew, but he somehow outgrew the nerdy part. Right now, though, his enthusiasm is contagious and for a second I feel like we're back on the playground.

“Individual events,” he says. “I've got a whole list going.”

I blink and my smile fades. I get exactly what he's *not* saying. He's adding individual events so people like me can't win.

People who don't deserve it.

I swallow hard and look away, telling myself I'm overreacting all the while.

I am overreacting. I'm putting words in his mouth. But there's no stopping this churning sensation in my gut.

“There's a whole list of them,” he says as the principal keeps talking. “I'm gonna release one a week and then end with a grand finale.”

I know he's waiting for a reaction but I refuse to play along.

Maybe I won't even participate in the scavenger hunt. I should just let Mara have the win and forget about it.

“Don't worry, the first one is perfect for you,” he says. “You just have to find a guy to kiss you, so you know...you got off easy on that one.”

I turn to face him, anger making my skin burn. “What does that mean?”

He blinks in surprise. “Just that it won’t be hard for you to find someone to kiss, that’s all.”

“Why? Because I’m just so easy?” I sound like an idiot, but I can’t bring myself to care.

I know Elijah knows that I don’t get around nearly as much as people probably think. I’m not totally chaste but I am still a virgin, and I don’t just make out with every guy I meet.

“You’re the one who’s made a sport of hooking up,” I point out.

“Hey!” He holds his hands up in defense. “I wasn’t saying that...”

“Then what are you saying? Why is this challenge so easy for me, in particular, huh?”

His chin jerks back and he’s looking at me like I’m crazy.

Probably because I have gone crazy. This is Elijah. My friend. But all I can hear in my mind is my parents’ latest comments about my looks and how I need to use them to my advantage, and so Elijah’s next words feel like a knife to my chest.

“Because you’re hot, dude,” he says with a huff of laughter. “Isn’t it obvious? I don’t think you’ll have to look hard for a mark.”

I can’t respond because my pulse is pounding in my ears. Logically I know he doesn’t mean to be cruel. He doesn’t know that he’s basically pouring salt on a wound.

This much is obvious when his expression shifts from baffled amusement to one of concern. “Hey. What’s up?” He lightly touches my elbow, his voice gentle and devoid of laughter.

For a second I think about telling him. Everything. All the crap with my parents and the fact that they don’t think I need to go to college, and that it would be a waste of money. But

before I can, the principal makes an announcement that gets everyone's attention.

“The student council has decided that if the team wins, there will be a victory dance—”

He's cut off by excited chatter.

“Oh God,” Elijah groans.

I turn to him, all my anger forgotten as we share a moment of misery. “Another one?”

He flinches. “Didn't we just have homecoming?”

It's kinda funny, because he's Mister Popularity and loves any excuse to party. But in this we are on the same page.

Neither of us have ever been into dances, but they used to be kinda fun...just another excuse for a group hang. Until this year when suddenly all of our friends started to pair up.

Celia turns to us with a grin. “Another dance!”

I look to Elijah, who's giving me that crooked smile I know so well. I do my best to widen my eyes and feign excitement. “Did you hear that, Elijah? Another dance.”

“Awesome!”

His smile is so fake it makes me laugh for real.

FOUR

Elijah

IT'S KINDA HARD NOT to crack up at Noelle's exaggerated excitement that borders on maniacal.

"It'll be fine," I tell her as we head out toward the parking lot a little while later when the pep rally lets out.

We both head toward the cars, but she casts me a sidelong look. "Don't you have football practice?"

"Nope. Coach gave us today off."

She nods and we keep heading toward my car. On days when we're both heading home at the same time, I always give Noelle a ride. She lives close enough that on sunny days like this one, she'd most likely just walk home. And on cold days when I'm not free...

Let's just say she wouldn't have to wait around long for some guy to offer a ride.

As far as I know, she's never bothered to get her license, and why would she need to?

The girl has never once had to take a bus thanks to that gorgeous smile of hers. Sometimes I don't even think she realizes her own power. Which is...kinda adorable and frustrating all at the same time.

"Aren't we waiting for Leah?" she asks as we near my car.

“Nah, she’s sticking around waiting for Ben to finish up in yearbook,” I say. “Then they’re going out to eat or something.”

Noelle sighs.

And I get it. I really do. Some days it feels like Noelle and I are the last two survivors of a plane crash called love. I knew senior year would be different, but I didn’t realize it would be anything like this.

For me, at least, today’s pep rally only highlighted how much everything’s changed from last year. Suddenly dances aren’t lame events for us all to hang out, they’re actual dates for the worlds’ happiest teen couples. And football isn’t just a game we play, now it’s what Ryan and a bunch of the other senior dudes are banking on to get them scholarships. And don’t even get me started on all this talk about colleges.

Right on cue, Noelle says, “Did you see the announcement about the college fair?”

My shoulders tense automatically.

That’s exactly what I’m talking about right there. Last year, no one was in a serious relationship—well, no one aside from Heath, but his toxic relationship with Pamela hardly counted. And sure, Mara and Celia were obsessed with SAT scores and early admissions as juniors, but for the most part I could make it through an entire day without the word college ringing in my ears.

Now? I can’t make it two hours without someone asking me where I’m applying to or what I want to study.

How should I know? When did everyone else suddenly figure all this stuff out? I feel like I missed that day in school when everyone stopped being content to just hang out and be high schoolers and started planning for their futures.

I hate even thinking about it so I try to change the topic. “What do you think of my new plan for the scavenger hunt?”

Her expression shifts ever so slightly and I’m pretty sure I can feel a chill in the air. Crap. It’s been like this ever since the

other day when she accused me of thinking she doesn't deserve the win.

I flip around, walking backward to my door so I can face Noelle. "Look, it was time to shake things up, that's all."

She doesn't pretend not to understand, but she doesn't address whatever has her all prickly about it either. "Shake it up how?" Before I can answer, she walks toward me. "You wanna see just how many couples you can break up before you declare a winner?"

She's kidding, I know that, but there's a cynical edge to her tone that bothers me.

"No, of course not. It's harmless fun, that's all."

She doesn't answer and I'm watching her expression to see what she's feeling, but she's not giving anything away. One thing I've always known about Noelle...the girl has a wicked poker face.

"It was Leah's idea," I add. Pathetic, perhaps, to throw my sweet cousin under the bus, but I don't like the way Noelle's been acting all weird around me. Like I hurt her feelings, or something.

I'd never intentionally hurt her. Which is what I'd tell her if she'd stop being all proud and impossible and just tell me what's in that head of hers.

I stop walking when I reach my car, but Noelle doesn't stop right away. She keeps coming toward me until the tips of her pointy-toed, knee-high boots brush against my sneakers.

Heat flares through me before I can stop it, before I can remind myself who this is.

My body doesn't care. Muscles tighten and my blood turns hot as everything in me attunes to the familiar scent of her citrusy shampoo and the warmth of her skin.

"So..." She cocks her head to the side and her gaze drops to my lips.

Holy crap. Fire slices through me as her gaze settles there. Her eyes look darker than ever, and despite the cold November

air, a sweat breaks out on my neck as my skin starts to crackle and hum with...

Oh crap.

There's no electricity between me and Noelle, I remind myself. There are no freakin' sparks!

But the thought feels desperate.

It feels like a lie. Because my blood is boiling and every nerve ending in my body is standing to attention as her dark gaze collides with mine.

She leans forward slightly and I forget where we are. I forget *what* we are.

Hell, I forget my own name when her hands settle on my chest.

"If I kiss you right here and now, does that mean I win?" she asks.

The girl might as well have taken a taser to me. One second I'm my normal, laidback self, and the next I'm a live freakin' wire. My heart pounds like I just ran a marathon and then...

I can't help it. My gaze dips down until I'm staring at her lips.

These are lips I've seen thousands of times, I try to remind myself.

But my throat is dry and my chest is too tight. The urge to reach out for her is so strong, it makes my biceps flex and my hands clench into fists.

She's teasing. I know this, even though her expression is bland. She's kidding.

She's paying me back for the comment earlier about how this would be easy for her...

I know all of this, and yet...

I don't know anything at all. My brain's incapable of coherent thoughts. It feels like someone just dumped gatorade

on a lightboard in my head.

Is she seriously considering kissing me?

My heart stutters.

If she's just doing this to mess with me, to prove that I'm not immune to her...

No. She's not cruel like that. Or...she never has been. We both love to play games. We tease and we flirt, but only to a point.

Neither of us has ever crossed that invisible line.

She arches a brow. "Well? Does it count if I kiss you?"

Yes.

No.

I swallow hard. "No. Of course not. There's rules, Noelle. And you can't have a head start just because I told you about it first."

Her lower lip juts out and she backs up a step, but I still can't quite breathe properly. I'm freakin' winded, and all because my best friend threatened to kiss me.

I thrust a hand through my hair.

Get a grip, dude!

She's already opening the passenger side door when I recover.

I climb in and head toward my home on autopilot.

Noelle tries to keep the amount of time she spends with her folks to a minimum, and since mine are rarely there and I'm always up for company, it's kinda just understood that if I don't have practice, we're heading to my house.

Together.

My hands shift on the steering wheel as that annoying sensation creeps over me again. I am way too aware of her scent, her warmth, her every shift and fidget as she crosses her legs in the passenger seat.

I turn on the radio too quickly, trying to cut this tension that is new and kinda awful and very likely one-sided judging by the way Noelle's nonchalantly scrolling through messages on her phone.

"Ugh," she mutters. "Mara and Celia are already talking about dress shopping for the dance."

"We haven't won yet," I chuckle. "But I appreciate their optimism."

"You know you guys are gonna win," she says. "You're, like, undefeated, right?"

I nod. But I don't feel even an iota of pride. Probably because I'm not one of the star players. I always get a shot on the field, but football's just something I do and have always done because my friends were doing it. It's not my thing like it is for our quarterback, Ryan, or like basketball is for Heath.

"Don't get me wrong, I want you and your team to win, but if you don't..." She shoots me a sidelong look. "I'm not gonna complain."

I laugh at that. Noelle might grouse about the victory dance—understandably. Homecoming was awkward for the few of us single folks who had to watch the others be all coupley for the *entire night*. But there's no doubt in my mind that she'll be front and center cheering us on at playoffs because she's a supportive friend like that. She never misses a game.

She turns her attention to her phone, her fingers flying as she responds to what looks to be a group text. She doesn't glance over at all as she asks, "We on for a rematch?"

I tense for half a second before I shake it off.

But the rematch she's talking about?

That means me and her. On my bed.

Playing games and talking trash? Yes.

But after that insane reaction I had to her merely mentioning a kiss?

I find myself scrambling for an excuse to avoid my bedroom. And that's when one of our old favorite haunts comes into view.

“Actually, it's kinda nice out.” I turn to her and waggle my brows, donning my most ridiculous sexy voice as I murmur, “Wanna play?”

She spots the old playground beside the middle school and her head falls back with a laugh. The sound warms me in the very best of ways. My hands readjust on the wheel as I shift in my seat.

Dang. When did I get all warm and fuzzy because of Noelle's laugh?

Clearly my head's still addled by that near kiss.

Still, as she turns to me and teases me about still liking the playground where we used to play as kids, I can't help but notice that the sound of her easy laughter settles something inside me that's been feeling off-center for days now, ever since I'd accidentally made things weird about the scavenger hunt.

“It's been a while,” she says with a sweet, nostalgic sort of sigh as we pile out of my car.

“What, you think we're too old just because we're seniors now?”

She shakes her head so quickly I laugh. “Definitely not.” Linking her arm through mine and huddling against me in the fall breeze, she nods toward the skate park on the far edge of the playground. “We're definitely not the only ones from our school here.”

I grin as I nod to some of our buddies from our class. There's a few seniors, but most are underclassmen I don't know very well.

I'm leading us toward the swings—always Noelle's favorite, but she stops and I'm forced to as well or else I'd be dragging her along beside me.

“Hey, isn’t that...” She squints toward the skate park and catches the eye of a girl I don’t recognize at first. Noelle grins. “That’s Sadie.” She waves enthusiastically and the other girl smiles and dips her head as she waves back.

“I think she’s shy,” Noelle says.

I turn back to Noelle, waiting for her to keep moving toward the swings, but out of nowhere she says, “You should ask her out.”

I arch my brows in surprise. “You think?”

Her gaze fixes on me and I feel like she’s studying me. Searching my face. But for what?

I don’t know.

“You said you think she’s hot, right?”

Did I say that? I unlink our arms, continuing to walk as I scratch the back of my neck. “Yeah,” I finally agree. “But I find a lot of girls attractive. Doesn’t mean I want to ask them out.”

“But she’s new and everyone says she’s sweet.” She chases after me.

I walk faster, which is stupid because it’s not like I can outrun this conversation, but it’s making me feel all kinds of uncomfortable. I wouldn’t be surprised to find I’m breaking out into hives.

Why? I don’t know. It’s not like Noelle and I don’t discuss other girls or her dating other guys. This is not forbidden territory, and there’s no reason for me to be feeling so weird about it.

And yet, I’m walking away at a breakneck speed, and she’s out of breath when she catches up with me by the monkey bars.

“You might like her,” she starts, and I whirl around with an exasperated huff..

“I don’t want to ask her out, all right?” The words snap out of me, way faster and harsher than I mean them to.

Her eyes bulge slightly. “Yeah. Fine. Whatever.”

After a brief awkward silence, she glances past me and her lips twitch up into an impish grin. “Last one to the swings is a loser!”

FIVE

Noelle

THERE'S something about swings that's therapeutic for me.

I tip my head back and let the wind catch my hair. I close my eyes against the bright afternoon sun, but its heat makes me smile.

For one long, blissful moment my mind goes blank with the wind and the whipping motion as my body whooshes toward the ground and then up again.

I let my thoughts scatter into the breeze.

And it's a relief to let them go because, honestly, I don't know what's up with me today. Or...these past few weeks.

Okay, fine, ever since senior year started I've felt like this. Like I'm ten steps behind the rest of my friends. Like they're all moving forward in all these different ways and I'm...stuck.

I keep finding myself wondering if maybe there's something wrong with me.

"What are you thinking about?" Elijah asks.

He's on the swing beside mine but he's kinda just pushing himself back and forth, not actually swinging.

I shake my head. "Nothing interesting."

"Come on..." he prompts, his tone wheedling.

But I don't want to talk. Mainly because a lot of this weirdness I'm feeling has to do with him. With us. And I don't know how to explain it.

So instead, I tip my head back, adopt the most absurd Eastern European accent I can manage, and shout at the top of my lungs in a too-low voice, "*Lisa, you're tearing me apaaart!*"

It's a quote from *The Room*, the worst movie ever made, and it never ever fails to make Elijah laugh.

Sure enough, I hear that low rumble of his chuckle and I keep my eyes shut as I grin. I don't have to look to know what smile he's wearing. It's always the same one when we share inside jokes. It's that crooked smile that at some point I decided was meant just for me.

I shake my head. That train of thought is not helping matters.

"You ready for the game this weekend?" I ask.

He shrugs and then shoots back, "You ready for the victory dance when we win?"

I wince.

He chuckles again. "Look at us, embracing the best years of our lives."

I pretend to gag, and he grins over at me.

It's another inside joke, how much we both despise when people say that our high school years are the best times of our lives.

Is there anything more tragic than believing you've peaked at seventeen?

For me, the reason it makes me outright nauseous is because...part of me worries it might be true. Not that I'll ever admit that to anyone aloud.

But my grades aren't going to get me into some amazing college, and I have no big career ambitions, plus my mom is always quick to point out how fast my looks will fade.

She's one of those people who's been turning twenty-nine for the last nine years straight. Aging gracefully is not in her vocabulary.

So yeah, I guess sometimes I can't help but wonder if my parents are right. Maybe this is as smart as I'll ever be. As popular as I'll ever be. Maybe this is as good as it gets.

And maybe...maybe my friends pairing up and moving away is just the beginning.

My friends and everyone in our class will literally be moving on next year. Without me.

I look over at Elijah and my chest aches. He'll move on. One day he'll have a girlfriend and our inside jokes will fade away—they'll have to. Because what girlfriend wants to share her boyfriend with another girl?

I wouldn't want to. Heck, I got jealous at the thought of sharing him with Sadie. Which is just...

I stub my toe into the earth to slow my momentum, my stomach churning with guilt and regret.

I acted like an idiot.

I don't even want to think about what happened in the parking lot. But part of me feels like I should apologize. Like I should explain...

And say what?

I swallow hard and look away from him instead. I don't know how to explain what happened. One second I was annoyed at this whole scavenger hunt thing, and his insinuation that I don't deserve to win.

I know that's why he added these individual events, and I can't even explain why it makes me feel like screaming every time the topic of the scavenger hunt comes up.

But it does. And rather than scream, or just, you know... talk about it like a normal human being, I found myself... taunting him. Teasing him.

I want to say I didn't know what I was doing. I would love to say that.

But that would be a lie.

I saw the way Elijah's eyes darkened when I drew in close. I saw the way his gaze fell to my lips. I'd felt my heart pound with anticipation and I felt this heady sensation of heat and...

And something I hated.

It was a surge of power. I felt the control I had in that moment, and it was intoxicating.

And that was wrong. It was so, so wrong.

I don't play games with guys...and I never, ever use my body as a weapon like my mom does. Not with the college guys I've dated and not with the well-connected guys my parents try to hook me up with, and absolutely not with my best friend.

I've never done that before...until today.

I look away as he starts talking about the football game and the dance. I can't pay attention because my gaze catches on Sadie in the distance. She's by herself on one side of the skate park and she's freakin' amazing on that skateboard, making the guys on the other side look like chumps as she whips up one side of the ramp and then flips to go back down.

She's kind of an enigma with these cool skater girl vibes that attract attention... but then she took a book to a pep rally. If that doesn't scream *don't talk to me*, I don't know what does. So... does she want to attract attention or push people away? Or is being the 'mysterious girl' her thing?

I watch her pull off another sweet move on the ramp, the guys watching with a mixture of envy and awe. A couple of them watching with a little more than that too. Yeah, she's attractive in this *off limits* kind of way.

I'm not a petty, catty girl. I pride myself on not being mean. I could've been. Back in junior high when I 'came into my own' as my dad put it, Pamela and her crew wanted me to be part of their clique.

But I saw how they gossiped and turned on each other, and I wanted nothing to do with it. And luckily I found Mara, Celia, and Addie. And of course I've always had Elijah.

But today...

Today it took everything in me not to show my claws when Celia mentioned setting Sadie up with Elijah, and when he mentioned she was hot, and...

I charge to my feet so quickly, Elijah stops talking. "Uh... you okay?"

I nod but I can't look at Elijah. My head is spinning and I am clearly not in my right mind today. I scrub a hand over my eyes, wishing for the first time ever that I wasn't with my best friend. "I think I need to get home." I cast him a quick look and catch the way his eyes widen with surprise.

"Oh, yeah, no problem." He's up and walking with me back to the car as if everything's fine and I haven't just gone full-blown weirdo on him.

"So, back to my place?" he asks as we're buckling in.

"Um..." Yes. That's what I should say and what I almost do say. But I don't trust myself right now. "I think I just need to go home. To my home."

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

He acts cool as he puts the car in drive and turns in the direction of my house. But I know I'm acting weird, and so I try to cover it up. "Sorry," I say. "I'm just...I'm not feeling like myself today."

He casts me a sidelong look, and he shocks the heck out of me when his hand reaches over and covers mine. "You okay?"

I nod, but my throat feels too tight as I stare down at his large hand covering mine. "Yeah, just...I don't know."

That much is true. I have no idea what's going on with me. But being around Elijah isn't helping my confusion.

He squeezes my hand and then pulls his back to put it on the steering wheel. I exhale a little too harshly.

“I blame the victory dance.” The blandness of his tone cracks me up, just like I know he meant it to.

He gives me that crooked smile.

“Me too,” I say. “What is the student council thinking?”

“We can only handle so much school spirit,” he agrees.

“Should we bail?” I ask, relaxing into the warm leather of the heated seat as I fall effortlessly into the easy banter.

“Definitely,” he says. “Although...”

“We’d never get away with it,” I finish for him.

“Mara would come and drag us out of my room kicking and screaming.”

I huff. “Celia would call in the big guns.”

We share a look and say in unison, “Addie.”

“They’ll have her call and ask if we’re okay...” He shakes his head in mock horror.

We have a longstanding joke about the amazing power of Addie’s sweetness. Seriously, it’s like a super power. “She’ll blink those big eyes—”

“Over Facetime,” he adds.

“And then she’ll be like ‘why aren’t you going?’” I do my best sweetheart Addie impersonation and Elijah grins as he shakes his head.

“Dude, you know I can’t fight that.”

“Who can?” I say.

We agreed a long time ago that Addie’s kindness is basically our version of kryptonite. She makes even the most jaded and cynical among us cave to her optimism.

“Looks like we’re gonna have to go then,” he says.

“Looks like it.”

He shoots me a sidelong look and I meet it with a smile. This guy. How could I have thought there was weirdness here?

It's basically already forgotten.

He turns the car onto my street and I'm starting to regret saying I wanted to go home rather than to his house. My mom will have some low-calorie diet meal waiting for me, as opposed to Elijah's, where we'd probably end up ordering pizza.

I'm thinking about telling him to forget it and take us both to his place, but then he says, "So who are you going to go with?"

"What?"

"The dance," he reminds me. "I don't think we can do the group thing again."

I'm nodding before he even finishes. "That was kinda miserable. I felt like a charity case."

He nods in agreement. Truthfully...we had fun. But when you're sharing a limo and a pre-dance dinner with two ridiculously loved-up couples, it gets a little awkward. There were a few of Elijah's teammates and another girl friend of ours as well, and that made it even weirder for some reason. It felt like everyone should be a pair but we had an odd number, and two in the group had dated and were not pleased to be sharing a limo and...

"Yeah, let's not do that again," I say.

He arches a brow as he slows in front of my house. "You gonna ask that intern your dad set you up with?"

I snort. "To a high school dance? I don't think so."

"Too cool for that?"

I arch a brow of my own. "Too old."

He gives a snort of laughter that makes me smile. "All right then, it's settled."

"What is?"

"You and me," he says. "We'll go together."

Said so easily. Like it's understood we'll be each other's dates.

Because it's a no brainer, I remind myself.

I'm nodding like a moron, incapable of coming up with a normal, laidback response.

Why? Why does this feel weird when I've slept in the same bed with this guy and not had the slightest issue.

But I know. The memory of that almost kiss in the parking lot creeps up before I can stop it.

My heart stumbles as I look away out the window.

Dang it. If something's different between us—if there's a tension here where there wasn't before—it's my fault.

I did this.

I wet my lips and take a deep breath.

Which means that I can make things right again.

Right?

I'm nodding a little too eagerly as I reach for the door handle, and my smile feels a little forced. "Good idea. Let's go together."

He's nodding as well, and watching me a little too closely. "That way we can all go as a group, but it won't be weird, right? It'll be like old times."

I part my lips about to say yes, but at that particular moment, his gaze drops, and heat flares as I realize he's watching my mouth.

So I never say anything. I don't agree. I don't disagree. I just get out, shut the door, and watch him drive away.

Will it be like old times?

I let out a shaky breath as I head up the steps to my house.

I hope so. But I doubt it. These days it feels like everything's changing way too fast.

But I'll do anything to keep things from changing what I have with my best friend.

Elijah's comment about my dad's intern comes to mind, and as I enter the kitchen to find my mom making a smoothie, I know exactly what I have to do.

She beams at me when I walk in. "You're home!" But then her smile falters. "Oh honey, you look pale."

And where Mara's mom would say, 'are you feeling all right?' my mom says, "You should've used bronzer this morning, sweetie. You look like a vampire."

"Thanks, Mom." I'm kinda laughing, though, as I give her a kiss on the cheek. My mom isn't perfect, but helping me look my best is her version of loving me, I suppose. "Need help?"

"No, but if you want some of my smoothie, go grab yourself a glass," she says.

I reach for the glass and listen to the blender as I call up my texts. There's an unread message from the intern. He does have a name. It's Brad. But I put him into my contacts as The Intern. I click on the message. It's another apology for having to bail early on our date and a request for a rain check.

I'd been planning on ignoring the text for eternity. But after today's weirdness, I take a deep breath, click on his text, and start to reply.

SIX

Elijah

I'M GUESSING MOST of the players on my team have some kind of pre-game ritual. Me? Not so much.

“You’re having dinner early, aren’t you?” my mom asks as she walks into the kitchen to find me and Leah devouring a frozen pizza.

My mom doesn’t wait for a response before answering her ringing phone, so no one informs her that the reason we’re eating early is because I have to leave for a playoff game in twenty minutes and I kinda need some food in my stomach before, you know...a really big game.

Leah gives me a look that I can’t stand. It’s pity, plain and simple.

Is it pathetic that my parents don’t know or care that my football team made the playoffs?

Probably. But it could be worse. Our wide receiver, Mason, has a dad that’s so involved, he shows up at every practice and gets all red-faced and angry when Mason fumbles the ball.

So. There you go. It could be worse. I could be Mason.

Instead...

“Hey kids,” my dad calls as he zips through the kitchen. He seems to be on the same path as my mother, and my guess

is they're getting ready to go out for some function. "Don't party too hard while we're away, all right?"

He adds a wink for Leah's benefit, and she kindly rewards him with a sweet smile. "We won't, Uncle Jake."

See? Again. They're not all bad. They took my cousin in when they didn't have to. They're not cruel. Just...absent.

"How long are you gone for?" I ask.

"Depends how long it takes to close this deal," my dad says as he grabs a club soda from the fridge. "Hopefully we'll be back mid-week. Are you kids gonna be all right on your own?" He fixes us with a meaningful stare as my mother zips through again, this time in full sales mode as she gives the person on the other end what appears to be a rehearsed spiel about the evolving landscape of lifestyle centers.

My parents are in retail real estate. That's about all I know on the topic, and I'm happy to keep it that way.

"Of course," I say, belatedly answering my dad's question so we don't interrupt my mom's monologue.

"We'll be great," Leah adds.

My mom and dad ask that basically every week before they take off. Like they honestly think one of these times I'm gonna have a different answer.

Actually, Dad, I don't think I'm gonna be able to be alone with only your credit card and an endless parade of friends this week. Won't you please stick around so we can toss a football around instead?

Uh, yeah. I don't think so. I've got a sweet deal going here and we all know it.

My mom comes back into the room right as I shove the last bite of pizza in my mouth. "Honey," she says with an exasperated sigh. "I stock this refrigerator full of healthy food too, you know."

I mumble, "I know," but with my mouth full it comes out garbled and Leah snickers.

“Now I hear we have big news to discuss when we get back,” she continues.

I straighten, my gaze flicking to Leah’s surprised expression. Had they heard about the football playoffs or—

“Your guidance counselor emailed to say that we need to schedule a meeting to discuss your college applications.”

“Oh.” I sink back in my seat, avoiding both of my parents’ searching gazes. “Right.”

“You have been giving some thought to your future plans, haven’t you?” my dad asks.

“Of course.” When there’s still silence, I add, “Noelle and I are hitting up the college fair this week too, so...”

That’s it. I don’t finish. I don’t know how to finish. Truth is, I really don’t care where I go to college. I know it’s expected, but I’m not excited about it the way most of my friends are.

Actually, their eagerness to leave this town—to leave us, our crew—it kinda depresses the hell out of me.

I know high school can’t last forever. And I know there’s probably bigger and better out there. But my friends, our parties, the life I have here...it’s all I know.

It’s all I have.

See? Depressing.

My mom’s going off on some rant about how colleges are so much more expensive than they used to be, while my dad’s chiming in with weird anecdotes about one of their colleague’s kids who I don’t know.

I’m not really paying much attention, too busy planning a party for after the game tonight.

Win or lose, there will be a party.

I’m interrupted in my group text to announce said party when my mom kisses the top of my head. “Have a good weekend, and don’t get into trouble.”

“Me?” I feign innocence and she laughs in that indulgent way.

Meanwhile my dad’s hugging Leah. “What about you, kiddo?” he asks her. “You have big plans for tonight?”

Leah casts a wide-eyed look at me, and I give a little shake of my head.

It’s not like I’m keeping the playoffs a secret, but if we tell them now they’ll just feel unnecessarily guilty about a) not knowing and then b) still leaving and missing the game.

Leah gets the message and gives my dad a beatific smile. “Just spending time with friends.”

“Good, good.” He ruffles her hair like she’s still eight years old, and claps a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, huh?”

I chuckle. So does he.

It’s not exactly a *Leave It to Beaver* moment, but everyone goes their own way feeling good.

Even me, because after the playoff game, I’ve got plans for my friends. And with all this talk of college, all I really want is to enjoy my friends while I have them.

I send Noelle a separate text as I head to my room to change for the game. “You coming tonight?”

Noelle: Have I ever missed a game?

Me: I meant after, dork.

And honestly, I’m not even sure why I’m double checking. Noelle never misses a party. But with the way things have been between us lately...

I don’t know. I guess I just want to make sure we’re cool. I see those telling dots blinking that she’s responding as I strip off my shirt to throw on my football gear. I head to the bathroom, do my thing, but when I come back out and check my phone, it’s still a blank. Her answer never comes.

Huh.

Weird.

She probably got distracted. I'd bet anything she's at either Mara's or Celia's getting ready so they can head over together.

When I come back downstairs, I burst out laughing. "What is this?"

Leah spins around. "This is school spirit!" She's wearing our school colors and her face is painted with the mascot and glitter. Her hair's pulled up in a crazy style and she even sprayed color into her blonde hair so she has highlights to match our school colors.

I can't even bring myself to point out that she's new to this school and will only be going for one year.

"You look amazing." I wrap an arm around her shoulders and head to the door. "You sure you're cool going early? I can find you a ride, if you want."

"I'm sure." She squeezes my waist. "You should have family there."

My heart gives a little tug and I tighten my grip on her shoulders. "Thanks, Leah."

She rests her head against me for a sec. "That's what cousins are for."

I chuckle as we reach the car. "Ben's meeting you there, right?"

She nods. "And Noelle already texted to make sure we know where the rest of your friends are sitting. You'll have a whole cheering section just for you."

I dip my head as I start the car, but I'm guessing she sees my grin. "Thanks, Leah."

"You have a lot of people who care about you, you know."

I nod, but I don't say anything. Leah's so freakin' genuine and open. Not even a hint of irony or cynicism in her bones. I'm used to it, but that doesn't mean I ever know what to say in response.

My mood is a whole lot lighter as I drive us to the school, and I know it has a lot to do with the fact that Noelle texted Leah. I mean, Noelle had said she'd be there, but her silence to that last text was kinda nagging at me.

But she'll be there with the rest of our friends. And while Leah's exaggerating about them being my own personal cheer section—they'll definitely be cheering for Ryan and the team in general—I still feel a swell of gratitude.

Before Leah moved in, my friends were all I had. And I think Leah's getting it. Just how much they all mean to me.

And why it sucks so hard that everything is changing.

But not today.

Not tonight.

And so I head into the locker room, all smiles, drinking in that crackle of excitement that always comes before a game.

“Eli!” Ryan booms my name, and he's grinning like we've already won.

“You ready, man?” I ask.

“Pfft.” He gives me a look of disbelief. “Have I ever not been ready?”

I crack up, because I know as well as anyone how full of it he can be. “How does Mara put up with you, man?” I tease.

His head falls back with a laugh. “You know, I ask her that all the time.”

I shake my head as I chuckle, moving down the locker room to greet the other guys.

Ryan and Mara are like two peas in a pod. They couldn't stand each other for years, and it baffled all of us, quite frankly. They were so alike in so many ways.

It always struck me as odd that they were enemies and not best friends.

But then when we watched them get together, it was obvious that they could never just be friends. There was way

too much chemistry there.

For some reason, this has me thinking about Noelle again. And...not in a good way.

My mind keeps calling up that crazy near-kiss moment in the parking lot and all the weirdness after. And then it's like a full-blown montage breaks loose in my brain. Like some part of my memory was just waiting for me to think about Noelle so it could unleash memory after memory and image after image.

Noelle in that skimpy dress, lying in my bed.

Her long legs peeking out from under my old, too-big T-shirt.

That smile when she was playing it coy, the one where I could see that dimple.

I scrub a hand over my eyes.

"Dude, you nervous?" This comes from Mason, the wide receiver whose dad is terrifyingly involved in his football career.

"Me? Why would I be nervous?" I stand up and clap a hand on his arm. "You're the one under the gun, man."

He groans. "Don't remind me."

I laugh. "Relax, dude. We've all got your back. We're a team, right?"

He lets out a sigh of relief. "Yeah. We're a team."

I grin as I head out of the locker room, shoving aside all thoughts of Noelle and our current weirdness. Soon enough, I'm too busy to think about anything but our warmup and the game to come.

The energy is infectious and I swear it fills the stadium as we run out onto the field. I end up playing more than usual thanks to injuries in the starting lineup, and I'm happy to say I hold my own out there.

I'm nothing compared to Ryan, though, who seems to be fueled by the crowd.

When I'm off the field, I glance up at the stands, and grin at the sight of Mara going nuts every time Ryan's out there in all his glory. She's holding a sign that hides the rest of our friends but in the last quarter she drops it in lieu of leaning forward, nibbling on her fingernails, caught up in the game.

I kinda wish I could reassure her. In all honesty, I'm not nervous at all. Ryan's got this. Same with the rest of the guys. We haven't gotten this far on luck, and what the other team doesn't realize is that our team thrives on a challenge.

So when the scoreboard is tied, I take that as a win. It'll light a fire under our guys, and...

Sure enough, Ryan gets the ball, slips through the reaching grasp of two defensive linemen on the opposing team and hauls butt all the way down to the end zone.

The team goes wild, including me.

I see Mara doing the same, her blonde curls bouncing as she cheers and hoots. Without the sign she was holding, I see Celia and Heath cupping their hands around their mouths to shout encouragement to Ryan and the other offensive players.

I see Leah and Ben a couple rows back from them, and Leah looks like she might hurt someone she's flailing around so much.

I grin, laughter bubbling up. Don't get me wrong. I'm psyched we may win this game, but I love watching my friends' excitement even more. Speaking of...

My gaze goes back and forth between the action on the field, as my team decimates our opposition, and our group of friends in the stands.

Where is Noelle?

It's straight up weird that she's not next to Mara or Leah, or near Celia and Heath.

She wouldn't bail, though. Not without a good reason. She's never missed one of my games. I shake my head. One of *our* games.

And then I see her. Unlike our friends who are jumping up and down, she's sitting a few rows back from Leah. I didn't notice her at first because she's kinda hunched in on herself like she's cold, and her dark hair and dark jacket don't exactly pop in this sea of people.

Before I can even question what she's doing away from the others, I see it. The arm around her shoulders.

The stranger sitting next to her with too-neat, slicked back brown hair and a face I'm itching to punch.

He says something and laughs, and I see Noelle turn in his direction with a smile.

She's on a date.

Noelle is at my game...with a date.

My emotions flare before logic can intervene. My gut clenches and my jaw snaps shut. Every muscle in my body tenses with this urge to fight.

To hurt.

My gaze goes back to Noelle. *To claim.*

Wait, no. What?

I blink in horror but it doesn't change the way I feel.

"Dude, we did it!" Mason's on top of me, tackling me with a hug, and it's only then I realize that Ryan's jogging off the field toward us and he's wearing a triumphant grin.

Mara and the others are losing it and the sound of cheers is deafening.

I give in to the inevitable bro hugs and laughter that follows as we celebrate, but my head is still turning over what I just saw.

More importantly, I can't just ignore the gut-wrenching, violent wave of jealousy that has swept over me and left me feeling dazed in its wake.

SEVEN

Noelle

MY FACE HURTS FROM SMILING. As Brad and I file into the crowd heading out of the stadium, I am so aware of what a horrible mistake this was that I'm actively cursing myself for being such a moron.

Brad's on his phone when we reach the bottom of the stairs, and he doesn't see Mara coming, but I do. I laugh as she tackles me with a hug, and Brad looks on with puzzled amusement.

It was the same baffled polite smile he wore the entire, painful hour we hung out with my friends before the game started.

Finally, I pretended there weren't enough seats for all of us and dragged him a little ways away. But that sucked even more because while all I wanted to do was, you know...watch the freakin' game, Brad was insistent that we talk.

Nay, that *he* talk.

So, rather than watch my favorite guys play my favorite sport and cheer them on like Mara, Celia, and Leah, I was forced to listen to Brad lay out his five-year plan.

A five-year plan!

The dude is nineteen. He shouldn't even have a *five-day* plan.

“Wasn’t that amazing?” Mara gushes.

I’m laughing at the way she’s still squeezing me tight. Then Celia and Heath catch up with us and Heath laughs as Celia joins in the group hug before he wraps his arms around all of us.

And for one blissful moment, I forget that I’m with the lamest date known to man.

Until he speaks...

“Noelle, love, you’re blocking the aisle,” he murmurs.

Love. He’s been calling me that a lot today, and the way he says it makes my skin crawl. It’s not natural. It sounds forced, like a faux British accent.

The hug breaks up thanks to Brad—AKA Mr. Buzzkill—but before I can respond or drag him away, so he doesn’t ruin my night any more than he already has, Leah and Ben descend on us.

“Yay, you’re still here!” Leah’s tone is breathless with excitement. She looks between me and Brad. “You guys are coming to the party, right?”

“Oh, um...” My heart sinks as I scramble to come up with an excuse. It was painful enough to watch Brad make conversation with my friends before the game. There’s no way I want to bring him to a—

“A party?” Brad perks up like a dog that just heard a high-pitched whistle. I swear his head even cocks to the side.

Leah nods enthusiastically as Ben gives me this little apologetic grin.

I like Ben. He’s very astute. I’m guessing he saw my flinch and knows perfectly well that I’d prefer to have my nails pulled out one by one than bring Brad to a party, *at Elijah’s*, as my date. Ugh.

But Leah has not gotten the memo, and Mara, Celia, and Heath are already heading toward their cars, calling back that they’ll see me at Elijah’s, and Leah—sweet, sweet Leah—is doing her darndest to convince Brad to join us.

I try not to sigh when Brad turns to me with an eager smile. “We should go!”

This smile I’m wearing is making my cheek muscles ache. “Sure. Okay.” I desperately try to keep my peppy tone as I turn to Leah and Ben. “We’ll see you there.”

Brad’s car is too hot and the hot air he spews only makes it hotter. I practically lunge for the door handle and don’t wait for him as I head toward the back door of Elijah’s place.

I already hear classmates laughing out by the fire pit on the back patio and the music is a warm welcome as we draw close.

Maybe this won’t be so bad. I mean, I’ll be surrounded by my friends, right?

“So this Elijah,” Brad says. He’s so close behind me I give a little start and whip around. He’s already got a beer in one hand and holds out a red Solo cup in the other.

I shake my head. I don’t know what’s in there, but whatever it is likely has alcohol and there’s no one I feel less inclined to loosen my inhibitions around than Buzzkill Brad.

“His parents are out of town?” Brad asks, his gaze roaming around the property.

“Yep.” I take in the view too. I guess I’m here so often I’ve become immune to it. The pool, the sprawling lawn, the pool house.

“Lucky guy,” he murmurs.

I don’t say anything. He doesn’t know the first thing about Elijah or his life.

“What do his parents do?” he asks.

“Um...I’m not totally sure. Something in real estate.”

For some reason this makes Brad smile and he wraps an arm around me. “You don’t need to know, huh?”

I have no idea what that means, but I don’t like the condescending tinge to his voice. I wait as long as I can before I shrug off his arm under the pretense of needing to grab my phone out of my back pocket.

It's obvious the second the football players start to arrive because everyone's shouting out congratulations. Ryan makes a beeline for Mara, who happily lets him scoop her up in his arms. They're joined by Celia and Heath, and I wish more than anything that I was over there with them instead of on the far side of the patio with Brad.

His hand settles on my waist, and I swallow hard.

I don't like PDA. It's not my thing. I'm cool with my friends' hugs, obviously, but I learned the hard way in junior high that when a guy seemed too friendly...

Odds were, he was about to get even friendlier.

So, unless I fully trust a guy, too much touching puts me on edge. Which...apparently Brad can sense.

"Whoa, relax, love." He's moved on to the drink in the red Solo cup and his hand shifts from my waist to my back, all the way up to my shoulders. I think the idea is to give me a back rub, but there is nothing relaxing or comforting about this.

"Hey, let's go say hi to Ryan and the other players," I say.

He tags along, but once again, I realize my mistake. Ryan gives me a big hug, but when he goes to make small talk with Brad, it just gets awkward.

"You into football, man?" Ryan asks.

"Yeah, just not high school football, you know?" He laughs like this is a joke and then goes on to bore my friends with a story about how he'd scored tickets to the Superbowl.

And by *he*, I knew he meant his dad.

Because his dad is friends with my dad, and I remember that Superbowl trip well.

I'm trying to find a way to end this horrible story but then Elijah shows up, and he's grinning and shaking Brad's hand, and we have to start the whole awkward small-talk thing all over again.

But this time it's even worse, because Elijah's darting glances in my direction as he drinks his beer and answers

Brad's questions about what his parents do and where they're at.

In any other circumstances, I'd be relieved that Elijah's here. I can totally imagine us storing up every stupid thing Brad says to laugh about later. I can totally picture him making faces at me behind his back...

We've done this before.

But tonight...none of that happens. Despite Elijah's big grin and welcoming charm for Brad's sake, he's not acting like himself. The happy-go-lucky, laidback act is surface level only, and I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who notices the difference.

"So you've got full run of the place. Sweet, bro," Brad says.

I wince, but no one seems to notice.

What I do notice is that Brad's hands are getting more and more adventurous and grabby. And every time someone offers to get more drinks, he accepts.

So does Elijah.

Which is so not like Elijah.

It reaches a point where I can't take it anymore. Not Brad's roaming hands, or the not-so-subtle challenge going on between Brad and Elijah.

Elijah doesn't like Brad. This much is clear.

Brad doesn't seem to notice, though. He likes Elijah.

Or, no...he likes Elijah's wealth.

And really, I'm feeling kinda nauseous when I finally turn to Brad and tell him we have to go. I don't even have to lie when I say I'm not feeling great.

I take his hand and all but drag him through the house. I call for a car and am in the middle of telling him he'll have to pick up his car in the morning when he pulls me down onto the couch. "C'mon, love," he murmurs as he pulls me into his lap. "This is what we came for, right?"

His mouth is hot and wet and he tastes like beer as he smashes his face to mine.

I push away. “Not tonight, Brad.”

His face twists in confusion. “What do you mean, not tonight?”

“I mean...” I pull away from him, off his lap. “I don’t move that fast, okay?”

His laughter makes my stomach turn. “Babe. You’re hot, all right? I get it. You’re gonna make a guy work for it.”

I’m backing away from him, grateful that I’m close enough to the party that I can hear my friends’ voices. I’m not in danger. I know this... but my heart still pounds like crazy.

And it’s his next words that make my stomach surge and my chest burn like it’s filled with acid.

“You’re hot, Noelle. But hot girls are a dime a dozen, babe. You can’t tease a guy all night and expect to get a second date, you know what I mean?”

He may as well have just slapped me in the face, and it takes me a second to find my voice. I can feel something dark and rage-like traveling through my body as I point to the door and snarl, “Get out.”

He holds his hands up in mock defense. “Look, you got your mother’s killer bod and beauty, but clearly not her brain. I’m going places, love.” He stands up and his earnest lecture is undermined when he wobbles. “You want a house like this? You need a guy like me.”

“You’re disgusting.” I keep my voice even, my gaze level.

Every black emotion swirling through me is put on lockdown. I learned a long time ago that bullies love fear and they even feed off of anger. The only thing bullies really hate is apathy.

A bully like Brad?

He hates to be ignored.

Which is why I feign a yawn and toss my hair over my shoulder with a diva look that would absolutely make my mother proud. “Lose my number, Brad. If I see or hear from you again, I’ll make sure your internship disappears like that.” I snap my fingers and give him a pointed look. “Understood?”

He bolts up from the couch with a sneer. “Are you threatening me? You think anyone will take your word over mine? I’m only here as a favor to your dad! You know that, right?” He stalks forward and I don’t budge. “He thinks I’ll be good for you.”

By the way he says it, I know he’s actually quoting my dad, and my stomach turns.

I can see it—my dad going to the upright, responsible pre-law suck-up and having a man-to-man talk with him about his daughter, who hasn’t figured out her college plans yet...

Oh yeah, I can practically hear it, and it takes everything in me not to let him see how much that hurts.

But as Elijah always likes to point out—I have a killer poker face, and I use it now to full effect. I arch a brow. “You actually think a suck-up like you holds more sway than his own daughter?”

Well, you’re probably right.

I lift my chin as he stalks closer, a contemptuous grin making his bland features ugly as his gaze rakes over me. Ugh. I’m going to need twenty showers to get clean after this. “You might be a sexy little thing, Noelle, but God you’re dumb. You have no idea how the world works.”

He’s so close I can smell his beer breath. Gross. But at least I can handle him. There’s no way I’m backing down.

I’m so focused on Brad, I don’t hear someone come into the room behind me until I’m gently nudged back a step.

I don’t see Elijah until his back is looming in front of me, blocking Brad from view as he takes over the small space between us. “Is there a problem here?”

I can't see Brad because Elijah's caging me behind him like he's my own personal security team, and I swear I don't even recognize my best friend's voice right now. It's a low growl that I've never heard before, not from him.

"We're good man," Brad says, his tone all pleasant again. Back to being a brown-noser now that the rich, influential host is here.

God, this guy is so cliché I can't stand it.

"We just had a little misunderstanding, that's all," Brad continues. "Right, babe?"

He'll be pleasant as can be to someone he thinks deserves respect...but that's clearly not me.

I blink back this stupid urge to cry. The even dumber urge to wrap my arms around Elijah's waist and rest my head against his back.

I am stronger than that, dammit. And I don't need any guy fighting my battles.

But apparently I don't answer quickly enough because Elijah's up in Brad's face, gripping him by the collar and lifting him so he's on his tiptoes.

For a second all I can do is blink in surprise. Elijah doesn't have a temper. I've never once seen him get in a fight or so much as threaten another guy.

"Hey, man, she's just being dramatic," Brad says. "You know how girls are."

This can go two ways. And part of me—a big part of me—wants nothing more than to let Elijah fight this battle for me.

I'm tired. I'm so freakin' tired all of a sudden, I just want to walk away, curl up in Elijah's cozy bed, and close my eyes.

But...

I take a deep breath and step out from behind my friend.

"It's fine, Eli," I murmur.

I don't know why I call him by his nickname. I almost never call him that and it feels weird to do it now. Like I'm talking to a stranger, or something.

But I don't look at him. I turn to Brad and force a polite smile, "Brad was just leaving. The car I called should be here any minute." I turn to Elijah but can't quite meet his gaze.

Humiliation makes my belly twist and churn.

God, I think I'm gonna be sick. I need out of here. Now.

"Think you can make sure he catches his ride?" My voice is sugary sweet. Plastic. Fake.

But it's my nice way of saying, *escort this a-hole out, please*, and we all know it.

I don't wait for either guy to answer. I walk out before they can respond.

No, I strut out. I'm not my mother's daughter for nothing.

I join a group of cheerleaders who are celebrating in the pool house. Dominic's there too and he greets me with an easy grin. I find myself gravitating toward him because he's not in the middle of a conversation and he's way more chill than the girls who are downing wine coolers like there's no tomorrow.

"You look like a bodyguard or something," I joke, looking up at the towering guy as he hovers on the edge of the room.

He snickers and concedes with a shrug. "I guess I kinda am. Don't want Jaz going nuts with the coolers, if you know what I mean?" He smiles at me and I'm internally "awwing" at the fact he's a protective brother. That's kinda cute.

"Need a drink?" he asks.

I shake my head. Definitely no drinks for me tonight. I feel bad enough as it is, a depressant like alcohol would make me do the unthinkable...like cry in public.

One of the cheerleaders joins us and I find myself getting comfortable at Dominic's side. He's easy to be around, including me in the conversation but not expecting me to carry it. I can just relax and...and hide.

Okay, fine, I am totally hiding and I know it.

I get an alert telling me the car I ordered has arrived at Brad's house. I can go back out there now. Part of me wants to see my friends.

But I don't want to face Elijah.

I don't want to see that judgy look he gave me whenever Brad said something gross or rude. I don't want to see the anger that simmered behind that easygoing smile.

My eyes prick with tears that I rapidly blink away, but I can't get rid of the thought...

It's not Brad I'm hiding from.

It's my very best friend.

EIGHT

Elijah

THE GOOD NEWS? My team won.

The bad news? Noelle invited that bland, potato-faced intern to my party.

He's gone now, thank God, but I'm still tense with fury at the scene I walked in on. The adrenaline coursing through me is a hundred times stronger than when I was on the field earlier, and it's clouding reason, making it hard to do anything but...but *feel*.

And what I feel is freakin' anger. Toward that jerk with the weak chin, sure. I didn't hear what he'd been saying, but I'd seen the look on his face, his posture as he'd stalked toward Noelle, who'd just...she'd just stood there.

I scan the too-crowded patio again. Where the hell is Noelle?

It's not anger I feel toward her, necessarily, but...frustration? Concern? I don't know.

I'm not sure I want to know.

All I *do* know is that she disappeared and she's not answering her texts.

"Stop glaring at the guests." Mara's suddenly in front of me, and when I drop my gaze, I realize I have no idea how

long she's been standing there. Her eyes are narrowed on me like I'm some puzzle she's trying to sort out.

I take a step back. Much as I love this girl, her gaze is freaking me out.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I ask.

At least, I think I do. My tongue's a little too thick and my head feels fuzzy.

"Are you drunk?"

"What? No." I never get drunk. Which is not to say that I never drink. But I know my limits, and while I find it hilarious to watch my friends and teammates get stupid and messy, I personally can't stand losing control like that.

Not that I'm a control freak.

But I am speaking to one currently.

Mara tilts her head to the side as she studies me. "You okay, Eli?"

Eli. All of my friends call me that. Except for Noelle. Except for earlier.

I don't know why she doesn't, and right now it feels important that I figure this out. "Where'd Noelle go?"

Mara shakes her head, and I hate how her lips twitch. I'm pretty sure she's laughing at me, but it's the sympathy in her eyes I really can't stand. "Last I saw she was going inside with her...*date*."

The way Mara wrinkles her nose makes it clear she's just as enamored with the frat boy as I am.

"Why'd she bring him? What was she thinking?" I don't know why I'm grilling Mara. It's not like she's Noelle's keeper, but she's here and she's always honest.

To a fault, sometimes, but I know she won't evade the question or come up with a diplomatic answer to make me feel better like Celia or Addie would.

“I don’t need anyone sparing my feelings. I’m just curious, that’s all.”

Mara stares at me in surprise and it’s only then I realize I just said that out loud.

With a frown I glare at the near-empty cup in my hand and set it down. Crap. *Am I drunk?*

Mara’s head tilts to the side. “You okay, Eli?”

I nod. “Yeah. Just...”

Wrong. Everything feels wrong tonight. Everything’s been all wrong for a while now. But I don’t know how to explain it to myself, let alone Mara.

What exactly is wrong? I don’t know. Things are changing. Everything’s changing...

Ryan comes over, wrapping an arm around Mara and nuzzling her neck. I look away. Not that I have a big issue with PDA, but right now I’m not exactly loving the blatant show of how happy they are.

Unfortunately for me, I turn my head and see Celia and Heath by the fire pit. She’s on his lap and they’re lost in their own little world, smiling and snuggling.

I turn the other way, and...there.

Finally.

I see Noelle. And thank God she doesn’t have that intern pawing at her anymore. She’s coming out of the pool house... with Dominic.

Oh hell no.

That’s my first thought. And it makes no sense. I get that. But my brain is not making sense at the moment so I head straight toward her.

She gives Dominic a hug and then turns away from him while he walks after his sister.

Some of that tension in my muscles eases slightly. She’s okay. But her head is down and she’s making a beeline for the

house.

I catch up with her in the kitchen and find her frowning down at her phone.

“Hey,” I say. I stop short when she lifts her head and meets my gaze.

For no reason I could ever explain, I feel like I’m facing a stranger.

Which is insane. This is Noelle. My Noelle. My best friend and the girl I’ve known since kindergarten.

But there’s something different about her.

Or maybe...maybe it’s me.

I give my head a little shake when she drops her gaze back to her phone and taps the screen before putting it in her back pocket.

I move toward her slowly. “You okay?”

She nods. “I’m awesome. Having a super night. You?”

But her deadpan voice doesn’t make me laugh like I know she means it to. I know her tricks. I know her defenses.

I know her.

This is no stranger, it’s...my Noelle. Which is why, despite the fact that the only light in this kitchen is the moonlight coming through the windows, and despite the fact that she’s wearing her best poker face...I see it.

“You’re not okay,” I say.

Her eyes round in surprise. She didn’t expect that. I normally go along with her lies, fall in with her jokes...

But I can’t tonight.

The adrenaline is fading, and now I just feel...raw. I can’t pretend right now. And maybe it’s the drinks talking, but I don’t want to.

I stop when I’m right beside her at the kitchen island and we both lean against it. “What did he say to you?”

She shakes her head. “Doesn’t matter.”

I straighten, my heart slamming against my chest. “Noelle, did he...touch you? Did he—”

“No!” She straightens too, so now we’re both standing and facing each other. “He didn’t. He wouldn’t.”

“He would,” I argue. “The way he was looking at you—”

“Yeah, well, I can protect myself.”

I open my mouth to argue, but then close it. My emotions are too close to the surface, and her comment made me bizarrely angry.

And she doesn’t need my anger right now.

She doesn’t need me to point out that maybe sometimes she does need help. Maybe it’s okay to accept it. I scrub a hand over my eyes and try to regroup. “What do you need?”

“I don’t need anything,” she says, her tone lighter and more like her usual self.

It makes me feel heavier. Tired. I don’t want to do this. I want to be real with her, and I want the same in return. “Stay the night,” I say.

“What?”

I drop my hand to look right at her. “Stay. You shouldn’t be alone.”

“My parents are at home, and it’s...it’s fine. Really.”

But it’s not, because she can’t fool me. Her poker face is on point, but when I look into her eyes, I can see the pain, and I’d do anything to take it away.

My own heart aches at the sight of it, like her pain is mine. And I wish it were. I wish I could do that for her. “If I could take your pain, I would.”

Once again...didn’t mean to say that aloud.

Crap. This is why I don’t drink.

Her brows knit together. “What?”

“Just...” I run a hand through my hair. “I don’t want you to hurt. That’s all.”

She blinks at me like she’s never seen me before. Like I’ve grown a second head. I know that in the cold light of day, I’m gonna regret I ever said this stuff. I’m gonna wince when I think of how she’s looking at me right now.

But at this particular moment, it’s tough to care. All that matters is that I make her feel better. That I take away her pain.

And I have no idea how to do that.

I reach for her before I can stop myself.

But really...I’ve hugged Noelle countless times. This is not a big deal.

Even as I think it, I feel her stiffen when I wrap my arms around her. But it only lasts for a second and then she’s melting against me. Her warmth is overwhelming. Her scent wraps around me and I feel every inch of her pressed against my body. Her cheek rests against my heart as her arms wrap around my waist. She holds on tight. So tight, I crush her to me because I know without her telling me that this is what she needs.

She needs to be held and protected, and my stubborn Noelle would never, ever admit it aloud.

Time passes but I don’t know how long. It’s long enough for me to be utterly aware of her in every sense. I feel her breath through my T-shirt, and the rise and fall of her chest. The only sound in this kitchen is the muted noises from the party outside and our breathing, which is ragged and uneven on both our parts.

I don’t want to notice how good she feels in my arms. I hate that my body is reacting to her warmth and her softness. I try to block it out, but my brain is useless.

The drinks, the adrenaline, the freakin’ storm of emotions that I’ve been battling on all sides lately...

I'm helpless against this surge of sensations even as I try to reason my way out of it.

You've held her like this countless times. This is no different.

But it is.

It is different. And I have no idea why. I don't know what's changed, or how to change it back.

Worse, I don't know if I want to go back.

Crap. I know nothing.

And what little I do know is muddled as hell right now thanks to her closeness and the fog of alcohol.

I don't even realize I'm stroking her back until her breath catches, and then...

And then my heart splits in two right then and there because with a little catch of breath she starts to cry.

I feel the wetness of her tears when she turns her face into my chest as her shoulders shake. I lean down, burying my face in her hair as I do my best to surround her with my body. Like if I hold her tight enough I can absorb her pain and protect her from anything.

"Hey, don't cry," I say, but my words are muffled against her hair and the feel of her fingers curling into my T-shirt is nearly my undoing.

I'll do anything to make her feel better. To show her she's safe. She's loved.

She's mine.

I brush off the thought as she pulls back slightly to look up at me. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm so stupid."

At least that's what I think she says. She's muttering and sniffing, and I can't stop myself from lifting a hand to wipe away her tears.

Her skin is softer than silk beneath my fingers and I settle my hand there, cupping her face in my palm as my thumb

brushes away the errant tears. “Don’t cry, babe. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

She nods a little, but her gaze won’t meet mine and I hate the defeat I see there.

I’m desperate to make her pain go away, and at some point my gaze has locked on her lips. On this crazy need that’s forming, mingling with this desperate clawing inside me to show her how much she matters. To show her how much I care, and...

I don’t even realize I’m lowering my head toward hers until her gaze flicks up to meet mine. Her eyes widen, then her gaze dips to my mouth before she takes a step back. My hands fall away as she forces a smile and punches out a brittle laugh.

“My ride’s probably here,” she says, looking anywhere but at me.

“Yeah.” I nod, shoving my hands in my pockets as my heart plummets and ice fills my veins. “You’re probably right.”

She’s already fumbling with her phone, mumbling something about how she missed the driver’s text. And then she’s heading for the door before I can stop her.

It’s for the best, I tell myself as I stand there alone in the middle of my kitchen, staring at the space where she’d been.

I’m in shock over what I just did.

Over what I almost did.

I wipe a hand over my face, groaning aloud as regret slams into my chest.

I’d come so close to kissing my best friend.

And that...

That would ruin everything.

NINE

Noelle

DESPITE DESPERATELY WANTING TO, I don't tell my dad how awful his choice of dates really was. I do, however, make it clear that I am not cool with him setting me up again.

Ever.

“But—” he starts over breakfast a few days later.

“Nope.” I reach for the fruit salad my mom's laid out for us. “Never again.”

“He was only trying to help, sweetheart,” my mom says.

She has that consoling tone of voice she uses when she's playing peacemaker. My dad and I don't argue often—actually, our time together is usually pretty nice. But we're both stubborn to a fault, and apparently my dad feels that involving himself in my non-existent love life is the hill he's willing to die on this week.

I know without a doubt that if I tell my dad all the nasty things Brad said and explain just how handsy he got after a couple drinks, my dad would absolutely be on my side.

But the thought of repeating any of it makes me feel sick, and right now I just want to forget it ever happened.

But of course, the moment I think that, it's back. All of it. Brad's sneer, his nasty words...

And that moment with Elijah.

I have to work to swallow the piece of cantaloupe I just put in my mouth.

If I could magically erase that entire day from my memory, I would. But since I can't, I settle for changing the conversation. "I'm gonna be home late today. There's that college fair in the afternoon and it may run long."

I don't know if this is true. I'm also positive they won't care. They're so used to me spending my days at Elijah's or Mara's or Celia's, no one blinks an eye if I'm not home until late.

"The college fair, huh?" My dad casts my mom this look that is so obvious, I'd have to be blind not to see it.

Ugh. Crap. I've never truly understood the whole 'out of the frying pan into the fire' phrase my dad uses until just this moment. I've gone from a bad topic to a horrible one.

"We don't want you to get your hopes up, hon," Mom says.

My dad cringes. "We just don't want to see you disappointed, that's all."

Something heavy and horrible settles in my chest, stealing my appetite and any desire to stay at this table for a second longer.

"Oops." I snatch my phone. "I just remembered, I'm supposed to catch up with Addie before school today..." I'm already pushing my chair out, pretending I'm in a rush.

I run away before they can stop me. And the thing is, I totally get it. I do. They seem to think that I've confused myself with Celia. Or Mara. Or anyone else in our class, for that matter.

But it's not like I'm holding out hope for some Ivy League school. I just want the chance to see what's out there. Figure out what I'm good at.

If I'm good at anything at all.

Addie answers right away. "Yay for breakfast dates!" She gets up early some days just to have these little check-ins and I

adore her for it.

This morning in particular, I need to see her smiley, optimistic face. Her bright grin helps me breathe easier. And while I love seeing her and Vince together, I'm grateful to have her alone this morning.

"You okay, Noelle?" She tips her head to the side.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

She doesn't say anything. She just hits me with her kind smile and compassionate gaze. And Elijah pops into my head because I find myself remembering our joke about our Addie kryptonite. A second after that, it's all pouring out of me. All of it.

Well, not the part about the almost kiss with Elijah, because honestly...I'm still not entirely sure what happened there. One second he was holding me. The next there was this thick tension between us that made my heart trip and my belly start to flutter, and...

I think maybe he was leaning in to kiss me?

"He said what?" Addie's basically screeching so it's no surprise when her step-siblings burst in to see what the commotion is. She shoos them away with promises to be down to join them for breakfast soon.

"What a creep," she mutters as soon as they've left.

I smile because...*creep* is so not a strong enough word for what Brad is. But from Addie, it's saying a lot.

"Is that why things are weird between you and Elijah?"

Her question gives me a start. Things are a little weird with me and Elijah, but I never told Addie about that. I never mentioned it to anyone, and it felt like Elijah and I were both doing our best to not act weird around our friends.

But the fact that I knew that he was trying not to be weird...

Well, that meant we probably *were* acting weird. Probably weirder than we realized.

I wince and rub my temples. “Where’d you hear things are weird between us?”

A guilty wince flashes across her face. “Celia may have mentioned that you two seemed different ever since that playoff game and...I don’t know. She wasn’t gossiping, just worried about you. Both of you.”

I nod. “Look, do me a favor. Don’t tell Celia or Mara about Brad or what happened okay?”

“Worried they’ll go ballistic?”

“Definitely.”

“I would be too.”

We laugh as we hypothesize who’d do the most damage. Mara can be kinda terrifying when she goes into Mama Bear mode, but Celia can be downright devious. I could totally see her hacking his computer to get him in trouble or something.

“I kinda just want to let the whole night be forgotten, you know? I don’t want to make things any weirder than they already are.”

She nods. “I get it, it’s just...” She purses her lips.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she hesitates. “It’s just...sometimes change is unavoidable. But it doesn’t have to be bad.”

“Mmm.” I make a noncommittal sound because I know where she’s coming from. She’d been miserable when she first transferred to a new school and started living in a new home with a new family. And in her case, all that change had led to this great new transformation.

But for me...?

I keep thinking about Elijah. About that glint in his eyes when he’d leaned down toward me. The way he’d been the same but new.

Honestly, it wasn’t the first time I’d felt that way around him. That day in the parking lot when I’d teased him...

Regret flared along with embarrassment.

“Anyway, none of this is why I called.” I force a bright smile. “Tell me everything that’s been going on with you.”

A little while later, my dad calls up the stairs that he’s leaving and if I want a ride, I better hustle. Addie and I say goodbye and I blow a kiss at the camera. She catches it, smushes it against her cheek, and laughs.

I head to school in a much better mood, feeling lighter than I have in days.

“There’s my favorite weirdo.” Elijah’s arm slings around my shoulders as I walk into the cafeteria, and aside from a flare of nerves that’s completely unwarranted, we fall into step and right back into banter like it’s just another Thursday.

See? It’s already basically forgotten. Everyone’s moved on from talking about the playoffs and the after-party, so I can move on too.

“I can’t believe you expect us to kiss, Eli,” Mara says.

I slide into the seat next to Elijah’s at the cafeteria just as Mara starts to talk about the scavenger hunt. Or, more precisely about the stupid kiss challenge that Elijah added to the scavenger hunt. The first of many new challenges, apparently.

And before I can even take a bite of my apple, my appetite disappears.

Everyone at the table is talking about kissing. Kissing each other. Kissing strangers. The rules about who to kiss.

I stare down at the table as heat inexplicably floods my cheeks and my mind fills with the memory of that night.

Would he have kissed me if I hadn’t backed away?

Does he even remember?

I slide a glance in his direction but he’s not looking at me. Which is good. I’m able to sit in silence as my friends discuss the rules about what constitutes a kiss to earn points in this stupid game.

“So I can’t kiss Ryan?” Mara whines.

Ryan leans over to kiss the top of her head. “You can kiss me anytime, babe.”

I snicker as Mara smacks his chest.

“It can’t be someone who’s participating,” he says.

“Oh my God,” Celia moans. “Dude, you’re not participating, is this your way of getting every girl in school to kiss you?”

We all crack up at that. No one more so than Elijah, who’s got that cocky grin going on. “Celia, you know I don’t need help there.”

There’s no arguing this. But at the reference to all of Elijah’s hookups over the years, my stomach churns with a violent lurch.

Is that all that moment was? He’d had some drinks and went into player mode?

I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.

The moment I think it, my stomach gets so knotted I toss my apple in the garbage.

Worse. This is definitely worse.

It’s a relief when the bell rings marking the start of class. I’m ready to bolt and get the heck away from all this talk of kissing when Elijah stops me. “You’re still going to the college fair, right?”

I nod, my heart sinking.

Wonderful. Just what I need right now. A vivid reminder of how bleak my future looks.

The rest of our friends don’t have to go. Their futures are bright and have been planned out for years.

As Elijah and I peel off toward the gymnasium where the college fair is being held, I wonder if he’s thinking something similar, because his earlier, laughing demeanor fades and he

gets oddly serious. “Do you sometimes feel like maybe our friends have their acts together more than we do?”

I bump my hip into his thigh, making him laugh as he stumbles a bit.

“Every day, dude,” I say.

I rarely call Elijah dude but today it feels important that I remind myself, and maybe Elijah, that we are buddies. Pals.

That all almost-kisses aside, we are nothing more than friends.

I bob my head, feeling like I can seriously put all this ridiculousness behind me...

Until Elijah has to go and ask, “So who are you gonna kiss?”

This time I’m the one who stumbles and he didn’t so much as touch me. “What?”

“For the scavenger hunt.”

Of course. Of course with the stupid scavenger hunt. I’d quit if I wasn’t so opposed to, you know...quitting.

Thankfully, the gymnasium door is just ahead, so I can avoid answering his question as we walk into the crowded space.

And I’m instantly overwhelmed.

My heart starts beating too fast. My chest is too tight. I’m out of place here. I look around at the smiling faces behind these foldout tables, at all the brochures and all the options, and...

I don’t belong here.

My dad’s right. My mom’s right.

“Want to start over there and work our way to the end?” Elijah looks down at me.

“Hmm?” I glance up, then blink and force a smile. “Oh, yeah sure.”

We don't stop and talk to many people. I think maybe Elijah's just as freaked out by the happily chatting people as I am, and besides each one already has a line of high schoolers waiting.

"You're quiet," Elijah points out when we finish our first lap with only a handful of randomly snatched up brochures to show for it.

"Just thinking about..."

His gaze is on me as he opens the door, and I feel like crying. Again.

But there's no way I'm doing that. It's humiliating enough that he's seen me lose it once. I look behind me at the couples who are talking to college reps together and my mind latches onto the first thing I can think of.

"The scavenger hunt," I blurt as I duck out the door. "The kiss."

What am I doing? Why am I bringing this up?

Because it's not about college!

I look over my shoulder and...that's a mistake. The door swings shut behind Elijah and he stands there staring at me.

Yeah, talking about kissing is a really big mistake.

Looking up and finding him staring at my lips?

Even worse.

I back up a step and hear an "oomph" as I slam into someone. Spinning around, I find Dominic and he's nicely reaching out to steady me.

"Sorry." He gives me one of his sweet grins—all kindness with just a hint of bashfulness tinging his cheeks.

"No, it's my bad," I say, my voice sounding stupidly breathy.

My heart's racing still at the way Elijah had been looking at me.

Not like a friend.

More like he was thinking about kissing me.

“You going in?” Dominic points behind me. His eyes are nice. So kind, as he gestures for me to go ahead of him.

“I actually...” I glance over at Elijah who’s not smiling. He’s watching me, and what Addie said earlier won’t stop playing in my ears. *Sometimes change is unavoidable...*

My heart slams against my ribcage. I don’t want things to change.

I want us to go back to how things were. Before the stupid scavenger hunt kiss made things weird at the playground, before Brad and the almost kiss, and now all this talk of who *I’m* going to kiss.

Without really thinking it through, I reach for my phone and flash Dominic a big smile. “Could you do me a favor?”

The stupid scavenger hunt kiss is driving me nuts, and I need to get it over with.

Like, yesterday.

I hand Elijah my phone, not meeting his eyes as I quickly ask Dominic, “You’re not participating in the scavenger hunt, right?”

“What? Uh, no.”

I grin even though my heart’s doing cartwheels and my face burns. Elijah is staring at me, I can feel it. “Then I have a kinda crazy favor to ask. Do you mind kissing me?”

I swear Elijah growls. It’s a sound I’ve only heard once before from him, and that was when he threatened Brad.

But Dominic’s laughing as he agrees, his cheeks going even redder, but he’s a good-natured guy and it’s clear he doesn’t mind doing me this favor.

I turn to Elijah with a cheesy grin. Hopefully it’s bright enough to hide the knots in my stomach and the fact I’m wrestling the urge to puke.

Not because I’m about to kiss Dominic, of course. He’s a really good-looking guy, but Elijah’s growl is still thrumming

inside of me.

“Take the picture, okay?” My gaze brushes over Elijah’s but quickly darts away.

His eyes are dark and stormy but he lifts the phone just as Dominic leans down and gives me a short, sweet, closed-lip kiss for the camera.

The kiss is nice, but I feel...nothing. And for some reason, that annoys the crap out of me as I pull back to see Dominic’s handsome face grinning down at me.

“That good enough?” he asks.

No. Not nearly.

“Perfect!” I snatch the phone from Elijah. “Thanks, Dominic.”

I dart away from the gymnasium, picking up my pace until I’m doing some crazy speed-walking routine, and I’m totally out of breath by the time Elijah catches up with me.

TEN

Elijah

THE GYMNASIUM DOORS shut behind me with a loud click as Dominic disappears into the fair, and that's the only sound in this hallway.

Other than Noelle's furious steps as she tries to get away from me.

Oh, and then there's the bass drum effect that's going on in my chest. My pounding heart is reverberating so freaking loudly I'm surprised my ribcage isn't cracking open.

"What was *that*?" I call after Noelle.

She whips around to face me and looks almost as frantic as I feel. She recovers quickly though, a smile curving her lips as she shrugs. "What you wanted, right?"

What I wanted.

What I *wanted*?

I don't even recognize this ugly, twisted rage that's flooding my veins and making my thoughts go haywire.

I open my mouth and shut it again quickly.

Noelle's smile fades, her steps slowing to a stop when I reach her. "Yeah, it's what you wanted, right? You keep harping on about this stupid kiss for your stupid scavenger hunt, so I did it. Now it's done." She grins, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Guess that puts me in the lead."

I don't say anything. I can't. Because, freakin' A, she's right. This was my doing. And there's a little part of me that doesn't want to think about my real reasons for pushing this kiss challenge.

Like a freakin' itch I can't stop scratching, I can't stop thinking about the way I'd almost kissed her that night of the party.

I can't stop imagining what it would have felt like. Had I maybe sorta hoped she'd kiss me to win this challenge?

Maybe.

The realization makes my stomach turn and some of my disgust must show on my face, because Noelle goes on the defense.

"Look, this was your challenge, okay? It's not like I normally ask random dudes to kiss me at school, you know?"

Random dudes. I cling to that phrase like a lifeline. Was Dominic just some random guy to her? With another surge of toxic poison in my veins I remember the way she'd come out of the pool house with him. The way he made her smile and laugh...

My hands are fists at my side and there's a muscle in my jaw that won't quit ticking.

I'm doing a crappy job of hiding my emotions, and if Noelle would look directly at me, she'd no doubt see exactly how I'm feeling.

Jealous.

Holy crap. I'm freakin' jealous as hell of Dominic. It was a dumb little peck and, hell, I'd even snapped the photo so I know exactly how staged it was.

But that doesn't stop my gut from twisting at the mere memory, or my blood from turning hot with anger at the thought of him trying it again.

I turn away, thrusting a hand through my hair as I try to get a hold of myself.

I don't want to think about what this means. I don't want to know why I'm jealous.

But it's too late. There's some part of me that already knows.

There's some part of me that's known for a while now.

I have a thing for my best friend.

Crap. This cannot be happening.

"Look, I gotta go," she says.

I can hear her backing away.

"This college fair is basically an excuse to cut out early, right?"

She sounds like she's trying to lighten the mood as she forces a laugh, but it's not working.

"I'll give you a ride." It comes out like a gruff command rather than a casual offer.

And even as I say it, I wonder what is wrong with me. I should let her go. I need space. We both need space.

She's clearly wiggling out about something, and I'm not sure I want to know what. I'm a little afraid that if I ask, it'll turn out to be something to do with Dominic.

Does she actually like him? Was that kiss just her excuse to make a move?

Crap. I seriously don't want to know. There's no way I can pretend to be cool with her having a crush on another guy.

Not when I'm only just beginning to realize the full extent of my attraction to her.

Because...it's not just attraction.

Attraction I can ignore. I've become a pro when it comes to blocking out Noelle's sex appeal. But something's changed. I can't ignore this pull anymore because it's not just attraction, it's...

Something else.

“You don’t have to,” she murmurs.

The sound of her voice has me turning back to face her, and it takes me a full thirty seconds to realize she’s responding to my comment about giving her a lift.

She shifts from one foot to the other, and I wonder if she has any clue how beautiful she is right now. She’s not even trying in a simple V-neck cashmere sweater and tight jeans, with her long dark hair spilling over her shoulders. There’s no makeup, no sexy dresses...and that makes her all the more gorgeous.

Her gaze flickers away, toward the door like she’s looking for an escape. “I can walk.”

“It’s freezing out.”

“Then I’ll find another ride home.” Her voice turns petulant...or maybe that’s a hint of panic I hear.

Fear creeps in alongside this churning mix of jealousy and horror at realizing just how badly I’ve got it for my best friend.

Does she know? Is that why she’s freaking out? Am I that obvious?

To everyone else, maybe not. But Noelle knows me better than anyone.

She draws in a deep breath and turns to face the doors. “If you’re not ready to leave, I’ll just get a lift from someone else.”

Of course she will.

A huff of bitter laughter escapes before I can stop it, and my earlier anger is back. I know it doesn’t make sense. I know it’s not even fair.

She can’t help it that she’s beautiful. She can’t help it that every guy at school wants her.

She didn’t mean to make me want her too.

She frowns and I know she catches my cynical smile. “What’s that laugh for?”

“Nothing, just...of course you’ll get another ride. All you have to do is smile and bat your lashes, right?”

Her eyes widen, surprised and maybe even a little hurt, but I can’t stop. My chest hurts. Every muscle in my body is filled with poison. And I can’t help but lash out.

“I bet Dominic will come running if he thinks a lift home will get him another kiss.”

Her lips part and the stricken look in her eyes bursts this ball of anger as if she’d just popped a balloon.

For a second we just stare at each other in silence. I have this horrible feeling like...

Like we’re strangers.

A clawing sensation breaks out behind my ribcage. It’s desperate and terrifying, and I feel like a kid again the first time my parents left me home alone.

“I’m sorry.” I rush out the words.

But it’s too late. I can see it’s too late. I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings, but I did and I’m not even sure why. She knows her effect on the guys in this school. It’s not exactly a secret.

With a sharp exhale I look away. “I don’t know why I’m being such a dick today. I’m...I’m in a bad mood, that’s all. I shouldn’t be taking it out on you.”

It’s a lie and I hate it. I never lie to Noelle, but I have no idea how to tell her why I’m actually pissed.

I know for a fact that if I tell her the truth, everything will change.

Everything.

I can’t do that. I just can’t.

“Come on.” I nod toward the exit. “I’ll take you home.”

For a second I think she’s not going to budge, but after a heartbeat, she falls into step beside me. We’re both quiet on the walk to the parking lot.

“I feel like we’re breaking the law,” she mutters.

I let out a huff of laughter because I know exactly what she means. No one explicitly said we couldn't leave once we were done with the college fair, but the last bell hasn't rung and we're the only ones out here.

I lower my voice and drawl, "I aim to misbehave." I'm quoting *Serenity*, which we've both agreed is a highly underrated movie and chock full of quotable lines.

My chest feels ten times lighter when she chuckles in response.

There's still an awkward tension between us but it's better. If we're quoting movies, we're back on firmer footing.

If we can get through this car ride without mentioning kisses, Dominic, or anything having to do with why I freaked out back there, I may be able to get home and regroup.

Yeah, that's what I need. I need some space to get my head on straight.

I need to get all thoughts of Noelle firmly back in the friends box and seal it shut.

I'm actually feeling somewhat good about this plan and am so lost in my own thoughts that I don't really realize how long we've been silent in my car until she breaks it with the most random comment of all time.

"I failed my driver's test."

I blink over at her. "What?"

She's staring straight ahead, and while her tone is flat and bored, her fingers fidget with her phone in her lap as she repeats herself. "I failed the written test."

"Okay," I say slowly. I feel like she expects me to say more, but I have no idea where she's going with this.

Finally she turns to face me, and when I glance over, my heart gives a hard thud at the emotions in her eyes. "It's not like I have this plan to rely on guys for rides all the time."

And...crap.

That's what this is about. "I didn't think it was," I rasp.

That's the truth. Noelle is self-sufficient...to a fault sometimes. I know she doesn't mean to skate by on her looks. Whether it's scavenger hunt wins or rides, I know it's not intentional. It's just the way it is.

But I realize with a sinking sensation just how badly my offhand comment hurt her as she keeps going. "I'm gonna take it again. Probably." She adds that last part belatedly and under her breath. "I just...I suck at tests."

I know this. The girl is smart, but she's struggled with grades for as long as I've known her.

"And the written test was just...it was awful."

She's not looking at me anymore. Her words are rushed and she's staring out her window. "It's timed, which always freaks me out. And I don't, I just...I failed. Big time. And my dad made this joke and..." She trails off. "Whatever. It doesn't matter."

I shoot her a sidelong look. Whatever she'd been about to say? It mattered.

"Anyway," she says as she turns her whole body toward the window, her shoulders hunching a bit like she's trying to protect herself.

From me?

I grip the steering wheel harder as self-loathing wraps me in its grip.

"I just don't want you to think I'll be relying on you for rides for the rest of your life. Or any guy, for that matter."

I don't know what to say.

Or...I know what I want to say but I can't say it. I can't tell her that I don't care that she didn't pass her test. I don't care that she relies on people to give her a ride. I can't tell her that I want to be the *only* guy who gives her a ride.

I want to be the guy she relies on. The one she turns to. For everything.

Hell, there's a part of me that wants to offer to be her lifelong chauffeur if only to see her smile and watch that dimple form and...

Holy crap, what is wrong with me?

And the fact that I don't just want to say it. I *mean* it. Everything in me knows that I want to be her guy. I want to be the only guy in her life.

I don't know how long I've felt this way because it's so obvious now, I'm starting to wonder if I've always felt this way and just never let myself admit it.

Holy. Freakin'. Crap.

It's a wonder I don't crush the steering wheel, I'm gripping it so hard.

And I don't respond. I'm too afraid of what will come out of my mouth if I open it. So I stay stupidly quiet as I pull up to her house, as she flies out the door like she's on her way to put out a fire...

I don't say anything. Not until I see her disappear inside her house. And then when I talk, it's to myself, my voice filling my empty car. "Oh man. I am in so much trouble."

ELEVEN

Noelle

I LOVE my friends dearly but the closer we get to the victory dance this weekend, the more I'd love to run from them.

“Are you going with the pink dress?” Mara asks Celia.

I pretend to be paying attention. Normally I'm totally cool with talk of dresses. Actually, normally, I'm the one leading this conversation.

I am not my mother's daughter for nothing.

But after yesterday's weirdness with Elijah, I am so *not* in the mood. Because while these two are getting ready to have a romantic date night with their boyfriends, I'm getting ready to have a friend date with Elijah.

Which should be fine. It should be great.

I frown down at my yogurt. So why isn't it great?

“Noelle?” Celia says my name in a way that makes me think it's not the first time she's tried to get my attention.

I lift my head to find Celia and Mara staring at me. They're both wearing looks of mild surprise, and there's a little concern there too.

I force a grin. “Sorry. I totally zoned out. What were you saying?”

“Ryan’s splurging on a limo,” Mara obviously repeats herself. “Did you and Elijah wanna come with us?”

“Oh, um...” It’s not difficult to envision the two happy couples tucked into the back of a limo and then...us.

Me and Elijah sitting together like we’re just another couple.

I’m shaking my head before I can come up with a good excuse. “Nah. I don’t think so. Thanks, though.”

“But—” Celia starts.

I pretend I don’t hear her as I grab my bag and shoot to my feet. “I’ve gotta run. I’m falling behind in biology and I want to get there early to ask Mr. Carmichael some questions.”

“Oh. Okay,” Celia says.

Mara’s brows knit together in a frown.

I know I’ve been acting weird lately. They know it. I know it. Elijah cannot have missed how weird I’ve been lately.

But, since it’s kinda all his fault with that whole almost-kiss-that-has-never-been-mentioned, I refuse to worry about him right now.

Mara and Celia on the other hand...

I pause a few feet away from our cafeteria table, feeling like I just kicked two puppies, so I turn back with a wince. “I’m sorry, you guys, I just...I have a lot going on.”

They both nod and then give me understanding smiles.

“If you want to talk...” Mara starts.

“I know where to find you,” I finish with a wink.

They look a little less worried this time when I turn away. And in my defense, I wasn’t lying about being behind in biology. I’m falling behind in all of my classes and if I get through this semester without an F it’ll be a miracle.

I failed my driver’s test.

I wince at the memory as I reach my locker to grab some stuff for my next class.

Why did I tell Elijah that? I mean, I know why. It'd seemed better that he know that humiliating fact rather than believe something even more humiliating.

I sigh, letting my head fall forward until it rests against the locker. So this is what it's come to? I'm debating which of the humiliating truths to spill to my best friend?

Sweet.

If there was ever any doubt that I'm a moron, now he knows I can't even pass my driver's test.

But at least he doesn't think I'm following in my mom's footsteps, right? He doesn't honestly believe I'm...what did he say? Smiling and batting my eyelashes?

I frown down at the contents of my bag before tossing it over my shoulder.

His words still sting even though I know I need to get over it.

He wasn't trying to be hurtful. He probably was just having a bad day. That's the only explanation because I've never seen him like that.

Well, I mean, aside from when he flew off the handle with Brad.

But that was warranted. Sorta.

I shake my head and turn away from the lockers, but find myself cornered by bright pink lipstick and a whole lot of blonde hair.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snarls.

Yes, *snarls*.

"Hello, Pamela." I don't try to sound pleased to see her. It's pretty clear she's not here to compliment my new lip gloss.

"Why did you kiss Dominic?"

I lean back against the lockers with a sigh. Ah, so that's what this is about.

"It was just for the scavenger hunt, Pamela. You can chill."

She looks a little taken aback, and I wonder if she's even playing Elijah's game. I'm guessing not by her confused reaction.

"Elijah added a new challenge," I explain. And this time I try to soften my tone a bit. I'm not a fan of Pamela's...or, I wasn't a fan of her and Heath when they were together.

They were horrible for each other and it was painful to watch them do the on and off thing for so long.

But, for all her faults, I've always felt a little bad for Pamela. Or maybe I just get her in a way that most don't. She's not all bad, just super insecure. Once you see that insecurity and know it's there, it's kinda hard to hate her.

The hallway is slowly starting to fill up with students on their way to the next class, and we're garnering more than our fair share of curious glances.

Pamela's notorious for her attention seeking ways, and I'm guessing every guy watching right now is secretly hoping for a cat fight.

But seriously...not gonna happen.

She shifts, crossing her arms, her anger turning to wariness. "So you're not, like...into him?"

I roll my eyes but I don't answer because, honestly, I *want* to be into Dominic. I'd *love* to suddenly have a crush on him.

I have a feeling my life would be a million times easier if I woke up one morning crushing on the new boy.

But no. Nope. Nada. Asking him to kiss me yesterday had been a mistake for so many reasons. And it had made it abundantly clear that there's absolutely no chemistry between us.

But as Pamela narrows her eyes, waiting for an answer, I don't exactly feel compelled to divulge my deepest, darkest feelings to this chick. "What's it to you?" I say instead. "I thought you two broke up."

Pamela scowls.

I know they did. I was privy to the whole trainwreck of an ending when poor Dominic found out that she hadn't actually broken up with Heath before starting something with him.

I've always felt bad for the way that went down, for Dominic's sake mostly. I mean, Heath and Celia got together as a result, so that's nice for them, but Dominic got cast as the bad guy in a drama he didn't even know was unfolding.

That's another reason I don't just tell Pamela point blank that I have zero interest in the guy. She deserves to stew.

Heck, she deserves a little payback.

"We're taking a break," she says. "But don't you dare try to steal him away, Noelle."

It's hard not to roll my eyes. This girl. She thinks we're all her competition. She's never understood that she's her own worst enemy.

"Dominic's single," I say. "And he's hot, and kind, and an excellent kisser."

Okay, fine, maybe I'm having a little too much fun making her squirm. But seriously. She deserves it.

"Don't even, Noelle." Her eyes get this desperate quality. "You can have any guy you want. Just..." She waves a hand around the hallway like it's a buffet of hot guys for me to choose from. "Just pick one. But not Dominic."

I smile. Bullies. I swear. They're so easy to annoy.

Sure enough, her cheeks turn a splotchy shade of red and that desperation in her eyes turns to anger. "You're going to the dance with Elijah, right?"

My head jerks back a bit. Her comment catches me off guard.

"So?"

Her expression turns smug. "So how about doing us all a favor and just put that poor guy out of his misery already, hmm?"

I feel like she's slapped me. "We're just friends."

“Oh, so you guys aren’t hooking up?”

“No, of course not.”

Her gaze goes past me and I know...I just *know*...he’s there.

“Good, because I’ve heard Jordan’s really into him. And you know they hooked up at his last party, right?”

His last party. Last weekend? After the playoffs?

My stomach sinks. My heart...

My heart freakin’ hurts.

But it shouldn’t. And I refuse to show it.

“So? Your point?” I say. My tone is bored, my expression blank.

I have no reason to be hurt. Elijah can hook up with whoever he wants.

Even if he did try to kiss me earlier that night.

My stomach feels like it’s filled with oily eels. They’re slithering around as I slam my locker shut.

Elijah’s voice behind me isn’t unexpected, but it still makes me stiffen. “Was there something else you wanted, Pamela? Or were you just here to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong? Again.”

Pamela rolls her eyes. “You two are so bizarre.”

I keep my back to Elijah for just a moment longer.

“What do you think, babe?” He slings an arm around my shoulders and I finally turn to face him. “Are we...so bizarre?”

He nails his impersonation so well that I can’t help a smile. The eels in my stomach aren’t gone, though, and I’m desperate for some space.

Which sucks.

I really hate that I’m finding reasons to avoid my best friend these days. He’s the one person I always want to spend time with. And now, I still do...

But I don't.

It's too confusing, and I honestly have places to be so this angst is gonna have to wait.

I slide out from under his arms. "I've gotta get to biology before the bell."

He falls into step beside me.

"I'm heading to the library," he says, when I cast him a questioning look. "I've got study hall and Leah's supposed to help me with my English essay."

I nod. And then...nothing.

I can't think of a single thing to say. Our normal banter feels like a foreign language and all I really want to do is grill him on what Pamela just said.

Had he really hooked up with Jordan that night?

And—way more importantly—had he actually tried to kiss me or was I just imagining things?

The silence between us felt all the louder because of the incessant chatter and laughter going on in the crowded hallway around us.

"So," he finally says, drawing out the word in a way that basically throws a spotlight on our awkward silence.

"So," I agree.

We both try to smile. I give a feeble laugh.

And this...whatever this new thing is between us... is miserable.

"Did Ryan tell you about his limo plan?"

"Mara did."

He nods, tucking his hands into his pockets. "And I'm assuming you said *hell no*."

"Of course."

"Cool. Then I'll pick you up?"

"Yup."

“Cool.” He bobs his head, glancing at the floor.

I nearly lunge for the biology lab door when it comes into view.

“Cool,” I agree.

We’re both lying. Because right now Elijah and I are many things...

But ‘cool’ is not one of them.

TWELVE

Elijah

I FIND Leah in the library, and she knows at a glance that all is not well in my world.

Her smile fades to a frown before I even reach the table she's staked out on the far end of the library, well out of the front desk lady's hearing.

"What's wrong?" she asks, as I sling my backpack down with a thwack.

I shake my head. "Don't wanna talk about it."

"Okay." She says it easily. Too easily.

I pull out my laptop and flip it open, automatically logging in. But once my home screen is up, I find myself staring at it blankly.

I can't focus on anything but the encounter I'd just stumbled upon. Or...okay, fine. Maybe eavesdropped upon.

It's not like I'd meant to creep on Noelle. But I'd seen her talking to Pamela and hung back, waiting for them to be done.

I'm not a fan of Pamela. Never have been, thanks to the way she treated Heath. So I'd hung back, not meaning to eavesdrop but...

Dominic's single. And he's hot, and kind, and an excellent kisser.

My chin drops to my chest as I take in a long inhale. Like some oxygen is gonna magically make this gaping pit in my gut disappear.

“Eli?” Leah’s voice is filled with concern.

It’s only then I realize I’m rubbing my chest, as if I’m in the midst of a heart attack or something.

Or something.

I take another deep breath, but it’s not helping. This isn’t the toxic anger I’d felt when I’d seen her kiss Dominic. Well, maybe it was a little of that. But this was worse. It was anger and frustration, yes, but it was mixed with...

I wince as I suck in another inhale.

Crap, what is this? It feels like my heart’s cracking and my stomach’s getting ready to swallow it whole.

“Wanna talk about it?”

I look up to see Leah leaning across the table, resting on her elbows as she fixes me with a look so understanding and sweet it only makes my chest tighten that much more.

“No,” I practically bark.

She doesn’t seem offended, though. Her head tilts to the side as she arches her eyebrows expectantly.

“I don’t know.” I sigh. And that’s the truth. I *don’t* know.

I have no idea what’s going on here. I don’t know why everything’s changed between me and Noelle, but...

But it has.

I fall forward and my head connects with the wood table with a *thunk*.

I hear a little hiss from Leah as she winces. “That bad, huh?”

I don’t answer.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with you and Noelle acting all weird around each other, would it?”

My head comes flying up as I gape at my cousin. “What?”

She shrugs, her expression one of regret. “It’s true. And I’m not the only one who’s noticed.”

My brows draw down. “It’s that obvious?”

She sighs. “To the people who care about you? Yes.” When I don’t say anything, she shifts in her seat. “Honestly, it wouldn’t be all that noticeable except that you and Noelle are normally so...easy together.” Her smile is small and soft. “I always envied your friendship for that reason. I don’t think I have any friends who I’m so comfortable, and *myself*, around.” Her eyes widen. “Except you, obviously. But that’s different.”

I nod because I get it. Family is one thing, but to have that sort of ease and unconditional love with a friend is rare. And amazing.

And I’m messing it all up.

Her smile gets a little dreamy. “And now I have Ben, obviously.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, taking another deep inhale because apparently some part of me is sure this newfound attraction to Noelle is due to a lack of oxygen.

Except...it’s not newfound.

Not at all. I’ve never *not* been aware of Noelle’s good looks or her sex appeal. Not since I was old enough to understand these things. It’s more like...I was really, really good at ignoring it.

A champ, honestly. If one could go pro at compartmentalizing, I’d have taken the gold medal.

So what’s wrong with me now? Why can’t I go back to ignoring the fact that my best friend has the sort of lips that beg to be kissed and the way she smells makes me want to pull her into my arms, and her skin is so...

I fall back in my seat with a groan. “Something’s wrong with me.”

“What is it?” Leah’s all hopeful. Like maybe she can fix this. “Come on, Eli. You’re always there for me when I need someone. Let me be there for you.”

She sounds so earnest I can’t say no, even if I want to. With a sigh, I let my head fall back so I’m staring up at the stained, popcorned ceiling. I can’t actually maintain eye contact with my sweet little cousin while I say this aloud. “I think I...I kinda...” I clear my throat and shut my eyes. “I kinda have a thing for Noelle.”

Leah’s silence makes me wildly uncomfortable. I can’t believe I’m feeling this way, let alone admitting it aloud. It makes me the worst sort of friend.

It feels like the worst sort of betrayal. I’m not supposed to see her like that.

It changes everything. It’s already made stuff weird between us.

And I hate that.

When I can’t stand it any longer, I open my eyes to see her watching me with so much empathy it hurts.

“And that’s bad?” Her nose wrinkles.

“Yeah, Leah. That’s really bad.”

She shifts in her seat, and I swear I feel Leah’s words brewing before she even starts to speak. “Maybe it’s not so bad,” she starts. “Maybe she feels the same—”

“She doesn’t.”

Leah blinks. “Oh.”

Yeah. Oh.

My insides sink even lower, seeing my own disappointment and hurt reflected back at me in Leah’s gaze.

“Are you sure?” she asks hesitantly.

You’re going to the dance with Elijah, right?

Pamela’s comment in the hallway comes back to me. That whole sickening conversation playing in my mind.

So how about doing us all a favor and just put that poor guy out of his misery already, hmm?

I flinch and Leah arches her brows in question.

“Does everyone know?” I ask.

Seriously, right now, I’m starting to think the entire school knows that I have a crush on my best friend, and I’m the last to find out.

“No,” Leah says quickly. “Honestly, I think most of your friends just want to see you together because they love you both. But it’s not like everyone’s talking about how you have a thing for her or whatever.”

I nod. That would make me feel better if I hadn’t just heard Pamela talking about how I have a thing for Noelle. And telling Noelle as much, right in front of my face.

I groan and scrub a hand over my eyes.

Leah leans forward. “Are you sure Noelle doesn’t feel the same, Elijah?”

We’re just friends.

Noelle’s voice is loud and clear in my head.

Oh, so you guys aren’t hooking up?

No, of course not.

I make a sound that’s alarmingly close to a moan. Leah flinches and glances around to make sure no one’s paying attention. “Have you talked to her about it?”

I’m pretty sure Leah is well aware of the answer, so I just stare at her until she huffs.

“Don’t you think maybe it’s something you should tell her?”

“No.” I shake my head quickly. “All I want is to forget I ever saw her this way. I wish I could rewind until...”

I think back to when this started. To that moment at my party when I almost kissed her? To that encounter in the parking lot when she mentioned me kissing her?

Or before then...

My mind rushes to call up memory after memory. Noelle on my bed in her little black dress. A sleep-tousled Noelle wearing my T-shirt. Noelle cuddling up in my arms while we're watching movies like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Ugh," I grunt. "I don't even know when this started. But I was better off before I realized what this is."

"Are you sure about that?" Leah's voice is so gentle, but her words are probing and I lash out.

"Yes, I'm sure, Leah. I don't want to feel this way. If I could magically make it disappear, I would. But I don't know how to do that. It's not like I can stop being her friend. I don't want to stop being her friend, but..."

I trail off and Leah lets me sit there in silence as I get my thoughts in order.

"What is it?" she finally asks.

I really don't want to talk about this anymore. I hate this conversation, and I can't stand what it's making me realize. But mostly, I hate the regrets that are so strong they feel like they're choking me.

"The worst part is..." I shake my head and exhale roughly. "It's making me a bad friend. I mean..." I squeeze my eyes shut, regret and shame gnawing at my gut. "I'm acting like a jealous idiot, and I know it. But I can't seem to stop myself."

"Because you like her," Leah says softly. "Maybe if you just explain that to her..."

"No. No way." I shake my head, meeting Leah's stare with an outright glare. "And don't you say a word about this to anyone. Please," I add belatedly.

She mimes zipping her lips, and honestly, I'd trust Leah to take any secret to the grave. But it still needed to be said.

"Why won't you tell her?" Leah asks. "Maybe if she knew how you felt..."

“I’ve made things awkward enough as it is. If I tell her... there’s no going back, you know? It’ll always be there between us. And I hate the thought of her walking on eggshells around me or acting different.” I trail off with a shake of my head.

Leah surprises me with a little huff of laughter. “Like she’s not acting different already?”

I blink in confusion.

Leah arches one brow. “You think you’re the only one acting weird?”

I shift in my seat as a mix of hope and terror makes me unable to sit still.

She’s not saying...

Noelle couldn’t...

The possibility is...terrifying. I don’t have any other word for it.

“What if she does feel the same?” Leah asks. “That would change things, right?”

Yes. No. I have no idea.

“What if she doesn’t?” I say instead of answering.

Leah stares at me for a long moment, clearly giving me time to process. And I need time, because I can’t sort out what this mix of emotions is, but it’s overwhelming, to say the least. It’s fear and hope and...

“What the hell would that even look like, anyway?”

Leah doesn’t seem surprised by my admittedly random outburst. Her smile is way too knowing. “I’d think that’s for you and Noelle to figure out.”

“Yeah, but...I don’t think she feels the same.”

I wait for Leah to argue the point. And I’ll admit, I’m more than a little disappointed when she doesn’t.

“Fine.” Her right shoulder hitches. “If you’re not willing to admit how you feel, or ask her how she feels, then what is it

that you want?”

I stare at her with wide eyes. She suddenly sounds much older and wiser than I give her credit for, and her question leaves me uncomfortable. “I want us to go back to how we were.”

She stares at me like she knows I’m lying.

And part of me knows I am. It’s like by admitting how I feel aloud I’ve just opened a can of worms and I don’t know how to put them back.

But the worms need to go back in.

“Okay, then,” Leah says. And if she’s a little disappointed in me she doesn’t say it, but I see it in her eyes. “If that’s what you want, then maybe you need to focus on being a good friend. What does she need from you...as a friend?”

I don’t know how long I sit there turning over her words but when the bell rings, I make no move to leave my seat, and Leah pauses beside me to pat my shoulder. “You’ll figure it out, Elijah. I promise.”

I nod as she leaves.

I’m not sure if Leah means I’ll figure out my feelings or if I’ll figure out how to navigate this new awkwardness between us or...

Or if she means I’ll figure out how to be a good friend.

The first two I still feel clueless on, but the last one...

I think of her expression when Noelle admitted she’d failed her driver’s test. I think of the defensiveness and the defeat.

It makes my heart hurt on her behalf because I know her parents well enough to know that they likely didn’t make her feel any better. Knowing her dad he’d probably just set her up with a credit for a car service and called it good.

I shove my chair back too loudly as I hurry out into the crowded hallway. I pass Ryan who regards me with a frown. “Dude, aren’t you heading to chem with me and Mara?”

I nod, half turning to call back to him as I move in the wrong direction. “Tell the teacher I’ll be there in a minute, okay? I just have to see Mr. Carlson real quick.”

“Mr. Carlson...” Ryan’s frown deepens. “The driver’s ed teacher?”

But I’m already halfway down the hallway. My heart pounds as I half run to his classroom.

I might not know much right now, but in this one little way...

I know exactly what Noelle needs from her friend.

THIRTEEN

Noelle

IT'S Saturday night and Elijah will be here any minute.

I started getting ready hours ago, so theoretically, I should be ready by now.

And yet, I'm still debating shoes.

I hold up two pairs in front of my phone, which is propped up on my dresser. "Red or black?"

Addie's eyes widen in surprise. She's lying on her bed, resting on her elbows, and she's sporting her usual attire of a loose T-shirt and a full, floor-length skirt. "You're asking me for fashion advice?"

I drop the shoes to level my friend with a look. "Celia and Mara are off having a romantic pre-dance dinner, and when I asked my mom's advice on which lipstick I should wear, I was subjected to a lecture on how my legs are my best asset so I should show them off more."

Addie sits up with a gasp. "Is it possible to show more leg without showing...you know...everything?"

I crack up because Addie is so adorably prudish sometimes. "Yes," I say. "This is actually the more conservative of the two dresses I was debating for tonight."

And that debate had waged for the better part of an hour, which is why I'm somehow running late despite prepping for

this stupid dance all day long.

Her eyes widen as she shakes her head. “Well, you look amazing. I mean, you always look amazing, but that dark red with your hair and skin...” She sighs. “You look like a supermodel, Noelle.”

I smile, but it feels forced. Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate the compliment. I’m weirdly nervous for tonight and there’s a reason I’m taking so much time and effort with my appearance.

Look good, feel good, right? My mom taught me that. I’m never more confident and calm than when I feel like I look the part I want to convey.

The problem is, when it comes to tonight...

I don’t know what part I’m playing. Or if I want to even play a part at all.

“Maybe I should call Elijah and tell him I’m bailing.”

The words kinda tumble out of my mouth and Addie gapes at me.

“What? Why? You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” It’s nerves talking, but I can’t stop them. My belly doesn’t just have butterflies buzzing about. It’s like a swarm of locusts in there.

And I hate it. I hate that I’m dreading seeing Elijah.

I hate even more than I can’t wait to see Elijah.

“I hate everything about this.” I’m pacing and poor Addie’s peering at the screen as she tries to keep up with me.

“What do you hate, Noelle?”

“I don’t want to feel this way.” I’m not making sense, but right now I can’t bring myself to care. Because I don’t want to spell this out. Not for Addie and not to myself.

“Are things still weird between you and Elijah?” she asks.

I nod. “And it’s all my fault.”

I'm still cursing myself for that stupid move I'd pulled in the parking lot. I'd treated Elijah like...like a guy. Like some random guy I could manipulate. I'd flirted and I'd seduced and, the worst part was, I'd gotten a thrill from it.

"I'm a jerk, Addie." I turn to face the phone. "I'm the worst sort of friend and I don't know how to face Elijah and..."

I'm breathing too quickly as I watch Addie reaching for her phone. The next time she speaks, her face is closer to the screen and her big eyes are giving me that compassionate look that's going to be my undoing. "You're a great friend, Noelle. To all of us. Including Elijah."

I shake my head because she won't understand.

I barely understand!

All I know is, while some part of me is counting the seconds until he shows up because I hate how we left things and I need to see him again so I can feel all right, another part of me wants to call him and cuss him out. "He kissed Jordan, Addie."

"Um...what?"

Poor Addie looks stricken as she tries to keep up with me. But my mind and my emotions are like a whirling dervish. I can barely keep up with my wild mood swings and racing thoughts. Addie doesn't stand a chance. And yet, I need to talk to someone, and Addie is my best bet.

I'd normally go running to Elijah when I feel out of control like this. When I feel lost and like I don't know which way is up and which is down.

These are the moments I'd show up at Elijah's house, and he'd welcome me in—to sit on his couch or lie on his bed—and he'd let me chill and relax. And he'd make me feel grounded again.

And then, if and when I was good and ready, he'd listen if I wanted to talk.

But I can't talk to him about this, and it's killing me.

“He kissed Jordan,” I say again, like maybe it’ll make more sense if I repeat myself. “After he almost kissed me.”

“Oh,” Addie drawls in a knowing tone.

I’m frowning down at the shoes in my hand. “But maybe he didn’t try to kiss me, you know? Maybe I got it all wrong.”

“And would that be...a good thing?” Addie asks.

“Yes.” I say it quickly, but it doesn’t feel right on my tongue.

“So you’d be cool with him hooking up with Jordan tonight, then.” Addie’s tone is way too mild. “After the dance, I mean.”

I go to speak, but I can’t breathe. There’s a fire in my lungs and in my veins. It’s hurt and it’s...betrayal, at the mere thought of him kissing some other girl tonight.

Of him being with anyone who isn’t me.

I fall onto the edge of my bed with a muffled curse. “I am so screwed.”

Addie sighs. “You are not. You and Elijah are so close... it’s normal for there to be some confusion about the friend zone, you know?”

I glance over at my phone, and I have this horrible, inexplicable urge to cry.

“Oh sweetie,” she says. “I wish I were there to give you a hug.”

I nod. “I wish you were too.”

“You’ll be with friends tonight,” Addie continues. “Talk to Mara and Celia and—”

“And ruin their nights?” I scoff. “I don’t think so. Besides, what’s there to say?”

Addie goes quiet and I feel like a jerk for being so ornery when she’s so sweet.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Maybe you should talk to him,” she says. “To Elijah, I mean.”

The thought of it makes my chest go tight and my lungs threaten to stop working altogether. “No. Nope. No way.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because I can’t lose him.” I hate how desperate I sound.

I despise how desperate I feel. Because I can’t deny the panic that sweeps over me at the thought of ruining my friendship with Elijah. I love all of my friends, but Elijah is my rock.

“Maybe you won’t lose him. Maybe it will make things better.”

I cast the phone a sidelong look. Man, Vince is so lucky he found her. I don’t know many people as optimistic and kindhearted as Addie, and I know she truly believes what she says.

But I don’t think she understands just how much I could mess this up.

I’m not like her. I’m not sweet and naive and trusting. I’m my mother’s daughter and I was raised to play games.

I wouldn’t know how to be me with Elijah if I was...well, *with* Elijah.

And that’s the best case scenario. But the truth of the matter is, he doesn’t see me like that. Maybe he’d tried to kiss me once when he’d had some drinks and emotions were running high, but apparently he also kissed Jordan that night too, so clearly it hadn’t meant anything.

And yeah, for some reason I don’t want to explain, that hurts. It cuts like a knife, if I’m being honest. But it’s the wake up call I need.

I exhale sharply and give my head a little shake as I toss aside the more comfortable black shoes in favor of the wicked red stilettos.

Maybe that's my answer. We're always clear on where we stand with each other when we're hooking up with other people. And maybe that's all I need to get us back on track.

I take a deep breath and come to stand, sliding my feet into the sexy-as-sin heels, and finally feeling like I'm standing on firmer ground. "Thanks for listening, Addie."

"I wish I could be more of a help," she murmurs.

She sounds so glum I have to give her my best reassuring smile. "You did help. I think I know what I need to do."

"Yeah?" She looks so hopeful but my mom interrupts by shouting up the steps that my date's here.

"Gotta go," I say with a too-bright smile. "Wish me luck?"

"Good luck, Noelle."

I turn off my phone and tuck it into my clutch. I don't even peek in the mirror because I've been doing little but checking out my appearance for way too long. But I only just reach my bedroom door when there's a knock.

Pulling it open, I go more than a little breathless at the sight of Elijah in my bedroom doorway, decked out in formal attire.

His eyes widen and he lets out a puff of air as he takes me in the same way I'm giving him a once over. His gazes go dark and distant for a second, but then he blinks and it's gone, and he's meeting my stare with a crooked smile I know well. "You look amazing, Noelle."

"Thanks." And then, with all the awkwardness in the world, I add, "So do you."

If he notices my weirdness, he doesn't let on, nodding instead toward my bed. "Can I come in for a sec?"

I throw open the door and it's only then I realize he's carrying something. A book and some papers.

"What's that?" I ask.

He tosses it all onto the bed and I cross over to look. My heart gives a crazy hiccup as my lips part in surprise. "The

driver's ed textbook?"

I frown over at him, only to find him watching me closely. That glint is back in his eyes but once again it's gone in the blink of an eye.

"What's this for?" I ask.

His smile is small and sweet, and it holds just enough uncertainty to make me feel like the ground is tilting and I'm falling. "This is for you. Er, for us."

"For us," I repeat slowly.

"To study," he says.

"For..."

"For the written test?" His smile grows now, and amusement lights up his eyes.

"You're going to...to help me study?" I barely recognize my voice, and I definitely don't know what to make of this warmth in my belly, spreading up into my chest...

It's making it hard to breathe, so I look down, focusing on the textbook and the other papers. He points to one of them. "These are the guidelines for requesting extra time."

I blink up at him. "What?"

"It's for people who have learning disabilities or...or whatever," he says.

That heat sweeps up into my cheeks now, and I look away.

"Look, lots of people have a hard time with tests," he says. He sounds annoyed and somehow that makes me feel better.

It would be embarrassing and weird if he was pitying me or being condescending. But he's talking to me like I'm being an idiot.

And maybe I am.

"Especially timed tests," he continues. "I talked to Mr. Carlson about it—"

"You talked to Mr. Carlson?"

He ignores me. “For starters, we can request extra time.”

“And if that’s not enough?” My throat feels too tight. “If I still fail?”

He shrugs. “Then we study more and you take it again.” Before I can protest, he continues. “And again. And again. We don’t stop until you pass.”

We.

We don’t stop...

My heart is in my throat now and it’s impossible to speak.

“I was an ass the other day,” he mutters. And I’m positive I’ve never heard him sound so serious. His gaze meets mine. “I’m sorry.”

I nod. I have so much to apologize for too, but I’m not sure I can speak without bursting into tears.

And then my mom’s intruding. “Oh, look at what a beautiful pair you two are.”

My dad’s not far behind her and he’s doing this annoying routine he does with Elijah where he basically sucks up and asks about his parents.

He’d love nothing more than for me to wind up with my super rich best friend, but even he and my mom gave up on that possibility years ago.

Because it’s never going to happen.

Elijah is my *friend*.

I glance down at the textbook as a wave of emotion washes over me.

“You ready, babe?” Elijah asks as he reaches out a hand to me.

I take it, and I refuse to overthink it. I refuse to make things weird.

Elijah is the best friend I could ever ask for, and there’s no way I’m going to ruin that by letting attraction or romance get in the way.

He opens his car door for me and whistles when he catches sight of my shoes. “Those things look lethal.” He wiggles his eyebrows, laughing and showing off his sexy smile.

I mean, smile. Just his normal... smile.

I grin and sink back into the leather of the seat as Elijah walks around the car to the driver’s side. I lift my toes and take in the sexy, sleek lines of my favorite pair of stilettos.

My maneater shoes, Celia once called them.

And she’s right. I do tend to wear them when I’m on a mission to make a guy take notice. And tonight that’s precisely what I mean to do.

I’ll have to let Addie know that our talk helped. Because it helped make one thing abundantly clear.

The best thing I can do to save our friendship?

Find myself another guy.

FOURTEEN

Elijah

I KNOW I'm not seeing things, but that doesn't stop me from double-checking. "Is Noelle seriously throwing herself at Dominic?"

Celia follows my gaze to the dance floor where Noelle is, in fact, throwing herself at Dominic. "I wouldn't say throwing herself..."

"She's definitely flirting," Ryan says.

Mara elbows him. I'm gonna assume that means Mara, at least, is onto the fact that I'm staring and can't stop staring.

But really, what the hell is this? Sure, I know we're here as friends but we're still here together. She's still technically my date.

But you'd never know it by the way she's hanging all over Dominic. Oh, they're not making out...yet. But his arms are around her as they dance way too slowly for the song that's playing.

She's laughing, her head tipped back. And he's grinning down at her. And if she presses herself any closer, they're basically going to be one person.

My lip curls up in a sneer as my hands fist at my sides.

"Uh, Eli..." Heath's next to me and he leans forward a little until he blocks my view of Noelle and Dominic. "You

okay, man?"

I blink, coming back to the moment and realizing that he's staring at me. They all are.

Leah and Ben are dancing, but the rest of my friends are gathered around me and they're studying me with varying degrees of concern and wariness.

"Eli, maybe you should get some air." Mara's brows draw down with worry. Noelle calls this her mom look, and at any other time the thought of that would make me smile. But I am incapable of anything but glowering as I watch my...my date, my friend, my—oh hell. My Noelle—grinding up against some other guy.

Mara must've nudged Ryan again, because he's quick to jump on top of that. "Yeah, man. Let's get out of here."

"Elijah?" Celia says again.

I look over to see all four of them watching me, their concern so obvious it would be funny...if I could laugh.

I force myself to unclench my fists, but then I hear Noelle's laughter and my head feels like it's swimming, as blood rushes to my muscles.

"She's my friend." I bite this out through gritted teeth. It's a reminder to myself, but my friends hear and they're exchanging looks.

"Yeah, she is, man," Heath says slowly, his tone warning. "Noelle's our friend too."

She's my friend. This time I say it to myself. But some part of me is not buying it. And that part of me is primal and unswayable. It knows exactly what Noelle is to me, and it's not a friend.

Well, it is. But she's more than that. She's...she's...

She's mine.

I swallow hard as the caveman thought takes hold and won't let go. When she wraps her arms around Dominic's neck

and they lean in toward each other wearing matchy dopey grins, I can't take it a second longer.

I'm heading toward her before I even mean to act. I'm vaguely aware of my friends trying to stop me. I know I shake off Heath and Ryan when they attempt to grab my arm.

"Dude, be cool, man," Ryan says.

But I am not cool. I am so far from cool.

The dance floor is crowded with students from every grade, but they move out of my way as I stalk toward Noelle in those crazy heels that make her legs longer than ever. Her dress is high-cut and it only rides up higher as she twines her arms tighter around Dominic.

My heart's slamming against its ribcage as I take her in.

In any other circumstances, I'd be struck dumb and rendered motionless by the sight of her. So crazy beautiful. Always. In sweats. In my oversized T-shirts. But right now, she's a mythical creature come to life. She's a Greek goddess in a form-fitting red dress with those dark locks cascading down her back.

Her cheekbones are high, her eyebrows perfectly arched, and her lips so full it's impossible not to fantasize about kissing them.

She's dizzyingly gorgeous and now I don't know if it's jealousy or desire that has me pushing people out of the way to get to her.

She's intimidatingly beautiful if you let yourself see her in that light.

But not to Dominic, apparently. He's having the time of his life holding her in his arms. He has no idea how perfect she is.

Inside and out.

He has no clue what a geek she can be about video games or how ridiculously prideful she is when it comes to asking for help. He's never seen her cry or held her while she pretends everything's fine when it's obviously not.

He's never seen her laugh so hard she's curled up in a silent ball, making cute high-pitched squeaks as she tries to regain her breath.

He doesn't know her.

She's not his to know. Not like that.

Neither of them see me at first, not until I'm right on top of them.

Dominic's eyes widen and he comes to a stop, which has Noelle stopping too.

"Eli?" She's breathless—from dancing or laughing or batting those damn eyelashes of hers, I have no idea.

Eli.

She called me Eli. My jaw clenches so tight I hear my teeth clack together over the sound of the music.

Noelle frowns, her lips pouting a bit as she tries to read my expression. "What are you doing?"

"Claiming a dance with my *date*," I say.

I sound...awful. Rude. The word *date* comes out with a derisive sneer.

I don't sound like me. Noelle blinks, and then her eyes widen with surprise.

"Hey, uh...why don't you calm down, bro." Dominic's looking between the two of us, but I don't look his way.

"What are you doing?" Noelle repeats herself, but this time her voice is low and meant for my ears only.

My nostrils flare and my fists clench as I struggle for calm.

Too late.

"Do, uh...do you two need a minute?" Dominic asks Noelle.

"Yeah. Excuse us." Noelle does not sound amused or apologetic. She doesn't glance at Dominic either, her gaze is still fastened to mine like she can't look away.

I know I can't.

She grabs my arm and yanks. I don't think either of us care much about the looks we get as she storms toward a side exit, hauling me behind her with a surprisingly strong grip.

For a half a second, I find myself marveling at how she is the only girl in the world who can stomp through a crowd wearing heels like that.

But then we're outside, and the early winter wind hits me smack in the face. Noelle doesn't seem to notice the chill as she spins around to face me, eyes blazing. "What. Was. That?"

"What was that?" I repeat, my brows high and my voice louder than intended as I jam a finger back toward the dance floor. "Better question. What was that?"

Her mouth gapes as she sees my anger.

My very real, very unlike me, very jealousy-fueled anger.

"Do you like him?" I demand.

"What?"

"Do. You. Like. Dominic," I grit out.

And *God*. Do you like him? I sound like a tween girl.

Some latecomers pass by in the parking lot and they look our way.

I'm causing a scene. Me. The easygoing, laidback charmer who can laugh at anything, even the fact that his parents didn't know he made the playoffs and that he still has no plan for the future.

I can laugh off anything...but this.

"What is this?" She glares at me. "Are you jealous?"

"Are you avoiding the question?" I shoot back.

Her lips thin as she plants her hands on her hips. A gust of wind hits us and even though she doesn't seem to notice as she glares at me, I see the goosebumps on her arms and curse under my breath. I shrug off my coat.

"What are you doing?"

I wrap it around her shoulders by way of an answer, and I tug the collar shut. And...I don't let go.

I should. But I don't. Instead, I hold her like that. In my coat and mere inches in front of me. She stares at me for a long moment like she's never seen me before.

And maybe she hasn't. Not like this. I can't bring myself to smile or laugh. Because there is every chance I am ruining our friendship, but I can't bring myself to stop it.

I can't let her go back to Dominic without...

Without what?

Kissing her?

Telling her how I feel?

I miss the chance for both because she tugs back and my hands fall away. Her voice is winded when she says, "What are you doing?"

I open my mouth and shut it. I have no plan. I've given this zero thought. I stupidly hoped apologizing and showing her what a good friend I am by offering to help her pass that driver's test would be enough to make things right.

But I did not plan for the moment when my heart took over leaving sense flailing in its wake.

She takes a deep breath and my gaze falls to her mouth as her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

I swallow hard and force my gaze back up to her eyes. But it's too late. I know she's seen my reaction.

She knows. She has to know.

"Were you going to kiss me?" It's a whisper but I hear her.

"No. I..." It's hard not to wince. With a heavy sigh, I run a hand over the back of my head and mumble, "I know we have to talk."

"At the playoffs after-party," she clarifies, and there's frustration and something more in her voice.

I know exactly the moment she's talking about. I've been reliving it every minute, of every day, ever since.

There's a flicker of hurt in her eyes that's so vulnerable it confuses me until I have this memory of Pamela and her big mouth. And all at once I'm blurting out, "I didn't hook up with Jordan."

Her lips part.

"Not ever," I say for good measure because Jordan is one of Pamela's friends and I try to steer clear of that crowd at all costs.

"Okay," she says slowly.

"And not at that party," I add.

Understanding flickers through her gaze, and is that relief I see in her eyes?

Does that mean...

"You didn't answer my question," she says. "Were you going to kiss me?"

Her eyes have gone dark and fierce. Fiery, almost. And for the life of me I don't know what answer she wants to hear. So I give her the truth.

"Yes."

Her nostrils flare, her mouth working to the side. "Why?"

"Why what?" For a moment I'm so caught up in watching her reactions, in letting myself see her like this. Not as Noelle my untouchable friend, but as the girl whose every reaction, every flicker of emotion, and every breath holds me captive.

"Why did you want to kiss me?" She sounds annoyed, and for some reason that makes me laugh.

I let out a huff of laughter, because...seriously? Does she have to ask that?

"Why?" Her tone gets sharp and impatient.

"Because..." I throw my hands up, my mind useless. There are so many reasons, and I can't put a single one into words

right now. So, I settle for, “Because I wanted to. Because you’re beautiful.”

I know I’ve made a mistake the second the words come out of my mouth, flippant and irritated, because I don’t know how she doesn’t understand what I’m feeling.

I’m terrified she doesn’t feel it too.

Her lips quiver and I want to take it back. I’m not sure why what I said was so horrible, but I see her hurt, and I feel it like it’s my own.

“So that’s it.” Her voice quakes as she looks away from me. “You got a little drunk, realized ‘hey, my best friend is a hottie,’ and so you thought you’d make your move?”

I jerk back, more than a little stunned by her harsh accusation. “No, that wasn’t—”

“Just a pretty face, right?” she mutters, crossing her arms and shivering. “What, did you run out of nameless girls from other schools? Was I the only hot girl left who’s not dating one of your friends?”

“Noelle, that’s not what I meant.”

But she’s already brushing past me, shrugging off my jacket as she reaches for the door.

My heart threatens to go with her. Panic has me reaching for her wrist.

She can’t leave like this. We can’t end things like this.

I don’t grip her hard, but she whirls around, her eyes blazing with anger...and pain.

Crap. I did that. But as much as I feel sorry for causing her pain, I’m angry too. She’s pushing me away, and she’s doing it on purpose.

She does this whenever she’s scared or hurt or vulnerable. So instead of letting her go, I pull her closer, wrapping one arm around her waist as I cup her face in my palm, forcing her to meet my gaze.

“I didn’t almost kiss you because you’re hot, Noelle.” It comes out low and gruff. “Although, I’m not gonna deny that I’m attracted to you.”

Her eyes widen and her whole body stiffens.

My heart is pounding like it’s trying to escape, but I’m in it too deep. I’ve gone too far. And holding her like this, I know I can’t go back.

There is no going back.

I lean down, close enough that we’re sharing the same air, and I can read every conflicted, confused emotion in those gorgeous eyes of hers. “I didn’t almost kiss a pretty face or a hot body. I almost kissed *you*. The nerd who quotes bad movies and does terrible impersonations. The badass who’d go to hell and back to protect her friends. The sweetheart who’s not nearly as tough as she lets people believe...”

Her breath catches as my thumb brushes over her parted lips.

“I wanted to kiss *you*, Noelle. I wanted to kiss my best friend.”

Her eyes are wet with tears and I can’t hold back a second longer. I close the distance between us and press my lips to hers.

And then I’m lost, drowning in the taste of her, the feel of her.

I crush her to me as she gasps, but then she’s kissing me back, parting her lips as I tilt my head to deepen the kiss.

The moment she melts against me with a moan, I’m a goner.

And there is no going back.

FIFTEEN

Noelle

I'M FALLING.

I'm tumbling and whirling and...

Elijah is the only thing holding me up, keeping me grounded.

His mouth seems to melt into mine, our bodies coming together like this is what they were made for. Like we've always meant to be this close, to be joined together.

Heat courses through me and I'm hungry for more. My hands feel greedy as I clutch at his shoulders and run my fingers over his arms and his chest. His groan is low and fierce as he pulls me even closer, his arm tight around my waist as his other hand cups my cheek so gently it brings tears to my eyes.

I have no idea what's happening, but for the first time in weeks, my brain has stopped churning and all that's left is sensations.

And it feels good. It feels right. It feels weird and wonderful, familiar and strange.

It feels like I'm kissing the perfect stranger, but also...

It feels like I'm kissing my best friend.

The thought cuts through this heated bliss, past the hum of sparks and chemistry that makes my body feel like it's come to

life for the first time, and through this painfully sweet tension that has my chest in a deathgrip.

My best friend. I am kissing my best friend.

I pull back with a gasp, jerking my hands away from his chest like I just got burnt.

For a long moment we just stare at each other. We're both breathing heavily, and I'm pretty sure the shock I see in his eyes is clearly reflected in mine.

We're both speechless...

Until we're not.

"What the hell—" I start.

At the same time, he mutters, "I can't believe I did that."

And then we're back to silence, but this time it's not a shocked silence, it's awkward.

It is so awkward.

It's the kind of awkward silence that makes me wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole so I don't have to experience it for a second longer.

What am I supposed to say?

I just had the hottest, most intense kiss of my life. And it was with my best friend.

I blink as my mind goes blank. I don't know what to make of it, let alone what to say about it. And then there's all the things he said just before he kissed me.

I wanted to kiss you, Noelle. I wanted to kiss my best friend.

My breathing feels too quick and the oxygen's not getting to my brain.

"Okay, you are clearly freaking out right now," he says.

And he sounds so calm I kinda want to kick him. Instead, I continue to gape at him with wide eyes, my lips still parted like at some point words might come out.

But that would require thought. *Coherent* thought.

That would require me to know what I want to say. And I don't. I don't know anything.

I start to back up, but Elijah stops me. "Don't run away, Noelle..."

"Um, I have to..." I nod toward the gym where our friends are waiting. Our friends.

Our friends!

Suddenly I'm blinking back tears because I'm beginning to realize what happened, and just how much this could ruin everything. "I...I have to go."

"Noelle," he starts.

But like a coward, I run back inside. I forget that I'm wearing his jacket until I'm in the hot, crowded gym that smells faintly of dirty socks and too many bodies dancing.

"Hey!" Celia beams at me, heading over hand-in-hand with Heath.

They look so freakin' happy my heart aches.

"You okay?" Celia gives me a weird smile.

I have no idea what my face is doing right now, but it's making her look worried.

So, I nod. I smile. At least, I hope I do.

Judging by Celia's creased brows, I'm gonna go ahead and say my smile is less than convincing.

"We were wondering where you two ran off to," Heath says. And then he stops talking, and both of their brows arch as they look over my shoulder.

My heart starts to trip and falter. I don't have to turn around to know that Elijah's coming after me. Of course he is. There are some days I think I know Elijah better than I know myself. And he is so not the sort to stand by and let me go if there's something he wants to say.

Elijah doesn't run and hide.

But I do.

The thought isn't exactly heartening. In fact, it kinda makes me want to cry. And the fact that my heart's racing like I'm some scared rabbit fleeing a wolf makes me feel beyond pathetic.

Even so, that's exactly how I feel when I glance over my shoulder to find Elijah stalking toward me, his jaw clenched and his mouth set in a determined line.

"Is everything okay with you two?" Celia asks.

But the way she's asking makes it clear she already knows the answer, so like a wuss I slip off his jacket, hand it to Celia and say, "Can you give this back to him, thanks."

And then I run.

Well...I walk quickly. These heels are no joke, and they don't care that my heart is tripping over itself as I try to get away from...

My best friend.

I wince. What am I doing running from my best friend?

But then again, what is my best friend doing kissing me?

They're both valid questions, really, and it makes me feel slightly better for reacting like a lunatic. I see Mara and Ryan in the crowd, but despite the fact that it's an upbeat song, they're holding each other tight and gazing into each other's eyes.

No matter how desperate I am to escape this dance—and yes, fine, Elijah—I'm not about to interrupt this Hallmark couple moment. But I need to get out of here. My heart's still racing and my lips...

I touch the stupid things because I swear they're still warm and tingly from that kiss.

That kiss!

I shut my eyes for a second, no doubt looking insane to the people trying to dance around me.

But really, that kiss is going to require some major reflection. I need to process what just happened and I can't do that while Elijah's chasing after me and my friends are worrying about me.

And then...there. I spy Dominic off on the sidelines, hands tucked in his pockets as he watches the people dancing.

He looks nice and normal and....safe.

He looks like just another guy at our school and not my best freakin' friend. So I make a beeline toward him and watch with relief when he greets me with a smile.

"Hey. You ran off so quickly I was a little worried," he starts when I reach his side.

"Uh huh. Yeah. About that..." And with that epically awesome transition, I say, "Are you having fun?"

"Um, not really. You?"

"No. I'm not. Any chance you can give me a ride home?" My voice is high and tight, and I can feel how wide and bulgy my eyes are.

I have crazy eyes.

Me. A girl who prides herself on being cool, calm, and above all the stereotypical high school crush nonsense, and I have freakin' crazy eyes because my best friend decided to ignore all the unspoken rules that made our friendship work when he went and kissed me.

Dominic's brows are sky high and it's only then I realize I'm breathing so hard I'm kinda panting.

Awesome. Great.

Nothing to see here, folks, just a massive freakout from yours truly.

"Please?" I add.

"Uh... Yeah. Sure." Dominic starts to scan the crowd. "I'll just let Jaz know. I came here with my sister—" He stops and flashes me a smile that I probably would have found cute under any other circumstances. "I didn't come here *with* my

sister. She's not my date or anything, but I am her ride and..." He goes back to searching for Jazmyn. "Let me just make sure she's...uh-oh."

His gaze locks onto something—or *someone* behind me.

I wince as Dominic's expression turns wary, and then...oh no.

Dominic puffs his chest out and steps around me, placing himself between me and—

"Elijah," Dominic says.

I turn slowly, hating myself for having put either of them into this position.

Damn it, I'd been so close to freedom. But now I'm facing Dominic's broad back as Elijah glares at me over Dominic's shoulder.

"Stop running, Noelle," he says.

Despite my heels, I feel two feet tall. I can't even sputter with self-righteous anger like some part of me wants to.

I am running, and anyone with eyes can see it.

Dominic shifts to block me from view. "Look, man, I don't want to get involved—"

"Then don't." Elijah's voice is devoid of all humor and easygoing charm.

He barely sounds like Elijah...or, at least, the Elijah everyone in this school knows.

But I know him, and I've only seen this side of him on very rare occasions. Like that time his parents bailed on his birthday, or the day he found out that his sweet little cousin was being bullied.

Hearing it now, because of me, makes my heart hurt and my throat feels too tight.

Dominic's trying his best to be calm and reasonable, and I decide right then and there that Dominic is an A-plus guy in my book.

I wish like hell I had a crush on him.

I wish he'd been the one to kiss me outside, and that he was the one to make my heart race and my body melt.

But no. The guy who did all that is exhaling loudly in exasperation as he ignores Dominic and talks to me. "Are you really gonna do this? Are you honestly gonna use another guy to avoid dealing with a problem?"

The words sting, as he knew they would. I glare at Dominic's back before finally tapping him on the shoulder. "It's okay," I mumble. And then, with the best smile I can manage, I move out from behind him and add, "Thank you, though. Seriously. I appreciate it."

Dominic's expression is filled with concern. "No problem. If you're in trouble, or..." He casts Elijah a sidelong look that makes me feel awful. The two of them were kinda friends. Friendly, at least, and now my cowardly actions are putting them at odds.

"It's fine," I say. "Elijah didn't do anything wrong, I'm just..." I don't finish, even though both of them are eyeing me oddly now.

I'm just...what?

I move on. "I came with Elijah so I'm sure he'd be happy to drive me home. Right, Eli?"

His eyes narrow slightly as I use his nickname that feels so weird on my tongue. "Yeah. Sure. I'm ready to leave whenever you are."

I nod and smile, feeling like a bobblehead as I fool no one. "See? We're good." I pat Dominic's arm like that settles matters, then turn on my heel to walk away.

This time I don't run. What would be the point? Instead, I stay one step ahead of Elijah as I lead the way to the side door that opens to the parking lot. That gives me a little more time to get a freakin' grip before we have to have this conversation.

This conversation, which is going to be...what?

My heart does a tap dance against my ribcage. What am I supposed to say?

The truth. A little voice speaks reason, but I push it away.

No way am I going to admit how much that kiss affected me. I'm not sure I want to admit to myself how much I loved the feel of his lips, his touch...

I draw in a sharp breath just as I push through the door to the parking lot.

The sudden silence feels deafening, and neither of us pauses as we head for his car.

"We don't have to leave, you know." He sounds amused, and that annoys the crap out of me.

He is not allowed to be amused by this while I'm freakin' reeling.

"Just take me home," I snap.

His chuckle is low and sends a shiver down my spine.

Crap. I am not supposed to find his laughter a turn on. If anything, I should be annoyed. And I am!

He heads toward the passenger side door, like he's gonna open it for me, which he probably would normally do, actually, but I brush him aside and do it myself. Without a word, he climbs into his seat.

But he doesn't start the car. Not right away. Not even after I've buckled my seat belt.

"What are you waiting for?" I finally ask.

He turns to face me. "We need to talk, Noelle."

I shake my head, that panic from earlier back in full force. "I don't want to."

His gaze holds a world of sympathy and hurt. The mix of the two is more than I can take so I look away. But the only thing to see out the window is the car next to his, and the longer I'm quiet, the guiltier I feel.

"We shouldn't have done that," I say. "It was a mistake."

I glance over but I can't quite meet his eyes, so instead I find myself watching his fingers clench and unclench on the steering wheel.

Dammit. Why does he have to have sexy guy hands?

I've always known he has sexy guy hands, but now I know how they feel, holding me close and cradling my cheek and...

"Crap," I mutter.

"Yeah. That about sums it up."

His wry tone forces out a huff of amusement against my will.

"Look, maybe I should apologize," he starts.

I stiffen. Is that what I want? I don't know.

I don't know anything right now.

"Maybe I should, but I'm not going to," he finishes. He's talking slowly, and I can tell he's thinking this through as he goes. If I were to look up and meet his gaze, I know exactly what I'd see. I know the thoughtful little crease I'd find between his brows and the way his lips purse a little between words.

I know this tone, just like I know this guy.

And the fact that I know what he tastes like, and how it feels to be crushed against him, is more than I can take.

"You don't have to apologize," I say. "But it can't happen again."

He's quiet for way too long. And finally curiosity outweighs this newfound cowardice, and I lift my gaze to meet his.

It's a mistake. His eyes are dark, and filled with so much emotion it steals the air from my lungs.

"I don't know that I can agree to that, Noelle." His voice is so low I can feel the rumble of it in my belly.

My voice shakes. "What are you doing, Elijah?"

He reaches out and I shut my eyes so he can't see what I'm feeling when his hand rests against my cheek again. The heat of it burning my skin makes my exhale come out in a rush.

"I know it's scary," he says.

My eyes fly open and this time I don't even try to hide my panic.

His throat works as he takes it in. "Go out with me."

"What?" I blink, my lips parting.

He wets his lips and his Adam's apple bobs. I can see his quick mind racing as he speaks. "Go out with me. On a date ___"

I open my mouth to protest.

"Just one night out together. One date."

"What? Why?" I sound just as pathetic as I feel. I might not be outright pleading, but I am damn close.

His lips tip up on the side. "I think we can't just...go back, you know?"

Why not? I stop the words with a swallow. I know why not.

"Things have been...weird between us," he says.

He's not asking it as a question, but I nod anyway.

"So maybe this is the next step, you know? Maybe we can make this work."

Fear is like a burst of cold air in my lungs. It floods my veins and makes me shiver. "What if it doesn't work?"

His smile is small and smug, and so very familiar, for a second I forget to be afraid. Because this is Elijah. This is my friend.

What's there to be afraid of?

And that's what his tone says too, when he continues, dropping his hand from my cheek and sounding more sure of himself. "If it doesn't work then we know." He shrugs like it's a no-brainer. Like it's no big deal. "Let's try it once. No

pressure for it to mean anything, just...a night out as...*not* friends.”

A laugh bubbles up that’s more nervous hysteria than amusement. “A night as *not* friends?”

He lifts a shoulder, his lips twitching slightly. “Some might call it a date.”

“A date,” I repeat. “With just us.”

“That’s typically how dates work, yes.” He sounds so calm and cool. If I didn’t know him any better, I’d say he actually was relaxed about the thought of us messing with our friendship.

He starts the car, and doesn’t push the issue. We drive in silence during which I will my mind to work.

But I lost all sense of reason the moment his lips met mine, and so I’m not more sure of anything when he pulls up in front of my house and parks.

“Tomorrow night,” he says.

And I swear it’s like he’s made the decision for us. During any other circumstances, that would annoy me. But right now, I cling to his certainty in lieu of my own.

Elijah is smarter than me, after all. And he definitely seems like he has a plan.

His lips hitch up in that crooked grin that never fails to make my heart clamor. “What do you say, Noelle? Is it a date?”

I hesitate, but only for a second. With a sigh, I reach for the door handle and force a smile. “It’s a date.”

SIXTEEN

Elijah

IT'S A DATE. IT'S A FREAKIN' date. I eye my reflection like maybe something's changed since the last time I looked. It hasn't. I'm still wearing a blue button-down that Leah picked out and my best jeans.

I should not be this nervous. It's so ridiculous. And yet...

My palms are sweaty and I haven't even left to pick her up yet.

I turn to face my cousin. "This is a mistake."

Leah's lying on my bed, and she rolls her eyes yet again. "How many times are we going to go over this?"

"It's too late to cancel, right?"

She laughs. "Seriously, you're worse than my girl friends."

"Leah..."

She laughs. "Okay, okay. One more time, for the record..." She clears her throat and gives me the speech she may or may not have given ten times already today. "This is a good thing. You and Noelle clearly have feelings for each other that you've been ignoring."

"And kissing her..."

"Wasn't a mistake," Leah fills in.

Yeah. We've been over this once or twice...or twenty times.

I'm still not convinced though. I acted impulsively. And in the moment it had felt like...like there was no other option. I'd had to kiss her.

But did I, though? The voice of reason eventually returned and it's not pulling any punches.

In the cold light of day I can see about eighty other ways I could've handled my jealousy.

And yes, I am self-aware enough to admit that I'd been jealous. There's also no way I can deny that the kiss had been amazing. Epic. It hadn't been like any kiss I'd ever experienced.

The world had shifted with that kiss. Stars had realigned and planets had fallen into a new orbit.

And yeah...I'm also self-aware enough to admit that I may be being overly dramatic here.

But that's how it had felt. And so I'd gone with it. I'd embraced the new weird, as it were. I'd shut down the thoughts that said *'Hey, maybe you shouldn't go plunging headfirst into a life-changing situation. Maybe you should stop and think instead.'*

I'd ignored that and let my more primal instincts win out. I'd let desire win out, and now...

Now I was in too deep. It's not just too late to cancel. It's too late to turn back.

That kiss changed things between us, and even though I told Noelle it would just be one date, that we could change our minds and go back to being friends if this failed...

I'm not sure I buy that.

And it's this thought that has a sweat breaking out on my neck and has me scrubbing my palms against my jeans.

I turn to Leah, "I don't date."

Her smile can only be described as condescending. “Yes, I know, my little Casanova. Everyone knows this.”

Including Noelle. I wince and run a hand through my hair. Then I wince again when I realize I just mussed the hair that I’d spent way too long smoothing down and adjusting.

“You’re right. Noelle knows me too well. She knows I don’t do...” I gesture vaguely to myself in the mirror. “I don’t do this. I don’t do *dates*.”

“But she does,” Leah points out.

“Not helping,” I snap.

She smiles.

She’s having way too much fun watching my distress. Since she’s not evil by nature, I’m assuming she thinks I’m overreacting.

Because I am.

But also...*am I?*

“She’s giving me one shot, Leah,” I remind her. “One chance to show her I can be more than a friend.”

Her smile fades. Maybe she’s starting to get it.

One date to show Noelle we could have a romantic future versus a lifetime of evidence proving we’re good as friends.

I throw my hands out wide, my heart racing with every minute that passes, bringing me closer to pickup time.

“I don’t do this!” I say again.

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t do this.” Her tone is gentle, like she’s talking a crazy person off a ledge.

Because metaphorically...she is.

“But I don’t know that I can either,” I shoot back. “There’s a reason I only do hookups.”

Leah presses her lips together. She doesn’t agree or disagree.

“Noelle knows that better than anyone,” I continue. “So who am I trying to fool here, huh?”

Leah has no answer. Her head’s tilted to the side as she studies me, and I’m pretty sure that’s pity I see in her eyes again. “You don’t know that you can’t do relationships, Eli. You’ve never even tried.”

For good reason! I keep that to myself. I don’t have the time to delve into some deep therapy session about my inability to get invested in something as fickle as a high school relationship.

And yet, I open my mouth anyway, and blurt, “I can’t lose my closest friend. I just...can’t.”

Her eyes get suspiciously watery and I turn away, my own chest getting too tight for comfort.

“My friends are my family,” I mutter, my voice too gruff. “I don’t want to mess that up.”

“I know, Eli.” She gets off the bed and wraps her arms around me, pressing her cheek to my chest as she says. “And you won’t. You and Noelle care about each other too much to let that happen.”

I pat her back as she sniffles. Man, how pathetic am I that my little cousin is crying on my behalf? I give a little huff of wry amusement at the thought.

Leah pulls back and looks up at me. “But let me ask you this. Do you want to go back to being just friends with Noelle?” Her gaze is fixed on mine and I can’t look away. “Do you think you can?”

“I...” My mind’s already calling up the memory of that kiss, and just the memory of it feels like it might knock me on my ass. “I don’t know.”

Leah purses her lips, not looking entirely satisfied by that answer. But it’s the best I can do at the moment.

“I should go,” I say, already heading toward the door. “We have reservations.”

Leah’s brows hitch up. “Reservations?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I mean...I need to show her I can do this, right? Be the sort of guy she typically dates?”

Leah’s frown is...not heartening. “I guess...”

“Hey.” I stop and face her in the doorway. “You’re supposed to be my cheerleader here.”

A smile lights up her face and she gives her head a little shake. “Sorry. You’re right. I’m sure wherever you take her will be perfect. Because you two are perfect together.”

Yeah, as friends, I add mentally.

But as a couple?

The word alone makes me squirm. *Couple*.

I try not to think about it as I climb into my car and drive on autopilot to Noelle’s house.

Couple.

Is that what we’d be if tonight goes well?

Is that what I want?

My head fills with images of Ryan and Mara, Celia and Heath, Vincent and Addie...

Is that what *she* wants?

I shake my head as I pull up to her house and let out a sharp exhale. I meet my own gaze in the rearview mirror. “Stop being an idiot.”

My reflection stares back at me unimpressed.

Noelle’s mom answers the door, and judging by the weird way she’s acting, I’d say she knows what’s up. Or at least, she knows enough.

Based on what I know of Noelle’s relationship with her mom, she doesn’t understand the full story, or even most of it.

“Where are you heading tonight?” she asks as she leads the way into the family room.

“Alexander’s.”

“Ooh, the new restaurant that opened in Haverfield?” Her eyes round with pleasure.

Well, at least I’ve managed to impress Noelle’s mom.

Her mom starts talking a mile a minute about the reviews she’s read and what some friend of hers said about the new upscale restaurant two towns over. I can barely hear her over the loud thumping of my heart.

First, because of nerves. Then, because...I see her.

Noelle glides down the staircase behind her mom, and I’m speechless at the sight of her.

I’ve seen her countless times in my life, looking insanely hot in gowns, swimsuits, and just her everyday clothes. But I’ve never seen her like this.

Her hair’s blown out to supermodel perfection and she’s wearing a slinky black dress.

I’ve seen her in that dress....sprawled out on my bed.

I’m choking on my tongue by the time she reaches the ground floor and her gaze meets mine. She’s wearing makeup—which isn’t rare—but she’s never gotten so glammed up for my benefit, and I’m weirdly...humbled.

I’m also still speechless, which makes our initial greeting instantly awkward.

You look amazing, is what I should say.

Gorgeous, I should add with a charming grin.

I know the words to say, and I even know the expressions and inflections to make her smile and maybe even blush...

But what do I do? I stand there like a moron. Silent and tongue-tied until her mom all but shoves us out the door.

I hurry ahead to open the car door for her and she mumbles a thanks as she slips into my car, but she doesn’t meet my gaze.

As I walk around to my side, I can’t shake this feeling that I’ve failed already. Our first meetup as something other than

friends and I botched it.

I take a deep breath before getting into the car. She doesn't look my way. She seems intent on smoothing out some non-existent wrinkle in the miniscule skirt that covers only the very top of her thighs.

Holy crap, her thighs. Her legs.

There is not enough air in the car for the rush of heat that sweeps over me. Out of habit I go to push this awareness aside. I try to think of anything other than the fact that the most beautiful girl in the world is sitting beside me.

On a date.

With me.

I clench the steering wheel just as Noelle finally speaks. "Is this okay?" She gestures to her dress. "You said we were going out for dinner but I didn't know..."

"It's perfect," I say.

Her gaze flits to mine and then she looks away again. But not before I see a world of wariness in her eyes. More trepidation and unease than I can take.

This...is wrong.

It feels off.

I don't even know what's so wrong about it, but this is not us.

"So," I say suddenly, just needing to cut this silence as I put the car in gear. "How was your day?"

It sounds so awkward and forced and...like how my dad makes small talk with the housekeeper. I inwardly wince and curse myself.

"Um, fine. Thanks." After a beat, she adds, "You?"

"Good. It was..." I think of my day which was spent scrambling to make a plan for tonight and replaying our kiss from the night before, over and over and over again. "It was good."

“That’s...good,” she echoes.

“Yeah. Good.”

Oh my God, I need to stop saying the word ‘good.’

This is not good. This is bad. This is very bad.

Another silence falls, this one thicker, heavier, and about twenty times more awkward than the last.

And that’s when I realize the fatal flaw in my big plan for the night. The restaurant is an hour away.

My palms start to sweat again as I head toward the highway. Out of the corner of my eye I see Noelle clasping her hands together in her lap.

We have an hour ahead of us...and I can’t think of a single thing to say.

I draw in a deep breath as I reach for the radio knob.

Oh yeah, this is bad. This is very, very bad.

SEVENTEEN

Noelle

I'M IN HELL.

I take a miniscule bite of the world's smallest piece of meat, and force another smile for Elijah's benefit.

The slow classical song that plays beneath the clatter of silverware and the murmur of voices is what I choose to focus on.

It's better than obsessing over the unbreachable silence that seems to have trapped us in this "prison of awkward."

"How's the chicken?" Elijah asks.

And I swear, this is the same tone he uses when he comes with me to visit my grandma at the nursing home. It's overly polite and painfully charming and...

I hate it.

I hate everything about this date, but I especially hate that tone of voice.

And yet, I nod and smile like an idiot. "Good. Great!"

Great. Just great. Everything's great.

I stick another tiny morsel in my mouth and pretend to take an interest in the comings and goings of the patrons around us.

Patrons who are approximately three times older than us. Old married couples and friend groups who no doubt came to

this stuffy, fancy restaurant after playing a rousing round of bridge.

Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against old people. It's just...

What are we doing here? This is the kind of place Brad would've taken me. It's the sort of place lawyers go to wine and dine clients or to impress their boss's daughters.

It's not the kind of place two high schoolers go to hang.

But it's oddly sweet that Elijah is doing this for me. He went to the trouble of getting a reservation and making this plan for tonight, so I'm determined to go along with it with as much grace as I can muster.

I'm trying. I really am. It's not my fault my mind is blank. Every time I open my mouth to say anything, I realize how lame it'll sound and stop.

I feel like we've established some unspoken rule that we won't talk about our friends. That would be too....friend-like, right?

Am I allowed to talk about dumb movies? Or is that a turn off on date night?

And good God are we really the kind of people who have *date nights*?

I set my fork down because my thoughts are spiraling and my stomach's starting to churn.

"So..." I say.

Elijah's brows arch and his expression is way too eager. Almost desperate.

I know he feels it too, this awful awkwardness that's making us both act so weird. I want to make a joke about it, but I don't want to hurt his feelings.

Worse, I don't think I can make a joke, because this isn't laughable. Honestly, it's taking everything in me not to cry.

At his expectant look, my mind goes blank again, and I have to scramble. "Have you, um...have you thought any

more about what college you'll apply to?"

He stares at me in surprise for a moment and I feel my cheeks start to burn.

If he's talking to me like I'm my grandma, then I'm talking to him like I'm his guidance counselor. Which is...not better. At all.

He clears his throat. "Not yet. I'm still...weighing my options."

I nod. And that's all I got. A nod.

"You?" he says with that same overly polite tone.

"Oh, um..." I shake my head, years of mortification piling on top of the mountain of sadness that's building inside me.

What have we done?

I'm sitting across from my best friend and he might as well be a stranger.

I knew this would happen. I knew it.

He's waiting for an answer so I blurt out the truth. "I don't know. I don't even know if I can get into college."

He looks stricken again.

And I am ruining this night for him. He brought me to this fancypants, exclusive, stupidly expensive restaurant to try and have some elegant, romantic evening, and I'm ruining everything because I don't know how to be this person.

Not with him.

With a guy like Brad? Yes. All day long. I'd be flirting and laughing and making small talk like a freakin' champ.

But I don't know how to be that girl with my oldest friend. It'd be like putting on a costume and bursting into a tap dance routine.

"You can get into college," he starts.

And that's it. That's my breaking point. "I don't want to talk about colleges," I practically snap.

He blinks and I feel like an ass.

I clear my throat and force a smile. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, it’s fine, it’s cool.”

It’s not cool. I’m not cool.

This is not cool.

I jump in my seat when the waiter arrives beside us and takes my plate. “Would you like to see a dessert menu?”

“No!” It bursts out of me too loudly and too quickly. “Thank you,” I add with a tepid smile.

Elijah hands over a card and I make an excuse about needing the restroom to avoid having to sit there in silence while we wait for the card to come back to us.

I stare at my reflection for a long while in the bathroom, willing myself not to cry.

It’s fine. It’ll be fine.

We said one date, right? If it doesn’t work, we’ll just...go back to how we were.

I clutch the edge of the bathroom’s counter as I lean over it and squeeze my eyes shut. I will not cry on my date with Elijah.

Once I start I won’t be able to stop.

But my heart still feels like it’s breaking in two as I rejoin him with a smile and we head out to his car. The drive home looms ahead of me. Way too much time to sit in silence.

Way too much time to stew over what we’ve done and how badly we’ve messed up.

But maybe not forever, right? We can go back.

That’s my hope when he pulls up to my house to drop me off.

“Noelle,” he starts.

I shake my head. “Can we...not?”

His gaze is dark and serious, and when it dips to my lips, I pull back. It's simple self-protection, that's all. I don't know if I'll be able to say what I have to say if he kisses me again.

"I appreciate what you did for me tonight." I say the words I've been mentally rehearsing for the last hour. "But I don't think this is going to work."

He doesn't disagree.

Of course, he doesn't agree either.

I force myself to meet his gaze as I hurry on. "I need you too much as a friend, Elijah."

He nods, the movement jerky as his throat works.

"Can we..." I reach out a hand for his, but then drop it. I don't want to send mixed signals, and any form of touching right now feels like it'd be crossing some line. "You said we'd try it once, right? And if it didn't work we'd go back..."

"You want to go back." His tone is flat, and I feel like there's a hint of bitterness or cynicism, slight and soft but there, edging his tone.

I swallow hard. Oddly enough, I'll happily take a jaded, irritated Elijah over the too-polite one I'd spent the evening with.

"I don't want to ruin our friendship," I say.

Too late, a little voice whispers.

I try to shush it but I swear Elijah hears it too because there's a sadness to his gaze. A resignation that makes my heart topple and fall.

"Yeah, sure," he finally murmurs, his smile strained. "It was worth a shot, right?"

"Yeah. Totally," I lie.

Was it worth it to mess up what we have?

What we *had*?

The thought makes my eyes sting and I reach for the door handle. "Thanks for a great dinner, Elijah."

“Anytime. ‘Night, Noelle.”

“Good night.”

I practically run into my house and I race up to my bedroom so I don’t have to talk to my parents.

I’m out of breath as I shut the door behind me. I fall back against it with a little sob.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I no doubt smear my makeup as I try to pull it together. But I’ve been holding back tears all night...maybe all day. And now there’s no stopping this stream of anguish as I cry for the friendship I fear is gone.

“We ruined everything,” I whisper to the empty room.

But the worst part is, right now there’s only one person I want to turn to for comfort. If these were any other circumstances I’d be running to Elijah’s house right now to tell him all about my horrible date. It’d be his arms I’d throw myself into so he could comfort me while I cry over the friendship I’d broken with a stupid kiss.

But I can’t go to Elijah, obviously, so I kick off my heels and climb onto my bed. And that’s when I see the driver’s ed manuals he’d left for me.

The tears I’d been trying to stop come harder and faster until I’m all out sobbing on my bed.

I miss my friend. And I don’t know if I’ll ever get him back.

EIGHTEEN

Elijah

THERE'S a party going on around me, but I'm lost in my own world of misery.

"Dude, what's up with you?" Ryan falls onto the couch beside me in the rec room, and I shake my head to try and snap out of it.

"What?"

Ryan's not a subtle guy. He's giving me a look that says I've lost it. Which...I have.

The rest of our friends, including most of the football team and all of their girlfriends are enjoying the perks that come with being an only child with too much guilt money on his hands.

But Noelle's not here, and I am an idiot for thinking she'd show.

We parted ways last weekend being all, 'yeah, great, we'll just go back to being friends.'

But did either of us actually believe that?

"Seriously, man, you're bringing *me* down with this whole brooding routine," Ryan says, clapping a hand on my shoulder to get my attention. "And don't get me started on the girls. If you don't talk to me, you're gonna get an intervention from

Mara and Celia. They'll probably FaceTime Addie in..." He arches his brows. "It'll be a whole thing."

"Your point?" My tone is less than gracious. But I'm really not in the mood for Ryan's upbeat attitude right now. I was doing just fine brooding on my own.

"Dude. Whatever went down between you and Noelle—"

"What'd she say?" My head snaps up and I look over to see him staring at me with wide eyes.

"Whoa. Uh..." He shakes his head, his expression softening with a wince. "Sorry, man. She didn't say anything. Not to me. Not to Mara or Celia either, so far as I know."

I swallow hard and go back to staring at the TV, which is...

Blank.

There's absolutely nothing playing on the screen right now, and I don't know how long I've been sitting here staring at it.

I scrub a hand over my face. Jeez. No wonder my friends are worried.

"Look, it doesn't take a genius to see that something happened between you two," Ryan continues. "I'm not exactly observant when it comes to this stuff, and even I could sense the weirdness between you and Noelle at the dance."

I glower at him. "Are you trying to help right now? Because this doesn't feel like helping."

Ryan sinks back into the couch with a sigh. "We gave you two space all week, man."

I roll my eyes, but I know he's right. All week Noelle and I have been walking on eggshells around each other. If we're even in the same room.

I swear, Noelle has made a freakin' art out of avoiding me. I don't know where she's been hiding or running off to between classes and throughout lunch, but she's really missed her calling as a magician. Houdini's got nothing on her.

“Wanna tell me what’s going on?” Ryan gives me a pointed look.

I reply with a side eye glare, and he has the good grace to flinch.

“Yeah, okay. I know talking about this stuff isn’t really our thing,” he starts.

“But Mara put you up to it,” I finish.

His grin is a little sheepish as he shrugs. “She’s worried.” After a beat, he gives me a shove and adds, “We all are. You and Noelle, you’re like...”

I glance over when he pauses. His face is screwed up as though he’s searching for the right words.

“You two are like the hub of our friend group, you know?”

I give a snort of amusement. “If by that you mean, I’m the one who hosts our parties and Noelle’s the one who makes them fun—”

“No, man.” Ryan looks a little offended and I glance away. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

I hadn’t meant for that to sound so jaded, but there’s some truth to it and we all know it. I love my friends, and I know they care about me. But would we all hang out so much if I wasn’t the one with the ‘fun’ parents who let us do whatever we wanted?

Doubt it.

And Noelle might not talk about it, but I know she wonders at times if she’d be so popular if she wasn’t a freakin’ supermodel in the making.

So yeah, maybe I’m feeling a little jaded right now, and I don’t feel guilty enough to take it back.

Ryan and I fall into a tense silence.

“Look, dude,” Ryan finally says with an exasperated huff. “We care about you both. If you two got into a fight—”

“We didn’t.” He waits me out until finally I clear my throat. “I kissed her.”

“What?” Mara’s voice on my other side has me stiffening.

I look over to see her and Celia to my right while Heath’s come up behind the couch.

Wonderful. Awesome. Now our school’s two perfect couples can hear how badly I botched things.

Leah’s on the other side of the room hanging out with Ben and some of his nerdy bros but she looks my way with a sympathetic smile. She can’t possibly hear what we’re talking about, but I’m sure she knows.

I can practically feel her urging me to open up about it. To share my freakin’ feelings.

With a sigh, I spill the story, all about how I kissed Noelle, how I took her out....how I totally trashed the best friendship I’ve ever had.

“But you guys are so good together,” Celia says when I finish, her brow furrowed.

“I can’t believe she didn’t tell us,” Mara mutters. I feel a pang of guilt until Mara adds, “But I’m glad you did. Now we can be there for her whether she likes it or not.”

At Mara’s look of determination, I almost feel sorry for Noelle. But also...I’m glad. No, I’m relieved that Noelle will have a friend to talk to.

I know she’s suffering just as much as I am with all this and I also know Noelle would be the last person to ask for help dealing.

She’s got more pride than anyone I know. She’d rather eat glass than admit that maybe she needs help to pass tests. So yeah, maybe it’s for the best that I’m all but siccing Mara on her.

I don’t know where she is tonight, but I hate that she’s not here. It feels wrong.

I miss her.

I freakin' miss my best friend. And I'm so furious with myself for ruining things between us I can't take it any longer.

"I wish I could turn back time," I groan, rubbing my eyes which are gritty from lack of sleep.

"You couldn't have avoided it forever," Mara says, patting my knee. "It's obvious to anyone with eyes and ears that you guys have feelings for each other."

"Yeah," I mumble, my tone turning sharp and bitter once more. "Friend feelings. Platonic feelings."

Heath surprises me with a muffled laugh. Celia looks apologetic as she starts to crack up too. Ryan and Mara don't try to hide their amusement.

"What's so funny?"

Leah's joining us and she shakes her head at me like I'm so adorably dumb she doesn't know what to do with me. "You guys like each other, Eli. It's what I've been telling you all along."

Their amusement makes me stiffen. I'm not nearly as prideful as Noelle, but this is so not the time to be laughing at me. "Yeah, well, try telling that to Noelle," I finally sputter.

As far as comebacks go, it's a lame one. Particularly because a little part of me means it. I wish like hell that Mara or Celia would stage an intervention with Noelle instead of me. I'd kill to have one of them inform her that she likes me as more than just a friend.

But they can't force her to like me, just like I couldn't make her see me as a date rather than her buddy.

My head falls back with a groan. "I messed up, you guys."

They all stop laughing at that.

"You didn't," Celia insists. "You told her how you feel and that's amazing."

I stare up at the ceiling, her words niggling and putting me on edge.

Did I, though? Did I tell her how I feel?

I tried to show her, but... Is that the same thing?

Or did I halfass it to avoid the sting of the inevitable rejection?

Ugh. This train of thought is not helping.

“Why was the date so bad?” Heath asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. It was, it was just...awful. I was trying to treat it like a date, you know? I was trying to show her this other side of me. Of us. But it was terrible. It wasn’t *us*, you know? It felt like we were strangers.”

They all fall silent and I heave another sigh.

“I don’t know how to be her friend and...not her friend.” I hear myself and roll my eyes. “That makes no sense.”

“No, it does,” Mara says slowly.

“It totally does,” Ryan adds. “You two are such good friends that you’ve skipped over all the get-to-know-you stuff, right?”

“Maybe you should try again, but this time...” Leah hesitates. “Just be yourself. Don’t put so much pressure around it. Show her you can be friends and also...more than friends.”

I stare at her for a long moment. That’s what I want, but it’s not that easy. “If it’s even a little one-sided, then it’s doomed to fail.”

“What if it’s not one-sided?” Heath asks.

I swallow hard, afraid to even hope anymore after the way things ended the other night.

“I don’t know,” I say. It’s a lame answer and the coward’s way out, but it’s the best I can manage. “All I know is, I want my friend back more than anything. I need her as my friend. That’s all that matters right now.”

Mara’s staring down at her phone with arched brows and a funny little smile. “Well, now’s as good a time as any to let her know that you’re still here for her.”

She shows me her phone and it's a text from Noelle that makes my heart ache and my blood turn hot with anger.

NOELLE: *Any chance you can pick me up? I'm on a date from hell.*

I'M off the couch and heading toward the door before I can think it through. "Text her back that a ride's on the way," I say. "Then text me the address."

"Uh...okay." Mara's thumbs are already flying over her phone screen.

And I'm already heading to my car. I'm just starting the engine when Mara's text comes in.

My heart's pounding, and I can't deny it's jealousy.

She's on a date? Seriously? But the jealousy turns to worry and a whole other form of rage as I start to wonder what a 'date from hell' means, exactly.

Then that worry turns to a jolt of fear when I see the address Mara texted me.

The sheriff's office. Noelle is at the freakin' sheriff's office.

NINETEEN

Noelle

THE DEPUTY with a handlebar mustache might be young, but he's still way too old to be hitting on me.

But that's exactly what he's doing. His eyes won't stop drifting down to my hemline, but I refuse to tug down the skirt. A: because it's already tugged down as low as it'll go, and B: I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he's making my skin crawl.

I keep my face expressionless as I answer him for the third time. "I told you. A friend is coming to pick me up."

"What about your little boyfriend?" His lips curl up in a mocking smirk.

He's not my boyfriend. I don't give him that satisfaction, either. "His parents know he's here." I lift a shoulder. "He's not my responsibility."

The deputy smirks and his attention falls on someone behind me. "She's a cold one, huh?" To me, he adds, "This your ride?"

I turn, expecting to see Mara, words of gratitude and reassurance on my tongue because Mara is nothing if not a maternal worrywart. But it's not Mara behind me, it's...

"Elijah?" It comes out strangled and when Elijah's gaze meets mine, there's not a hint of humor, not a flicker of his

typical easygoing charm.

He's all grim lines and terrifying determination as he directs his attention to the deputy. "Are you done here?"

I don't wait for the deputy to respond. I'm already jumping out of my seat. "We're done."

I refuse to turn and say goodbye to the creepy deputy, and I don't even pause for Elijah. I head straight for the front doors, and don't stop until I'm outside, the cold air nipping at my skin.

I draw in a deep breath as Elijah drapes his jacket over my shoulders.

I so want to shrug it off and say I don't need it, but I'm freezing so I burrow into it. "Thanks."

We're both silent as we head to his car. "You didn't have to ___"

"Don't." He cuts me off, opening the passenger door for me, then slamming it shut once I'm tucked inside his car.

I'm a little freaked out by how serious he's being. I watch him stalk around the car then wrench his own door open before slamming that shut too.

I let a beat of thick silence pass before murmuring, "I could've called a car if—"

"Stop." He turns to face me, one hand on the wheel. "Are you hurt? Did he..." His jaw works. "Did he hurt you?"

A shiver races through me at the unexpected fire in his eyes.

"No," I whisper. "He didn't hurt me."

He nods and then starts the car. "What happened?"

I wet my lips, then turn to face the front. My insides feel like they've been scorched and all that's left is ash. I am the worst sort of idiot to think that going out with another guy would help...this.

Whatever this is.

“Noelle,” he says. “Why were you at the sheriff’s office?”

I take a deep breath. “He’d been drinking. My date. Before he came to pick me up. I guess there was a game at his school —”

“His school.”

“His college,” I say.

“Right.”

I don’t miss the harshness of his voice or the way there’s a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“I didn’t realize he’d been drinking until...until it was too late.” I try to sound cool, but there’s a tremble in my voice and he doesn’t miss it.

The look Elijah cuts in my direction...he doesn’t miss a thing. “You okay?”

His tone is gentler this time. Gruffer. He sounds like he’s still angry but doesn’t want to scare me.

God, I love this guy.

The thought cuts through the fog I’ve been in ever since we got pulled over, and it hits me like a splash of cold water.

Like a friend, I mentally amend. As if anyone but me can hear my thoughts. As if it matters now anyway after the way I ended things.

I look out the window to hide a fresh wave of emotions.

His hand covers mine in my lap and for a long while neither of us says anything. Part of me is waiting for more questions to start up.

Who’s the guy? Where were you headed?

Why the heck were you out with another guy?

I start to shake with that thought. Why *was* I with another guy? Why wasn’t I safe and warm and laughing with *this* guy?

“Was this one of your parent’s picks?” He asks it casually like he doesn’t really care.

Whether he does or not, the sound of that tone is like a sharp prick against my skin.

“No,” I murmur. “I’m the only one responsible for this bad decision. Unfortunately.” I try for rueful amusement, but it falls flat in the silence between us.

I shift in my seat.

“So how’d you end up at the sheriff’s?”

“Oh, um...” I wince at the memory of realizing too late how drunk Michael was. “He didn’t seem that messed up at first, but once we hit the highway...” I give a little shudder and Elijah reaches forward to turn on the heat.

“Thanks,” I say.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah. I’m just grateful a deputy spotted his crazy driving and pulled us over.”

He’s quiet for a long moment and I wish I knew what he was thinking. “Do you...want to go home or...”

I flinch before I can stop myself. “Not really.”

That’s why I didn’t call for a car service in the first place. My dad would know that I’d bailed early and there’d be questions I didn’t want to answer.

“You can come over.” The stilted way he says it makes me want to cry. One month ago, it wouldn’t have even been a question. Elijah’s house was a given.

But now...

“That’s okay,” I say.

And yeah, I sound just as awkward.

Out of the corner of my eye I see his hands shift on the wheel. “Mara and the others are all there.”

So we won’t be alone. That’s what he means. My heart is sinking hard and fast with each passing minute.

I can’t do a night of...this. And I have no desire to face any more well-intentioned questions or not-so-subtle looks

behind my back from my friends.

“I’ll go home,” I say. “But...thanks.”

He’s quiet for so long I think the conversation’s over. But as he turns right, heading toward my house, he says, “Because you think I’m gonna make a move?”

“No, because...” I trail off, my lips still parted.

Because I’d want you to.

I swallow hard as that harsh truth lands like a blow. If he were cuddled up next to me on the couch or on his bed like we’ve done so many times before...

My heart slams against its cage at the thought, and warmth spreads through my veins and into my limbs making me feel heavy and needy and...rattled..

My senses are fuzzy just thinking about being that close to him. There’s no way I wouldn’t reach for him. No way I wouldn’t say something I can’t take back.

“Fine,” he clips. “I get it.”

I blink at the resignation in his tone and replay what he’d said. What I’d said...

What I hadn’t said.

“No, it’s not that.” I shake my head. “I’m not...I’m not worried about that.”

I look over and he casts me a quick, searching look.

“I just...” I throw my hands up as I try to explain. “I want things to go back to how they were.”

It’s the wrong thing to say and I can see it in his face, in his eyes, in the way his hands clench on the steering wheel.

“I want us to go back to before,” I say again, as if I really mean it.

And I do...

Don’t I?

I turn to face straight ahead. “Or maybe...maybe I want it all, but I can’t...I can’t have that.”

“What do you mean?” His voice is low and he doesn’t try to hide his frustration.

I open my mouth and close it. I shouldn’t have said anything at all. But I’ve said too much and now I have to figure out how to explain without leading him on or hurting his feelings.

I wet my lips and swallow convulsively as my thoughts flit about from one dangerous thought to another.

Trying to explain is like walking through a minefield. One wrong move and I’ll destroy our friendship for good.

“I don’t want to end up like my mom!” I blurt.

It sounds so ridiculous I think we both blink in shock.

I feel his gaze on my face as he glances over, and after a beat, he draws out the word, “Okaaaay.”

“I mean...” Heat floods my cheeks and guilt nips at my insides. “I love my mom, but she’s content to let guys just... take care of her. She’s actually proud of the fact that she’s a trophy wife and she thinks I should aim to follow in her footsteps.”

I can’t even look at Elijah right now because it’s humiliating to admit any of this aloud. I mean...I don’t think any of it is news to him. He’s known me forever. My family too. But it’s still kinda the worst to have to admit that your parents don’t think you’re cut out for anything more than looking good on some guy’s arm.

“And so you went out with some idiotic frat boy who might have gotten you killed to...what?” He spears me with a glance. “To prove them right?”

My lips part in shock at his sharp tone. “No, I...no. I only went out with him to...”

To get over you.

To forget about our kiss.

“To what, Noelle?”

I swallow hard...and wuss out. “To distract myself, I guess.”

His expression is blank when he meets mine. “Uh huh.”

I look away. “But my point is...I can’t not be friends with you, Elijah. I need you in my life and I can’t be that girl with you—”

“What girl?”

Tears are stinging my eyes because Elijah always knows without me having to say.

So, why is he making me say this?

“I can’t be a...a girlfriend. Or, like...romantic or whatever. I don’t know how. It’s like there’s two of me, you know? There’s the me *you* know. The friend me. And then there’s my mother’s daughter. And that’s how I am with guys.”

I’m babbling now and I’m fully aware of the intensity of his stare once he pulls over in front of my house and parks the car.

“And how are you with guys?” He sounds confused, and that kills me.

I feel smaller than small inside, and that’s not how I ever feel around this guy. I’ve never in my life felt so shallow and ridiculous and...

And I really am my mother’s daughter.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “It’s just...no one expects anything from me, you know?”

The silence feels like an actual weight, invisible but unavoidable as it presses down on my shoulders and makes my body feel like it’s made of lead.

I finally turn to face him and see his brows knitted, his eyes narrowed. He’s studying me like he stares at his phone when he’s working on one of his apps.

“You’re smart,” I say. Because apparently my shake up in the car earlier has rattled my brain and is making all kinds of stupid truths tumble out of my mouth.”You create apps for fun.” I let out a desperate little laugh. “You can do anything. Go anywhere.”

“And you think you can’t?”

“I...” I can’t say this truth aloud. “No one expects me to. No one expects anything from me but a pretty face.”

He doesn’t argue, and his silence hurts.

“And...and I can’t *not* be friends with you,” I barrel ahead. “Because you are my favorite person in the world. And I don’t feel dumb or less than when I’m with you. And I don’t know how to do anything but be friends. Not with anyone, not for real. But definitely not with you.”

When I’m done, all I can hear is my breathing. I sound like I just ran laps or something because it’s harsh and uneven. I go to reach for the door handle, but he stops me with a hand on my knee.

“Noelle, wait.”

I freeze.

No...I burn.

I can’t move, but I am keenly aware of the heat of his hand on my leg, of the warmth that flows from him and makes me want to turn and burrow into his strength.

But I can’t bring myself to turn and face him because I’ve never been more exposed. I’ve been naked and skinny dipping and felt less exposed than this.

After a moment when he apparently realizes I’m not turning around, he says, “If you don’t want to be like your mom, then don’t be like her.”

I frown, slowly looking over my shoulder. “I am like her ___”

“No. You’re not. I love your mom, but you’re nothing like her. You’ve never intentionally treated guys like they’re

stepping stones. And you've never used your beauty or your sexuality to get your way."

"That's not true," I say, spinning to face him. The bitter truth of it burns on its way out of my mouth. "I use it all the time with guys and you've even called me out on it." I arch my brows. "My uncanny ability to get a ride home when it's cold? Being given credit for scavenger hunt wins that I barely participate in? You know me. I may not always mean to, but I have a power when it comes to my looks. Just like my mom. I just... I wish that wasn't all I had."

His fingers touch my chin, and he turns my face until I'm looking at him. "It doesn't have to be. That's not you. You don't have to be that way."

I shake my head but he doesn't let go. "You just think that because I'm not like that around our friends. I'm not like that with you."

My mind instantly calls up that moment in the parking lot when I'd challenged him to a kiss. I'd done that. I'd gone on a weird power trip. I'd seen his attraction and...and I'd liked it.

I'd used it to win a stupid argument and make my petty self feel better.

I jerk my head away this time, and he lets me go. But just as I go to reach for the door handle, his voice stops me, gruff and uneven. "You say no one expects anything from you but a pretty face?"

I can't move. There's so much emotion in his voice I can't help but turn back and sneak a look at his expression.

His jaw works and his eyes flash. "I expect everything from you," he growls. "You are the only one of my friends who I expect to show up even when I'm not throwing a party. You're the one I expect to call me out when I go too far. You're the one I expect to be there when Leah's off with Ben at college and the rest of our friends are busy chasing their dreams. *You're* the one I expect to see at my side."

I am struck dumb at the intensity in his voice, at the ferocity in his gaze.

He takes one look at my wide-eyed surprise and huffs in exasperation, then runs a hand through his hair. “If you don’t want to be your mom, Noelle, then don’t act like her.”

He’s said that before and he’s saying it again like it’s common sense. And...

Maybe it is. Maybe it’s that simple. But right now, I don’t see it. It’s a lifetime of thinking and conditioning that I can’t just flip on its head.

“I have to go.” I whisper it, but I know he hears me.

He doesn’t try to stop me, and this time when I walk away from him, I wish he would.

I wish more than anything that I hadn’t left the car. That I’d turned toward him instead.

That I’d kissed Elijah until all the rest of my doubts and indecision disappeared.

TWENTY

Elijah

IF I THOUGHT things would be different between us come Monday, I was wrong.

We might've had a moment in the car the other night, but she's back to ignoring me. Running from me. At least now I guess I know why.

But by Thursday, I am thoroughly out of patience. I've had days to process what she said, to play over that conversation, as well as all the other things she's said over the years to clarify her doubts and insecurities even more.

So now at least I get why she's so freaked at the thought of us taking things to a new level. But knowing...that kinda makes it worse. How am I supposed to combat all her mom's crazy, toxic thinking? I always knew her parents were messed up in that regard. I mean, seriously. Who sets their daughter up with an intern?

It's too weird, and they are way too backwards.

My parents don't win any Parents of the Year awards, but I'm starting to think maybe I've had the sweeter deal between the two of us. My parents might not care overly much which school I go to, but they expect me to do something with myself next year.

They expect me to have a career of my own and not freeload off of them like some kids might. They might not pay

much attention, but they've never made me doubt my own worth.

Worse...Noelle's parents have made her feel bad about her power and sexuality. Like every time she flirts with a guy, it's a power move and not just...a seventeen-year-old girl enjoying guys and figuring out how to relate to them.

That's what really kills me. And it explains so much. Why my stupid comments about her getting rides or not deserving to win the scavenger hunt made her so upset...

Because she thought I was right.

She thinks it's true and that I believe it too.

Guilt and anger make me even surlier this week than I was last week. And it doesn't help that Noelle's not even giving me a chance to talk to her.

"She's skipping lunch? Again?" I glower at the cafeteria table full of friends as if daring one of them to contradict me.

No one pretends they don't know who I'm talking about. When I came back home without Noelle the other night, there wasn't a single person at my house who didn't look at me with pity. And that pity has been pretty consistent all week when Noelle finds ways to evade me at every turn.

"I'm worried about her," Celia says. "Maybe I should go find her."

"I saw her on my way here," Ryan says. "She's good, just spending her lunch breaks with Mr. Carlson."

I stiffen, still standing next to the table.

"The drivers' ed teacher?" Mara's voice goes up at the end.

Ryan nods, his mouth too full to answer.

Heath fills in for him. "Celia and I talked to Addie yesterday. Noelle's been talking to her so...she's not alone." He casts a quick glance up at me.

She has another friend to confide in, is what he means. I'd normally be that friend, and it hurts a little that I'm not, but...I get it.

And at least she's talking to someone.

Also...the first smile in more than a week starts to tug at the corners of my lips as something inside my chest expands. "She's taking drivers' ed again."

I didn't mean to say it aloud, but Ryan nods again. "Looks like she's fit it into her schedule."

"Huh. That's weird," Celia says. "I thought she didn't like to drive."

I dip my head to hide another smile as I take a seat at the table.

Leah slides into a seat beside me. "What did I miss?"

She's been sticking close to me ever since this business with Noelle has started to go south, and I let her see my smile now because this girl has fretted over me more than I care to admit.

"Good news?" Her brows arch.

I bump my shoulder into hers. "I don't know. Maybe."

I have no desire to explain Noelle or her newfound desire to get her license despite her parents' lack of faith and the never ending supply of guys who'd do anything to give her a ride.

Including me. I let out a huff of wry amusement at the thought.

"Okay, clearly something's changed," Leah says, keeping her voice low as the others chat around us. "Did you talk to Noelle?"

I shake my head. This smile isn't for me. And this light feeling in my chest isn't so much hope as...pride.

My smile grows and I laugh a little. I'm freakin' proud of my best friend.

I want to tell her that.

I wish I could.

And...maybe I can.

Not for the first time since last weekend, I find myself thinking about the advice my friends had given me.

Show Noelle I can be her friend. That we can still be friends...and more. After hearing her issues and knowing her fears about being anything more than friends, that piece of advice feels more pertinent than ever.

If Noelle can be brave and try again for her license, even if she risks failing, then maybe it's time I try again too.

But this time I won't make the same mistake. I won't let Noelle forget that she is my friend, first and foremost. That I don't expect or want her to be anything different. That she's perfect the way she is.

"I know that look," Leah says as she steals one of my fries. "That look says you're hatching a plan."

"Ooh, a plan?" Mara butts into our conversation. She looks alarmingly eager as she turns to face me. "What plan?"

"Is this a Noelle plan?" Ryan asks.

"How can we help with this plan?" Celia asks. "We can totally help."

"Unless you want us to stay out of it," Heath adds with an understanding smile.

Normally I'd say *stay out of it*. But I think if I'm going to pull off this plan...?

I may just need all hands on deck.

I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table. For the first time all week I'm actually grateful Noelle isn't here to overhear this conversation.

"I think I have an idea." I grin. "But I'm definitely going to need some help."

TWENTY-ONE

Noelle

MY MOM'S looking at me like I'm not speaking English. My dad has his head cocked to the side like maybe he heard me wrong.

"You want a ride where?" he asks.

"The DMV," I say again. "I'm taking my written test."

"But I thought you...didn't pass." My mom tips her head like a bird who can't figure out what she's looking at.

Didn't pass is her softened way of saying 'failed.' Which I did. Twice now. But Mr. Carlson told me I only got one too many wrong last time. Between that fact and what Elijah said about me trying until I get it right...

Well, I'm motivated.

"I'd like to try again." My tone leaves no room for argument...I hope.

Dad shakes his head with a sort of quizzical expression and an air of defeat. "Okay. If it means that much to you..."

"It does." My firm tone has them both blinking in surprise.

They've been doing that a lot lately.

Never more so than two days ago when I returned home on the school bus after a meeting with the guidance counselor to come up with a game plan. My dad had repeated the words

‘community college’ no less than twelve times. My mother had wrung her hands as if she’d failed me somehow by raising a daughter who’d rather get a job than find a husband straight out of high school.

They both came around by the end of the conversation, and this morning my dad even announced with pride that he and my mother had stopped by the community college and picked up a course catalog so we could all review the options together.

I’m not gonna lie. I teared up a little.

My mom openly wept. And then she went off on a weepy tirade about how proud she was of me and how her mother had never even expected her to finish high school, and...well.

Maybe I should’ve waited a day to hit them with another surprise.

But today is the day, and I know for a fact that I won’t be the only one from Mr. Carlson’s class who is going. The new girl, Sadie, and I have sorta bonded in his class, once we realized that we were the only “old” ones in a class full of freshmen and sophomores.

I face my parents and brace for more shocked responses or well-intentioned but no doubt painful questions about why I’ve decided to risk failure a third time, but instead...

“Do you want us to stick around so you have a ride home after?” my dad asks.

“No, thanks. Mara and Celia are picking me up. We’re supposed to hang out today.”

I let out a little laugh and shake my head, amazed that this went over so easily. Maybe Elijah was right and it really was that simple. You want to be different? Act different. Expect different. Demand different.

Okay, he didn’t say that, but that’s what I got from our talk in his car and it’s gotten me this far, so I’m not about to start looking back.

“Why don’t you put on a little makeup and do your hair,” my mom says as I’m heading toward the stairs.

I’m just about to roll my eyes and point out that I’m not going to the DMV to impress anyone or to flirt, when my mom continues.

“If you end up getting your license today, you’ll want to look your best for the picture.” She looks so proud and pleased with the idea, I don’t have the heart to point out that the written test is only the first part. I still need to do the actual practical test.

“Good idea,” I say instead. I can explain that later. No need to ruin the good mood.

Addie calls as I’m getting ready to go.

“You psyched?” she asks, with so much enthusiasm I question how much coffee she’s had this morning.

“Is anyone ever psyched to take a test?” I ask.

“Good point. Although, I bet Celia gets pumped.”

We both laugh at that because, yeah, she probably does.

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” I say. “And if I don’t pass today...”

“You’ll pass next time,” Addie finishes. “Elijah was right. It just takes persistence, and you’re nothing if not stubborn.”

I make a little face. “Thanks a lot.”

“Speaking of stubborn...” she drawls.

“Subtle. Very subtle.”

“When are you going to have an honest conversation and tell Elijah that you have feelings for him?”

I wince. “I don’t know. I’m starting to regret telling *you*, and telling him will be even harder.”

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t regret telling me, you just hate that I’m right. You can’t avoid this conversation forever and you know it.”

I nod. "I do know this. I just..." I turn to face the phone on my nightstand. "I'm scared, Addie."

"I know, sweetie. Trust me, I get it."

"What if it doesn't work out? What if he changes his mind? What if we never get past the awkward and we can never go back to being friends?"

"You know..." Addie sighs. "I wish I could give you some guarantee. Tell you that for sure it's all gonna work out for you two. But I think...I think falling in love doesn't work like that, you know?"

"Love?" I squawk. "I didn't use the L-word. I'm not there yet."

Addie laughs. "Okay, fine."

She clearly doesn't believe me. I don't know if I believe me. Because not being with Elijah these past couple weeks has been awful. Like, there's a piece of me missing when he's not in my life and at my side.

Is that love? I don't know. Maybe. But right now, all that matters is that I get him back. But before I do, I need to make sure I'm ready. That I know my own self and can trust that I won't treat him badly or depend on him too much.

I let out a shaky breath. Which is tough, because I already need him. But, like Addie keeps telling me, it's okay to need people. It's okay to want them in your life so badly it hurts.

That's not the same thing as being needy or dependent or not having a life and a mind of your own.

I get that. I do.

But it's still terrifying.

The thought of losing Elijah forever is the scariest possibility of all.

"So?" Addie says. "You'll talk to him?"

"I guess I have to, right? I'm realizing now that there's no going back, so...do I have any other choice?"

“You always have a choice but, in this case, I think you’re right that you can’t really go back. Not to the exact same way it was between you, at least.” Addie purses her lips “You’ve come out of the cocoon,” she says at last.

“Um...what?”

“A butterfly can’t go back into a cocoon after it leaves it, right? For better or worse, you and Elijah are out of the friend cocoon. So now it’s time to spread your wings and fly, little butterfly.”

I arch my brows, not hiding my skepticism.

Addie laughs. “Okay, fine. You’re not a butterfly. Can you think of a better analogy?”

I sigh and shrug. “Doesn’t matter because right now I can’t think about Elijah. I have to concentrate on this test.”

And the fact that Elijah’s the one who believed in me enough to get me the materials and offered to help me study until I passed?

Nope. Definitely not thinking about that.

Not thinking about that the entire drive to the testing center. Nope, nope, nope.

I spot Sadie when I enter and make a beeline toward her. She grins, holding up the study guide. “Oh my God, if I never see this thing again, it’ll be too soon.”

I laugh. It’s her first time taking the test. “Try taking this test for a third time and then tell me how much you hate it.”

She winces and then holds up crossed fingers. “We’re both gonna pass. We have to. We know this sucker backwards and forwards.”

I nod. I’ll admit, I’m feeling pretty confident. But what really keeps me from spiraling into panic isn’t just the fact that Mr. Carlson got me extra time or the fact that I really do have that dang book memorized, it’s Elijah’s voice in my head telling me that he’ll stick with me and help me study until I pass.

I got this. Because even if I don't pass today? I will pass eventually. That's just the way it is.

But the good news is...

I pass!

Sadie does too, and we do this weird bouncing hug dance thing that makes us both crack up laughing as we wait for our respective rides out front of the center.

When I see Mara's car pull into the lot, I turn to her. "Hey, do you want to come hang with us? I'm not sure what we're doing..."

In all honesty, I've been a jerk lately. Avoiding Mara and Celia in my quest to steer clear of Elijah. When Mara called me up last night demanding that we all hang out today, I couldn't say no. I didn't want to. I've missed my friends.

All my friends...

I shake off thoughts of Elijah as Sadie drops her skateboard on the ground and stops it rolling away with her foot. "Thanks but...I'm good."

I fix her with a knowing grin. She'd been all quiet and aloof the first couple times I'd sat next to her. But the more I chatted with her, the more she came out of her shell, I realized she's not a mystery girl trying to play some angle. She's just shy.

"You know you don't have to be nervous. My friends are really nice," I say.

"I'm sure they are." She laughs and dips her head. "And I'm not afraid of anyone. I'm just cool doing my own thing." She winks at me, and I wish she'd said yes.

I think about pushing it but decide I'll try again another time. She'll warm up to us eventually. If not, Mara will make her.

"Okay, well, I guess I'll see you in school on Monday." I reach for the door handle to Mara's car as Sadie skates away. She lifts a hand to wave goodbye, and I slide into Mara's back seat.

“So?” Celia asks.

“I passed!”

They both squeal as we drive away, and I’m so caught up in answering their questions about the test that it takes me a minute to realize we’re not heading toward any of our houses. “Where are we going?”

“The playground,” Celia answers.

Her tone puts me on edge.

The fact that neither of them is meeting my gaze in the rearview mirror only adds to my wariness. “What’s going on at the playground?”

“Elijah has an epic day planned for us.” Mara’s gaze meets mine for a half a second and she’s way too excited.

“Elijah...” I repeat his name slowly, hating the way the mere mention of him makes me warm and sets off a whirlwind of butterflies in my belly.

“It’s for the scavenger hunt,” Mara adds.

“Uh huh...” That would at least kinda explain Mara’s bizarre level of excitement. “What do we have to do?”

“I don’t know, it’s a secret,” Celia says. “But we’ll be paired up in teams and we have to do all the events in one day to get credit.”

I frown. Something is up. “Is that why you insisted I wear...this?”

Mara had specifically informed me that I had to wear my comfiest casual clothes, which I’d assumed meant she had mud masks in mind or something. But now, knowing I’m seeing Elijah...

I frown down at my faded black leggings and the oversized T-shirt. If I’d known we were doing this with Elijah I would’ve worn my cute yoga pants and a T-shirt that doesn’t look like it could fit three of me.

Crap.

“What’s wrong?” Mara’s eyeing me in the mirror.

I’m being ridiculous, and the concern in both their eyes makes me feel guilty. I haven’t just shoved a wedge between me and Elijah. I’ve made things weird for everyone. But that ends today.

“Nothing.” I shake my head.

Celia’s lips hitch to the side and she turns to face me. “If you don’t want to see Elijah—”

“No. It’s fine.” My smile is forced and huge. “Honestly. It’s fine.”

It’s fine, fine, fine, fine.

I repeat the word on a loop in my brain to keep from obsessing over what I’m going to say to him. How I’m going to take a giant leap off a very high cliff when I tell him that I want to try again. That I want to be his friend...and more.

Oh God. Terror ripples through me, and I find myself clutching the edge of the seat as Mara pulls over in front of the playground.

It’s fine, it’s fine...

I see Elijah standing in the midst of a bunch of our friends and his teammates. Even Dominic’s here with his sister, and a bunch of Heath’s basketball friends. Everyone’s wearing casual tops and workout clothes as they talk and laugh in small clusters.

Some of my terror eases. This really is just a group thing then. Nothing to be afraid of.

Maybe everything really is fine...

The thought evaporates the second I step out of Mara’s car and Elijah’s gaze meets mine.

I nearly freeze in my tracks and it takes everything in me not to dive back into the car and hide like a coward.

Instead I tip my chin up and give him a little smile.

I am not a coward. I am...

I think of Addie and let out a huff of laughter.

I am a freakin' butterfly.

I'm not going back into my cocoon, dammit. And what's more...

I'm not gonna let another day pass without telling Elijah exactly what he means to me.

TWENTY-TWO

Elijah

IT'S ALMOST TOO easy to set my plan into action.

Mainly because most of the people here are in on my plan.

Pretty much everyone but Noelle.

So the second I shout that everyone who wants to participate has to pair up into teams of two, they do it—and Noelle is stuck with me.

I don't feel bad.

The girl has been avoiding me for two freakin' weeks. She's gone on a date with a drunk a-hole just to avoid how she feels about me, and it ends today.

"You ready, babe?" I turn to her with a grin. It grows when I see her brows knitted in confusion.

"What are we..." Her head whips left and right as she takes in the other teams who are already off and running. "What are we doing?"

"It's a one-day scavenger sprint." I hold up my phone but don't let her close enough to see the list. "Whoever completes the entire list first gets bonus points."

"Oh. Um...okay." She tucks some hair behind her ear and I can't help another grin, despite my nerves.

But honestly, my nerves calmed down the moment I saw her step out of Mara's car looking all perfectly Noelle. No makeup, no tight dress or terrifying heels. This is the Noelle who sits cross-legged on the end of my bed and plays video games for hours. It's the girl who cries laughing while watching epically awful movies.

This is my friend. And it's the girl I love. The one I want to call *my girlfriend*.

And now I just have to prove to her that she's one and the same. I don't need her to change. I don't need *us* to change. I need to show her that I know her better than anyone and I love her exactly as she is.

"Come on," I say. "We've got a lot to do."

I turn and head to my car, not waiting because I know she'll come. She's too curious about what this is all about.

"What's first on the list?" she asks as she buckles her seat belt. "And...wait. Are you allowed to compete?"

She's catching on, obviously. But I didn't really expect her not to.

"I'm making an exception for this event." I wink at her. "We're gonna start at the bottom of the list and work our way up."

"Okay." She draws the word out and it's full of suspicion. She's quiet for the two-second drive around the corner. "Madeline's Bakery?"

Her favorite.

"First task," I say as we stand in the short line. "We have to order one of everything on the daily specials menu and eat it."

She chokes on a laugh. "Seriously?"

I shrug. "I don't make the rules."

She's outright laughing now and I feel her gaze on the side of my face, burning into me as she searches my expression. I

can all but sense the moment she caves and decides to go along with it.

A little while later we're sitting across from each other in the crowded bakery. Some of our classmates are here as well as part of the scavenger hunt and I'm guessing the owners of this fine establishment are gonna give me free donuts for life after all the business I send their way today.

"Aren't you gonna help me?" Noelle's grinning as she licks icing from her thumb.

"I'm here as your official photographer," I say as I reach for one of the pastries.

She arches a brow. "You're documenting me being a pig?"

"Nope," I say, pulling up the list. "I'm documenting you shouting the worst movie line ever at the top of your lungs."

She freezes. When she licks her lips, it takes everything in me not to stare and groan.

"You heard me." I laugh out loud as someone on the far side of the room shouts out a line from a Marvel movie.

Noelle shakes her head, feigning snobbery. "They don't know bad movies."

"No one knows bad movies like you know bad movies," I deadpan.

She bursts out in a laugh and then makes a show of cracking her knuckles.

"What are you thinking?" I ask as I get the video going. "The Room. Maybe a little Miami Connection? Or maybe something from our John Travolta phase?"

She pretends to think it over, and then she surprises me by leaning across the table, resting her elbows on it as her eyes glint with mischievous laughter. "Actually, I'm thinking something a little more relevant." She glances toward the other table and then gets to her feet, calling all eyes to her. "They want Marvel bad? I'll give 'em Marvel bad."

She crooks a finger so I stand as well and bring the camera in close.

She leans in even further so she's making sexy eyes at the camera. "May I present Susan Storm in The Fantastic Four..."

I start to snicker as she hams it up for the small audience around us, her voice going louder even as she adopts the worst sex kitten impression ever. "Those aren't my lips, silly. These are my lips."

She falls back in her seat like she's just done a heroic deed and I shut off the video and burst into loud applause making her laugh as some of the others in the restaurant join in.

She arches one brow as I slide into the seat across from her. "Super sexy, right?"

"So hot," I agree. "Especially with that powdered sugar on your nose."

She touches her nose and then her head falls back with laughter.

My heart is on fire. Because this...this is how we were before the kiss. This is the way we used to flirt and have fun.

This is the girl I can call friend and girlfriend. And I hope she sees it. I hope like hell she gets what I'm trying to show her.

She kicks me under the table. "Admit it. You're turned on by my Susan Storm impersonation."

I tip my head from side to side. "I don't know. What really does it for me is your Eastern European accent."

Her head falls back as she shouts. "*Lisa, you're tearing me apaaaaart.*"

I burst out laughing, and so does she. I don't think either of us even notice who's staring as we laugh until we're both out of breath.

When it starts to fade, I lean in and lower my voice. "See. Now that's sexy."

For a second, I worry that I'm gonna push her away. But even though her eyes flicker with something serious, her smile never fades. "You think so, huh?"

I nod. "I do. I really do."

And hell....I *do*. I'm not being the tiniest bit sarcastic. There is nothing sexier than Noelle being...well, *Noelle*.

We hold eye contact for a long moment and then suddenly she's shooting up to her feet with a new, nervous energy. "What's next?"

"You'll see," I tease as I follow her to the car.

The car is silent as we drive the very short distance back to the park, but it's not an awkward silence. There's a tension between us, and it simmers but doesn't feel heavy or bad, it feels...

Expectant.

It's the feeling in the air right before a thunderstorm, or that moment in a movie right before a major turning point.

We both know it's coming. The talk we're dancing around. The conversation that decides how we're going to move forward.

As friends. Or as friends and more.

But either way, we're back on the same page. I think. I hope.

"We could've just walked back here," Noelle says as she climbs out of the car. She turns to face me. "Okay, what do we have to do here?"

I furrow my brows as I pretend to study the list. As if I don't know it all by heart. As if I didn't spend the better part of the last few days hashing out exactly how this would go and what I'd say. "Hmm. It looks like we need to go on the swings."

"The swings, huh?" She turns to eye the swings, which are currently occupied by another team. "That's a...random choice."

Her tone is sarcastic. I know she's caught on. How could she not?

"Not really," I admit.

"You know," she says slowly as she turns to face me. "Shoving pastries into my mouth at Madeline's, wearing my comfiest clothes, and now swinging at my favorite playground..." She tilts her head to the side and purses her lips, her eyes gleaming with emotion. "It's all my favorite things."

"Really?" I rock back on my heels, my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her as I pretend to consider this.

"Mmmhmm." She crosses her arms and I can see her lips twitching. "I seem to recall a morning in your kitchen where I mentioned all of these things and how they'd be..."

She trails off and swallows, and I take pity on her.

"Your perfect date?" I offer.

She nods.

"It does seem like that, doesn't it?" I meet her gaze and hold it, and the air between us crackles as the tension builds. It's hard to draw in enough oxygen as I move closer to her. I pull my hands out of my pockets, but I don't reach for her. Not yet.

She holds my gaze for a long beat, and I see the moment her poker face cracks. Her lips start to tremble and her eyes get shiny with unshed tears. "Elijah..."

Then I reach for her. Finally. I pull her into my arms and she burrows into me like we were both just waiting for this moment.

I hold her tight and settle my lips against her temple as she draws in shaky breaths against my chest.

"Okay, you caught me," I say, pretending to be put out. "The entire list is made up of all the things you love."

Her arms are trapped between us as I wrap my arms even tighter around her back. But she moves them so she's clutching the fabric of my shirt as she sniffs. "Why?"

I kiss her temple because for a second I don't know how to answer. "I guess I thought that was obvious."

She pulls back slightly and tilts her head so she can see me. This close I can read everything in her eyes—the hope and the fear.

It's an exact mirror of what I'm feeling right now. This hope is terrifying. Like standing on top of a cliff and looking down. If she still decides she doesn't want this...

Doesn't want me...

I push aside the thoughts.

"I messed up with our date." I cringe. Any speeches I'd had planned fly out the window as I look into her eyes. "I wanted to show you that we could be...different. But the thing is... I don't want different. I don't need different. I never meant to make you feel like you had to be somebody else..."

Her expression grows tight with emotion, her lips pressing together.

"You are my best friend and you are the girl I fell for. I don't need us to be anything but what we are."

She lets out a huff that's part laughter and part sob. "Two dorks who watch bad movies and play video games together?"

"Not just that," I say. "We also eat too many carbs."

Her lips tremble and she bursts out in a laugh at the same time the tears she's been holding back spill over.

I'm honestly not sure if this is good or bad so I just hold her tight, stroke her back, and kiss the top of her head again as she sniffs and takes a few deep breaths.

"So all this..." She pulls back a bit as she talks, but I don't let go of her completely. "It's all the things I love, huh?"

I nod.

With her head still tilted down she peeks up at me, her gaze so open and vulnerable and unguarded it makes my chest ache. She wets her lips and takes a deep breath. “If it’s all the things I love, then...then how come you’re not on the list?”

My chest expands and contracts at once as shock and joy and relief and a million emotions I can’t begin to name hit me in the solar plexus so hard and fierce I think I stop breathing.

When I don’t react immediately, she squeezes her eyes shut, her nose wrinkling up in the most adorably embarrassed expression. I’ve never seen this look from her before. Not once.

“Too cheesy, right?” She winces, her cheeks turning a little pink. She shakes her head as she opens her eyes. “I told you I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know the first—”

I kiss her before she can finish. I can’t *not* kiss this girl right now. I crush her to me as our lips collide and melt together like we’ve been kissing each other every day for decades. She kisses me back like she’s just as eager to show me what I’m trying to show her.

That I love her.

We’re both breathless when we come up for air, and when I pull back and our eyes meet...we start to laugh at the same time.

Soon we’re laughing so hard we’re clinging to each other just to stay upright.

“You’re such a dork,” she says through tears of laughter.

“Me? You’re the one who can quote *Fantastic Four* on command,” I shoot back.

That sets us off again and we laugh even harder when we see some of our classmates and friends watching us with varying degrees of bemusement.

“Come on,” I say finally, when the stares get to be too much. “Let’s get out of here.”

Noelle surprises the heck out of me by slipping her hand into mine like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

And...it kinda is. It's new and it's different...but it feels right.

It feels like us.

“So, where to now?” she asks.

“That depends,” I say when we reach my car. “Do you want to finish the list?”

She leans against the car door and I lean into her. I can't help it. Now that I can be this close, I can't stand being any further away. So I rest my hands on the car door on either side of her as she thinks over her answer. “I can't believe you convinced everyone to go along with this.”

I shrug, a little embarrassed by the awe and gratitude in her eyes. “It wasn't hard. Turns out our friends are a bunch of romantics.”

“You don't say.” she laughs.

I grin down at her, my gaze caught on the sweet curve of her lips. I can kiss her.

Honestly, this knowledge is kinda heady.

I can kiss my best friend whenever I want.

I think. I hope.

I blink as I drag my gaze back up to meet hers. Wait, I can, right?

Her gaze is dark and thoughtful as she reaches out and rests her hands on my chest, trailing her fingers over me like she's just as eager to explore this new physical side of our relationship as I am.

And maybe...that's my answer.

“I can't believe you got Mara to go along with this,” she says.

I blink in surprise.

I love Mara, but she's so not on my mind right now. But Noelle's got this shy vibe going on that makes my heart twist with a surge of protectiveness and affection. So, I go with it...

“Why’s that?”

“Because she takes this scavenger hunt very seriously.” Her gaze fixes on my throat and this new, sweet, vulnerable side of Noelle might just kill me.

I fell in love with my best friend a long time ago. Is it possible to fall even more right now?

A thought hits me and nearly brings me down at the knees.

It’s not just possible to keep falling. It’s probable. With a shock to the system, I can see a lifetime stretching ahead of me. A lifetime of discovering every different side of Noelle. A lifetime of watching her grow and mature and reinvent herself...

A lifetime of falling in love over and over and over again.

She peeks up at me again. “We should probably tell Mara not to worry...”

“Are we still talking about Mara?” My brows draw down a bit.

Her lips curve up in a tremulous smile. “I just think we should tell her that I’ll have to forfeit the scavenger hunt.”

“You will...” I say.

She nods, and her shaky inhale puts me on edge. There’s so much hope and fear in her eyes it takes everything in me not to kiss her senseless just to distract her from whatever’s going on in that head of hers.

But then she lets out a sharp exhale and straightens a bit. “Yeah, I mean, if Leah can’t participate because she’s your cousin, then your girlfriend definitely shouldn’t be allowed.”

The air rushes out of me in a *whoosh*.

Just when I think I can’t love her any more than I already do...

“I mean it’s not really nepotism, but it’s close, right?”

My answer is a kiss. This one is slow and gentle, and she makes the sweetest little moaning sound as she slides her arms

around my neck to pull me in even closer.

I could stay like this forever. Kissing my favorite person is better than anything I've ever known. But we're in public and the wind is making Noelle shiver. So eventually, grudgingly, I pull back and kiss the tip of her nose. "Noelle..."

"Yes?" she whispers.

"Will you come back to my house and watch horrible movies with me?" I can't help myself as I steal one more kiss.

She grins against my lips. "I thought you'd never ask."

EPILOGUE

Noelle

ELIJAH'S KILLING me with his cocky smirk. I don't know whether to smack him or kiss him.

Or maybe both.

Probably both.

He arches a brow. "Listen, woman, you can't tell me what to do."

I roll my eyes at the 'listen, woman' part but choose to ignore it. He's trying to distract me but it's not gonna happen. "You're not allowed to throw your future away for me. I'm not going to allow it."

"Allow it?" he mutters. "Jeez, we're a couple for a few weeks and you think you own me."

He can't hide a grin as he says it, and his eyes sparkle with pleasure. He loves this. All of this. And so do I.

I love *him*...even when he's driving me nuts.

"You can go to any school in the country, Elijah. You have the grades and your parents can afford it—"

"So?" he shoots back. "That doesn't change the fact that I don't want to go to any of those schools."

Our knees touch as we glare at each other, both of us are sitting cross-legged on his bed.

We'd just finished playing a videogame when he hit me with the news that he's decided where he's applying next year...and it's the community college that I'm going to.

The more I realize how serious he is, the more worried I become. "I mean it, Elijah. I don't want you to give anything up for me."

"Hey." He grows serious, his tone soft and warm as he reaches out a hand and cups my cheek. "Don't be upset, babe. I'm not giving up anything for you."

I frown. I don't believe him for a second.

"I'm doing it for me." All hint of laughter fades in his eyes, and I reach up to hold his hand.

"Look, Noelle, I've watched my parents choose career and money over everything else my entire life. And...I don't want to live like that."

My heart squeezes at the earnestness in his gaze.

"What do you want then?" I ask. Because for the first time since this conversation started, I'm realizing that he's not teasing and he's actually given this some thought.

"You've got to know that you're my family. You're everything to me."

My eyes well with tears before I can stop them and we both smile and laugh a little. Turns out being in love makes me kinda a sappy mess.

He brushes a tear away when it escapes. "I'm not making my parents' mistakes," he says. "I'm putting family first. I'm putting love first..."

"But your future," I start.

"Is with you." He says it with such decisiveness, such finality...

I can't bring myself to argue. But I do voice my biggest fear. "I don't want you to resent me. I don't want to hold you back."

“You’re not,” he says, his tone filled with passion. “You never could. You bring out the best in me, Noelle. And honestly...” He sighs as he looks away, searching for words. “Honestly, I don’t know what I want to do yet, career wise. I know I like playing around with apps, and I know I like gaming and stuff but...” His gaze returns to mine and it’s more serious than usual.

He really has been giving this some thought.

“I want to take some time to figure out what I do next. And there’s no rush, right?”

I nod. “Right.”

“But whatever I do, I want to make sure that you’re on board. That we take the next step together,” he says.

And...gah! He’s so sincere. So serious. How can I argue that?

“If you’re sure...” I start.

His lopsided grin is sudden and dazzling, but it’s the hard crushing kiss that follows that really steals my breath.

“I promise, this is what I want,” he says.

I can’t help but smile in turn. “Okay then. We’re both sticking around after graduation.”

He rests his forehead against mine with a sigh that sounds so satisfied I can’t help but laugh.

“You’re really happy about this plan, huh?”

He nods and then gives me a quick kiss. “I really am. I mean...not to sound too cheesy but...”

“Too late,” I say automatically, making him laugh.

“With Leah moving in, and now you and I figuring out how we fit together...”

I arch my brows, my heart fluttering as his gaze meets mine.

“This house feels like a home now,” he finishes. And my heart swells so fast I think it might burst. All I’m capable of is

a nod of understanding as he brushes my hair back off my cheek. “For the first time, it feels like a home.”

“Then we stay,” I say.

“Together,” he adds.

I smile and lean in for another kiss. “Always.”

THANKS FOR READING! Stay tuned for Dominic’s story next. In the meantime, if you’re looking for more sweet YA romance, be sure to check out Maggie Dallen’s Briarwood High series, starting with [Out of His League](#). Turn the page to read the first chapter free!

What’s the first rule of reinventing yourself as a cool girl at a new school? Steer clear of your old crush.

DON’T FORGET to join Maggie Dallen’s newsletter for updates on freebies and the latest news on releases and sales: <http://eepurl.com/bFEVsL>

And if you like to chat books, come hang out in her [#TeamBubblegum](#) reader group!

OUT OF HIS LEAGUE

Veronica

Fake it till you make it.

As far as personal mantras go, mine wasn't terribly original, but it was effective. Sort of. At least, I hoped it would be. Time would tell. My best friend, Trent, was driving me to my first day at a new school for my junior year. After a lifetime of going to the same school with the same class, I'd been granted an amazing opportunity to start fresh and I was determined to make the most of it.

Physically, at least, I was ready. You know those scenes in cheesy teen romantic comedies where the girl gets a makeover and is totally transformed in a one-minute montage?

Yeah, I'd done that.

Well, my friend Margo had done that. She'd been the one to teach me how to blow out my frizzy, curly brown hair into pretty waves. She'd taught me how to wear makeup and how to walk in heels. But trust me, it hadn't happened in a matter of minutes. It had taken all summer.

Mentally I was prepped, too. I'd been planning for this moment ever since I got my acceptance letter from Briarwood, a private school I scored a scholarship to. It was on the other side of town from my old public school, Atwater, and it might as well have been in a different universe.

No one knew me at Briarwood, which was terrifying but also incredibly exciting. It meant I had a chance to reinvent myself, and I didn't have to wait until college to do it.

Physically and mentally, I was ready to play the part of Veronica Smith—the confident, cool, dateable new junior. But if I could actually pull it off remained to be seen.

Sitting in the front seat of Trent’s car as we neared my new school, it was kind of hard to fake it. Trent knew me way too well. He, like everyone else I’d grown up with, knew me as Ronnie—tomboy, jock, and completely invisible to the male population.

Before you get any ideas, I should say right now—this is not a story about how I fell in love with my best friend. No way. Trent is awesome and I love him dearly—as a brother. So no, and also...ew. I can’t even go there in my imagination. I should also probably mention that my friend Margo in the backseat was his girlfriend. They’d been dating since freshman year and since I was Trent’s best friend, Margo had become my first and only female friend by default.

I’d been friendly with a lot of the girls on my old soccer team, but soccer was the only thing we’d really had in common, and those friendships had stayed on the field. Besides, any one of my former teammates would have looked at me like I was crazy if I’d asked them to help me with my hair. But Margo? She stepped into the role of my lone girl friend like a champ.

But she wouldn’t be my only female friend for long, hopefully. Veronica Smith was going to make friends. Girl friends. And she was going to be noticed by guys. She was going to flirt, and date, and as God as my witness, she was going to have her first kiss.

My inner diatribe was cut short as Briarwood came into view. The butterflies in my stomach went crazy and I sucked in a quick, loud inhale as I clutched my belly.

Trent glanced over. “You all right, Ronnie?”

“It’s not Ronnie anymore,” Margo scolded from the backseat.

I felt her hands on my shoulders as she leaned forward so her face was next to mine. I already knew I was in for another

pep talk. She'd very sweetly come over to my house super early this morning to help me with my hair and makeup.

Despite her many lessons these last few weeks, I still hadn't been confident enough to do it on my own. This morning she'd alternated between making me look good and boosting my confidence.

I was so freakin' glad Trent was dating Margo.

Trent tried to be helpful in his own way, like by offering to give me a ride on my first day so I didn't have to show up on the bus. Still, he couldn't quite seem to get on board with my plan. He didn't understand why I might want something different, to *be* somebody different.

Margo, on the other hand... well, I got the feeling that this was her dream come true. She was a big fan of all those cheesy rom com movies where the nerdy girl becomes popular just because she gets a sweet blowout and a pair of contact lenses.

For Margo, my plan was the closest thing she'd ever experienced to that in real life. And in real life, she got to be the awesome fairy godmother character who gives the makeover.

She was pretty pleased with herself on that front.

I glanced in the side mirror at the still unfamiliar reflection. I was pretty darn pleased, too. She'd done an awesome job. I wouldn't have recognized me if I saw myself walking down the halls of my old school, where Trent and Margo were headed after they dropped me off.

I'd been dying for a change for a while now but trying to change your image when you're surrounded by people who've known you since kindergarten? It's next to impossible. Even Trent couldn't wrap his head around this new me and he knew me better than anyone.

It was Margo who reminded him. "She's going by Veronica now," Margo said, her voice all stern, but still cute. She couldn't help it. Margo was just cute by nature. Small and blonde, she'd always been popular at Atwater. Not in a *Mean*

Girls way but in the “I’m nice to everyone” way. In return, everyone loved Margo. Including me. She’d taken me under her wing these past few weeks, helping me to develop my new identity.

“She’s Ronnie,” Trent said, “And she always will be.”

I sighed. That was why this new and improved me could only exist at a new high school. I had to kill off Ronnie. It’s not like I was the lowest rung on the social hierarchy. I had some friends—all nerdy boys, except for Margo and my teammates. Trent might have been the nerdiest of them all. It was still a wonder to me that Margo had fallen for him, but I guess he did have a cute grungy rocker look about him that was an oddly good complement to Margo’s goody-two-shoes vibe.

My vibe was total tomboy. I’d always been into sports and had been more comfortable hanging out with the boys in my class. I’d never liked shopping, or tight clothes, or taking time to do my hair. I liked being comfortable, and that usually meant oversized T-shirts and frizzy curls scraped back into a ponytail.

And while that was all fine and good for a long time, once I hit high school I didn’t know how to break out of that image. And here’s the thing... I wanted to go on a date. I wanted to be kissed. And yes, one day I wanted a boyfriend. I didn’t want to go through my entire life being treated like a boy just because I’m good at sports and don’t know the first thing about highlights and lowlights.

So when I got the scholarship offer to go to Briarwood, I seized on the chance to start fresh. Just thinking about the clean slate ahead of me made the butterflies ease up, excitement taking their place.

It was hard to not feel like a fraud, but as Margo liked to point out—I wasn’t being a fraud, I was just being a better version of me. Because while I liked sports, there was more to me than just that. I was also a good baker and had great grades. I liked to read romance novels and I adored old

movies. I wrote for the newspaper back in my old school and dabbled in photography.

I was more than just a tomboy, just like Trent wasn't just a computer nerd with a thing for indie bands. But I guess when you're stuck in the same building with the same group of people, you get put in a hole. You get stuck with your label and it's almost impossible to break free.

There were a lot of reason I wanted to go to Briarwood—great soccer team, better chance at getting into a college of my choice, better teachers—but starting fresh was the biggest one.

Trent pulled up in front of the school, which looked daunting with its ivy-covered walls. Margo kneaded my shoulders like a coach, which she kind of was. She was my cool-girl coach. “You’ve got this, Veronica.”

It was a bad sign that my full name sounded weird to me, wasn't it?

No. I'd get used to it.

Trent sighed. “I still don't get why you want to be different. You're the coolest girl I know, and—”

Margo and I both slapped his bicep and he winced. “Aside from Margo, obviously.”

Margo grinned and planted a kiss on his cheek. But he was focused on me, his eyes sweetly squinted with concern beneath his black-framed glasses. “Ronnie, you don't need to change who you are just to be liked by some guy.”

I held back a sigh as Margo groaned and flopped back in her seat. We'd all been over this so many times, it was getting super old.

“I'm not changing who I am just to get a guy,” I said for the millionth time.

“She's being herself, just in a way you're not used to,” Margo chimed in.

I pointed back to her—Margo got it. “Exactly. I'm being me, just... a new me. I want to be all of me.”

Trent looked unconvinced.

“I’m fun, right?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, of course.”

“And I can flirt...I think.” I’d never really tried because there were no guys in my old high school who wanted to flirt with me.

“I’m sure you can,” my ever-supportive Margo said.

Trent rolled his eyes. I think it icked him out to think of me flirting just like I didn’t particularly like to think about what he and Margo got up to during their sexytime.

I’m serious when I say that Trent was the brother I’d never had. And I guess Margo was kind of like the sister I’d never had. So together? Ew. I couldn’t go there.

I shook off the horrid thought and focused on the conversation at hand. “And I am a girl, right? So why shouldn’t I have fun and flirt with boys?” I grasped Trent’s hand, outright pleading with him to understand. “Just once I want a guy to look at me like I’m a girl. I want to be invited to parties that aren’t a bunch of dudes playing video games.”

“You like video games,” he pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I like video games, but every once in a while I’d like to go to a party where there are girls there and dancing and spiked punch and—”

“And you have watched too many movies,” Margo said with a laugh. “No one has spiked punch at house parties.”

I waved her off. “Fine. Beer. Whatever. I just want to experience what it’s like to be popular and...” *Wanted. Noticed. Seen.* “And liked for something other than my skills on the field or as a gamer.”

Trent looked like he might relent, but he still had concern in his eyes. “But you’re not going to stop playing soccer, right?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. I love soccer, and volleyball, and softball—I’m not giving them up. I just don’t

want that to be all that defines me.”

At this point, my monologue was on automatic. We’d gone through this before. So. Many. Times. I loved the fact that he loved me just as I was, but in a way Trent’s view of me was part of the problem. He’d never see me as anything other than his old pal Ronnie, and I couldn’t wait to be surrounded by people who didn’t know me at all.

I glanced up at the school and watched as a stream of students filed out of cars and into the big double doors. An entire school full of people who didn’t know me.

This was my dream come true.

“Fine,” Trent relented, reaching into the backseat to grab my book bag. “Let me know how it goes today.”

“I will.”

“And tell Drew I say hello.”

His words stopped me as I was reaching for the door handle, a sick feeling started to well up in my gut. “Drew?” I turned around to face him. “Who’s Drew?”

I could only think of one Drew. As far as I knew, Trent and I both only knew one Drew.

Relax, Ronnie. Maybe this Drew was a musician who Trent knew from seeing local bands or something. Maybe he was a friend of the family or—

“Drew Remi,” he said.

The name made my stomach heave. Drew Remi. As in the same Drew who’d gone to school with us up until first semester last year, when he’d moved away.

“Drew moved to California,” I said. From what I’d heard, his mom had gotten a job in Los Angeles and Drew had moved there with her. My friends and I had been jealous when we’d heard that he was leaving cold Pennsylvania behind for sunny California. Most of the girls in our class had gone into mourning, but no one had whined and wailed more than his girlfriend, April. Or ex-girlfriend, I guess. After he’d left,

she'd stopped moaning and started dating another one of the popular guys in our class.

But no one had been more popular than Drew Remi. He'd been an A-lister, if such a thing exists outside of Hollywood. He'd been athletic, hot, and charming...or so I heard. I hadn't had much to do with him since junior high. Before that point, we'd all been friends. But once puberty hit, it was a whole other story. Everyone separated. Drew had become super popular and I... had not.

"He and his sister didn't stay in California long. They moved back to town last spring and started at Briarwood," Trent was saying this as though it was no big deal. Like he was just mentioning that it looked overcast outside. *Hey, it might rain today. Also, your whole plan at reinventing yourself is doomed to fail. Have a great day!*

"I didn't know that." Margo was looking at Trent with the same look of horrified outrage I wore, though why Margo was upset was not nearly as obvious to me.

For me, this could ruin everything.

She swatted his shoulder. "You should have told me."

Ah. It was a couple thing, apparently. I shook my head. I couldn't worry about their squabbles at a time like this.

"It's not a secret," he said. "But it doesn't have anything to do with us or our friends. Sounds like he has a new crew these days. New school, new team, new girls." Trent shrugged as if this was obvious.

"Why didn't he come back to Atwater?" Margo asked.

He shrugged again. "I don't know. Probably because Briarwood has the better baseball team."

Ugh. I'd forgotten that he'd been an up-and-coming baseball star when he'd left our school.

"So he doesn't see his old friends anymore?" Margo asked. "What happened?" She was clearly in info gathering mode whereas I was just trying to quell the burgeoning panic attack.

I was here. I was all decked out in new clothes, with new makeup and a freakin' blowout that took forever to perfect.

This could not be all in vain just because Drew freakin' Remi decided he didn't like California.

"Maybe he hangs with some of his old friends," Trent hedged. He clearly had no idea. Drew's 'old friends' meant that elite little clique that ruled my former public school with their trendy clothes and effortless confidence. Trent didn't hang out with that crowd, and while Margo was friendly with some of the A-list girls, she didn't party enough to be in their inner circle and apparently that satellite status meant that she'd missed a key bit of gossip.

A totally relevant bit of gossip that could change everything.

"You guys, focus," I said.

Both heads swiveled so they were facing me. Trent still looked confused, but Margo had that look of determination I loved so much.

It meant she had a plan.

"He won't recognize you," she said.

Trent and I stared at her. I finally broke the silence. "Margo, I went to school with Drew from kindergarten through freshman year. I think he knows who I am."

"She peed her pants at his birthday party," Trent helpfully added.

Margo turned to me and I threw my hands up. "I was five! And this is not the time to rehash old embarrassing stories, Trent." I gave his shoulder a shove that made him grunt.

"Sorry," he mumbled. Turning to Margo, he added, "But the point is. He's going to know who she is." Then to me, "I just don't see what the big deal is. So Drew knows. That's a good thing, right? You'll have a ready-made friend."

Margo and I shared a look of exasperation. She was the only one who understood what I was trying to achieve here. A new me. A clean slate. Bye, bye Ronnie the tomboy. Hello,

Veronica the dateable. Veronica who did normal girl things with normal girls. Veronica who got attention from boys for something other than her ability to dribble and hold her own in *Fallout 4*.

“She doesn’t want a ready-made friend,” Margo said.

“Also,” I piped up. “He and I were never friends. At least, not since fifth grade. Why would he suddenly want to be my friend?”

“Because you’re hot.” Trent’s face split in a grin I’d never seen before. The way he was looking at me was gross. “Seriously, what did Margo do to you? You look like a... like a...”

“Like a girl?” I finished.

He nodded. “Yeah.” Then his gaze met mine and he scowled. “It’s weird.”

I shrugged. “Get used to it.”

Margo leaned forward so her head was jutting between us, effectively cutting off this new bickering match before we could rehash the same argument for the millionth time. “Trent just made my point for me.”

He frowned at me. “I did?”

I frowned at him. “He did?”

Margo nodded confidently. “He did. My doofus of a boyfriend here is right.” She grasped me by the shoulders so I was forced to turn awkwardly to face her in the back seat. “You. Are. Hot. Trust me when I say that he won’t recognize you.”

She looked so sure of herself and her makeover abilities, I didn’t have the heart to argue. But I caught Trent’s look over her shoulder. He wasn’t convinced, and neither was I. Drew and I might not have been friends but we’d known each other forever. Makeup and hair wouldn’t erase that.

I forced a smile for Margo’s sake. “Maybe you’re right.” And even if she wasn’t, it was fine. I would just steer clear of

him. He'd managed to ignore me for years before he left our school; surely he'd do the same now.

And I'd do the same. Ignore, ignore, ignore.

I flipped down the overhead mirror on the car's sun visor and gave my new and improved face one last look.

I looked good. I looked like a girl. I looked... nothing like me.

But this was the new me, I reminded myself just like I'd reminded Trent.

Get used to it.

To continue reading, check out [*Out of His League*](#).