

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

Bella

And Her

SECRET

CRUSH



NOVA AVERY

# Bella And Her Secret Crush

Nova Avery

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Isabella

“Checkmate!” screamed Mandy as she threw her final card down, grinning victoriously.

“This is Uno, not chess, Mandy,” Cooper rolled his eyes at his girlfriend, but I could see the smirk on his mouth.

“Checkmate felt more dramatic. Doesn’t matter what I said, because I still won!” She celebrated her win as if she had just won the Kentucky Derby, not a Saturday night game with her friends. But that’s what made her fun.

“Whatever,” Cooper said under his breath. He was pretty much always a sore loser.

“Do we want to play this again, or shall we move on?” I asked, pulling everyone’s cards to me. I had to lean across the table to grab Andrew’s cards, and when I did, Landon grabbed my side, squeezing hard. “Ah!” I stood up straight, turning and swatting his hand away from me. He loved pestering me, and even though I hated it, I kind of loved it too.

When I sat back down, I elbowed him in the ribs, earning myself a laugh. I turned, sending him a glare.

When I looked back at our friends around the table, I noticed they were all watching us with weird looks in their eyes, which wasn’t exactly unusual.

“Let’s just play this again, it’s too fun,” Leslie grabbed the cards from my left, beginning to shuffle them.

Every fourth Saturday, Landon and I hosted game night at our shared house. Our circle of friends nearly never missed, and we enjoyed a long night of highly competitive games and

way too much junk food. But it was the night that I looked forward to the most every month. I loved stuffing my face with garbage food and yelling at my friends over games that children also find highly entertaining. I was sure that the alcohol also helped our fun time, but even without it, we'd be having a blast.

And Uno was usually our favorite. We, of course, made up our own rules and made the game more cutthroat than the normal version, which made it so intense every time and had us coming back for more. Competitive didn't even begin to describe our group, which played almost savagely enough to hurt feelings.

"Everyone against Belle this time," Landon announced, shooting me a wicked grin. I just glared at him, hoping that the threat in my eyes would scare him away from sabotaging me. Even though I knew I was about as scary as a penguin. Regardless, I had to play the part.

Our friends laughed, and Cooper whispered something in Mandy's ear. Her eyes shot to mine as she laughed, and I had the sneaking suspicion they were making a comment about me. I didn't even need to know what it was about, but I'm sure it was their plan to make sure I lost.

I had a reputation for losing almost every game that we played. It didn't matter if I was one card away from winning; somehow, I always had to draw extra cards and lose to someone else. Thankfully, I didn't take it too seriously.

Once the cards were dealt, we started playing. The rules of our game wouldn't make sense to anyone but us, and that was how we liked it. We added stacking rules, where players could skip over other players if they could play the exact same card—color and number. We had rules where everyone had to switch hands, and other more nefarious rules that ended with shots or people having to slap the table fastest.

As the game heated up, Mandy placed a blue plus five-card to the stack. Cooper gave her an ugly look, reaching for the draw pile. I started snickering, but then another hand came down on the discard pile, placing two blue plus five cards on top of the first one. That stacking rule? Yeah, it meant the draw five cards could be stacked, meaning that someone just doomed another player to draw fifteen new cards.

Slowly, I turned my head and looked at Landon. He was barely holding in a laugh, his hand covering his mouth. I was shooting daggers at him because, as it stood, I was the player with the most cards already. Now I had to add fifteen to that. Not to mention I wouldn't be able to hold onto the cards very well with that many.

“Sorry, Belle. Nothing personal.” He gave me a shrug to accompany that evil grin on his face.

Huffing dramatically, I picked up a stack of cards and counted out fifteen before putting the rest back. I did my best to organize the cards in my hand, but there were just too many. Everyone that sat around our wooden dining table was

cackling with their amusement, and I just let it roll off of me. Times like this were why this game was so fun.

“You’ll pay for that,” I muttered under my breath as we continued playing.

“Probably not,” He answered. “Unlucky duck.” He winked one of those green eyes at me, and I just rolled mine.

He honestly wasn’t wrong.

Finally, after another two minutes of torture, someone reversed the playing direction. I cheered in my head, not wanting to give my excitement away. The color was red, which meant that I could play the cards I’d been saving for this special moment.

Turns out there are positives to drawing so many cards. When it was my turn, I slapped down the two red plus five cards and whipped my head to look at Landon. I stuck my tongue out at him as I looked down at his hand to see that he only had two cards left before I laid mine down.

“Take that,” I said triumphantly. Landon narrowed his eyes, but then suddenly widened them as he looked across the table. I watched in horror as Leslie, the player to my right, laid down two more red plus fives. And I was after her in paying order. My smile fell, and my soul was crushed.

“Actually, you’ll take that.” Landon picked up the stack of cards that was the draw pile, counting out every single card loudly. He enunciated each syllable of each number, making eye contact with me the whole time. Would the cops

understand if I murdered him right now? Surely they would have sympathy for my case.

“Twenty,” He said smugly, sliding the tiny stack of cards in front of me. Now I had half the deck in my possession.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. So maybe I was a little competitive.

“All is fair in Uno,” Landon mocked, leaning into me and shoving me with his shoulder.

“So I can cut you with this card and that’s fair?” I asked, holding a card to his neck.

“Aggressive much?” He countered, grabbing my hand and pushing it away from him.

We stared at each other for a few more seconds before bursting out into laughter.

This was a normal day for us. After being best friends for eight years and living together for nearly three, we’d gotten pretty comfortable being completely savage with each other, especially during game night.

I leaned into him as we laughed, holding onto his arm. Naturally, his free arm wrapped around my back, staying there for a second after I finally straightened up.

Our friends were all silent, meaning they obviously had no sense of humor. But when I looked at them, they exchanged glances and then looked back at me and Landon like we’d spontaneously become conjoined twins.

“What?” I asked, no longer thinking they were giving me weird looks because of my notoriously bad luck.

They all stayed silent for a few seconds, none daring to speak up. Finally, after looking at everyone else at the table for confirmation, Andrew opened his mouth.

And I wished he would have kept it closed.

“Are you two dating now?” He asked. My cheeks grew instantly hot.

I just stared back at him, mortified that he would ask such a thing. First of all, Landon and I had been living together for such a long time. If we were ever going to be together, it would have already happened. Second of all, he was my literal best friend, and I would never let anything ruin that.

Still, the question had my insides turning. I burst into laughter, attempting to emphasize how absurd the thought was.

“Of course not,” Landon answered, pretty much reading my mind. “Why would we do that?”

Mandy let out a giggle, but quickly righted herself. “Because you two are so close. Just figured you finally got together.”

“Finally?” I asked, quirking a brow at her and hoping my face wasn’t as red as it felt.

“You know...since you two have been like this for years now.” Mandy waved a hand at us as if that explained anything.

I looked at Landon, seeing the equally clueless expression on his face.

“This? We’re just friends, guys. Always have been.” Landon threw an arm around me, trying to emphasize the friend part.

“Always will be,” I finished, realizing that I’d literally finished his sentence, which didn’t help our argument.

“Whatever you say,” Cooper smirked as if he’d caught us lying, but I just shrugged at his comment.

“You guys are crazy,” I told them, motioning for Landon to make his move and get the game restarted. I was ready to be out of their scrutiny.





Landon

“We’d played four games since the last round of Uno, and I still couldn’t get her laugh out of my head. It was a nice laugh, and I’d always liked it, but today, I hated it. For some reason, the way she had laughed at the notion that the two of us could be dating rubbed me the wrong way. Not that I necessarily disagreed with her, but she just kept laughing about it. As if it was something laughable.

I understood where our friends were coming from. Isabella and I were close. And after years of tight friendship and living together, we were extremely comfortable around each other. It wasn’t weird for her to lean into me or for me to put my arm around her. I pestered her pretty much any time she was around me because I loved getting a reaction out of her. I knew everything there was to know about Belle, and she knew everything about me. She was the one person in this world that I counted on through every phase of my life.

And it would always be that way. We’d even promised that our friendship wouldn’t die when we got married; we would just have to become friends with each other’s spouses because no one walked away from the type of friendship that we had.

And even though I knew that was how it would always be between us, even though I had ever considered the possibility of us dating—Okay, I totally had when I first met her in college and thought she was the hottest woman I’d ever seen, but quickly had moved on when I realized that she was already in a relationship—I still didn’t like the way she just laughed at the idea of us being together.

“I’m getting more snacks,” Belle declared, moving from the table and heading towards our kitchen. I stood too, following her.

“I’ll help.”

“We know you’re just going in there to make out!” Cooper called after us, and I turned around to flip him the bird.

“That’ll never happen!” Belle called over her shoulder, not even hesitating. I didn’t like that either. Especially because I could guarantee that I would be the best kisser Belle could ever kiss. Not that she’d ever know.

Once we were in the privacy of the kitchen, I walked up behind Belle, pulling one of her pigtail braids. They helped her keep her long, black hair tamed, and she looked incredibly cute when it was styled this way.

Instantly, she whirled around, glaring at me playfully. I just held my hands up as if I hadn’t touched her, and she rolled her blue eyes. She reached around, opening our pantry. Standing on her tiptoes, she extended an arm to the top shelf where the tortilla chips were. Unfortunately for Belle, she was not tall like her older sister. I stepped up behind her, reaching over her head and grabbing the bag of chips that her fingertips barely brushed.

“I totally had it,” she lied, turning around and shoving me backward. I chuckled, handing her the chips as I walked to the fridge. Instinctually, I pulled out her favorite Trader Joe’s salsa that she made me drive a ridiculously long time to get every time we ran out. Amelia Island didn’t have one of the most

spectacular grocery stores ever, as she so often called it. And this salsa was an obsession of hers. Meaning I made the hour-long drive often. Even if I bought five jars, she'd empty them in a few weeks.

But I didn't care. That's what friends did for each other, and she usually tagged along. But she always commandeered the aux cord.

"How did you know?" She asked, looking at the jar in my hand as if it was the Ring from Lord of The Rings and she was Gollum.

I gave her a flat look. "Seriously?" I asked, double-checking that I was indeed holding her favorite salsa. I was, of course.

"Just give it to me," She said as she reached for it. I naturally extended it above my head, where she could never dream of reaching. I grinned at her as she jumped, trying to force my arm down.

"Hand over the salsa, you big oaf," She grumbled, hopping again.

"Okay, little rabbit," I teased, handing her the prized jar.

She gave me one of her death glares before pushing past me. After grabbing some salsa bowls that she proudly bought at HomeGoods for this very occasion, she strutted back to the den where all of our friends were. I grabbed a box of snack cakes from the pantry and followed her.

"We have an idea," Andrew announced as soon as we were back in the den. Our four friends were sitting around the table

like they had just held a conference while we were away. Mandy's hands were steepled, Cooper had a line above his brow, and Leslie was leaning back with her arms crossed.

"I have a feeling I'm not going to like it," Landon responded, both of us stopping in our tracks at the sight of our friends.

"Oh no! It's a good idea. I think you'll both love it!" Leslie spoke up, sitting forward with an eager look in her eyes. She looked over to Andrew, prompting him to continue.

"You two should play a dating game."

"Like one on TV?" I asked, scrunching my eyebrows. There was no way I could ever be on a show like that. The idea of Landon doing one was laughable, too.

"Of course not! One with each other!" Mandy said, and I was even more dumbfounded. It was like they'd missed the whole part where Belle said she and I wouldn't date.

The look on my face must have encouraged them to keep elaborating.

"You both know each other so well," Cooper started, looking between me and Belle. "So you two would be the best people to pick out dates for each other."

"Still not sure I'm following," I responded quickly, running a hand through my hair.

"You both pick out dates for each other every Friday. The first one to pick out a lasting partner for the other wins," Leslie explained in a matter-of-fact way, as though they didn't just

come up with this game in the two minutes that we were grabbing salsa.

“Why would we do that?” Belle asked, cocking her head. I could only see her out of my periphery, and I didn’t want to see much more than that during this conversation.

How would I pick out a man for her to date? No one was good enough for her. I couldn’t think of one person that I knew that I would set her up with because no one deserved her. And that’s why she’d been single for so long. She kept her standards high, and few got close enough, even for the first date.

I had entirely different reasons for staying single.

“You’re both competitive, so th—”

“Am not!” Belle interrupted, and my head turned so fast that my neck twinged. When she saw the incredulous expression on my face, she flinched in mock hurt. “What? I’m not!”

“Sure, you’re not,” I said, shrugging with a smirk on my face. The girl was probably the most competitive person I knew, especially in her real life. Card games were one type of competitive, and Belle was mild. But in her job and every aspect of her personal life, she was the most cutthroat person I knew.

She rolled her eyes and turned back to Leslie.

“You are both competitive, so this could be fun for the two of you to engage in a little friendly competition. Plus, both of you have been out of the dating game for too long.” Leslie

gave me a pointed look, but I ignored it. She didn't have even the slightest clue.

“What does the winner get?” Belle asked, interest clear in her voice. Told her she was competitive.

“You two can decide that for yourselves. We just thought we could get you two started with the game,” Andrew answered, smirking at me before looking back to Belle.

I wasn't exactly looking for love at the moment, but I did think that it could be fun to do this with Belle. I'd actually be really interested in seeing who she paired me up with.

Turning, I looked at her fully, trying to gauge her reaction. As usual, the answer was already written on her face.

“You in?” I asked, taking a step closer to her in a challenge.

Ever the competitor, she took another step closer, our chests nearly touching.

“Oh, you're on.”





Isabella

“Have you picked someone out yet?” Mandy asked me, leaning forward to catch my attention. I was momentarily caught up in doom-scrolling on my phone, but it was for a good cause. Well, sort of. A good cause for me.

“I think I just found her,” I responded with a grin, locking my phone before Leslie could peek over my shoulder. I gave her a look, and she backed up with a sly grin.

As usual, the three of us women were on time for our weekly coffee catch-up. The men were always late, even though Landon lived with me, and Cooper lived with Mandy. The six of us had been meeting up for coffee before work every Wednesday for the last two years, and aside from holidays and sickness, nothing kept us from this group date. For the past three months, we’d been coming to Grumpy Coffee since it reopened as a coffee shop. My sister Emma was engaged to the owner of the shop, and they’d combined their stores. Naturally, I suggested moving our regular meet-up spot here, and everyone agreed.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this game?” Mandy asked, concern written on her brow. I gave her a blank look, not knowing what she could possibly mean.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know, maybe because you and Landon are super close and live together? Both of you dating will change everything.” She picked up her latte, looking at me over the rim as she sipped.

“It’ll be fine. We’ve both dated since moving in together.” I waved a hand at her nonsense as I brought my own drink—black coffee, of course—to my lips. And it would be fine. Landon had dated a few girls in the last three years, and I’d dated a few guys. It had been nearly a year since either of us had dated, though.

“Never at the same time,” Leslie pointed out, and I shook my head.

“Not true! Remember I dated that one guy Aaron while he was with Trish.” I grinned as though I’d won an award for reminding them of that time.

“You went on two dates with Aaron. And they never went past you two meeting at a restaurant. That definitely does not count.” Leslie was right, but I just shook my head as if that helped my point.

But why would it be so weird for Landon and me to date at the same time? I couldn’t think of a single reason. We lived pretty independently of one another.

“Look, all I’m saying is that you two spend a lot of time together. Like, a lot. You make dinner together, you go shopping together, you watch movies and shows together. If you both start dating, then you won’t be spending that amount of time together anymore.” Mandy grabbed my hand as though she was already comforting me in my grief over the lessened time. I laughed.

“It’s really not that big of a deal, guys. We’re both adults, and things change. I’ll be just fine.”

“Are you sure that you two aren’t... secretly in love with each other or something? What if you both go on these dates but just find out that you want to be together instead?” Leslie asked, leaning forward in anticipation of my answer. She and Mandy had this idea in their heads for a while now and bugged me about it too often. It really grated on my nerves. Could we not just be great friends?

Mandy was giving me the same look. I let out a huff. “Look, Landon and I have always just been friends. There has never been anything else between us, and there never will be. We’re going to help each other find dates, and that’s all.”

“That’s all what?” Landon said from behind me, scaring the crap out of me. I jumped in my seat and turned around to shoot him a glare. He laughed, earning him a light punch in the gut from me.

“Nothing. Go get your coffee,” I told him, rolling my eyes as I turned around. I felt his hand on the top of my head as he ruffled my hair.

“Landon!” I nearly yelled, turning around to punch him again, but he ducked out of the way, heading toward the counter. I watched after him, shaking my head as he walked away, a small smile on my lips. He always did annoying things like that, but I would think something was wrong if he didn’t.

Mandy looked over her shoulder at Landon, who was ordering at the counter, then she looked back at me. “Are you sure about that?” Cooper took a seat next to her, draping his arm around her shoulder as he picked up her latte. She swatted

him away, making him put her cup down. The entire time, her accusing stare was on me.

I just rolled my eyes at her again, tired of the ridiculous argument.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Leslie commented as Landon came back to the table with his black coffee. He sat down at the empty seat across from me, his wide frame taking up more space than most normal people.

“Week one of the dating game. Are you two ready?” Andrew asked as he sat down with his muffin. He always started at The Pink Bakery before joining us. Coffee wasn’t what got him started in the mornings, sugar was.

“Of course. Got the best guy picked out for Belle,” Landon answered, taking a huge gulp of his coffee. He winked at me as he put the cup down.

“What’s he like?” Mandy asked, leaning into her boyfriend as everyone’s eyes turned to Landon. He grinned, shaking his head.

“Where is the fun in that? Not saying a word,” He answered. Groans of frustration sounded around the table, but not one came from me. I knew he would do this, and I’d prepared.

“What about you?” Cooper turned to me expectantly.

“Nope, nope, nope. I’m not spilling either.” I shrugged, knowing I couldn’t say a word even though I wanted to. More than anything, I wanted to tell everyone—except Landon—

what I'd planned for him on Friday. But I couldn't because they would probably tell Landon.

I don't know why I did it, but it was almost as if I didn't have another option. My fingers just naturally went for her name on my phone and before I thought about it too much, I'd set Landon up with a girl from my fitness class.

Knowing Landon as well as I did, I knew he had a thing for girls with big asses. And so that's who I found for him—a girl in my class who had worked very hard for her voluptuous backside and loved to show it off. Jessica.

Except there was a caveat. Landon also hated women who only talked about themselves and were conceited. And if there was one thing that Jessica was, it was totally and completely wrapped up in herself. Honestly, I wasn't sure if I'd ever had a conversation with her where she didn't make it about how good she looked, how her body was superior to mine, or how great of a person she was.

Landon would love her.

Why I didn't take the first week seriously? I wasn't sure. There was a part of me that knew I wasn't playing fair, but

I also wanted to see Landon squirm a little bit. Maybe I was a terrible friend, or maybe I was just showing him how bad it could be before I set him up with a girl that could be his future wife. Maybe I was just a hero.

“You two are no fun,” Leslie pouted, crossing her arms as though we'd taken candy away from her, and she was a sugar-

depraved child. I rolled my eyes again.

“Everyone will get the full rundown after both dates. Patience, friends,” I said, grinning.

“We’ll both fall in love with our respective dates, obviously,” Landon said, winking at me. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I knew there would be no falling in love this weekend for me. It just didn’t work like that. Love didn’t work like that, if it even existed.

I smiled, knowing that love was certainly not on the table for Landon this Friday, but he would find that out for himself once he met his lovely date.

“Why do I feel like this game is going to last forever?” Mandy asked, looking at Leslie. The two shared a look that somehow held an entire conversation in it, then both of them grinned.

“It won’t. I picked a real winner for Belle,” Landon told everyone, puffing out his large, muscular chest with pride. “Wouldn’t be surprised if wedding bells are around the corner.”

I groaned, standing up. The suspense of waiting for this blind date and for Landon’s blind date, along with my general disinterest in doing this at all, had me ready to leave. “I’ll see you guys next week.” I grabbed my purse and headed for the door.

I had to turn around and give my friends a quick middle finger when they started vocalizing their own rendition of



Here Comes the Bride.



Landon

“Dude, you can’t wear that,” she told me, her eyes narrowing at the overly casual outfit I had picked out. “You’re going to Tidewater.”

“What’s your point? This is fine,” I shrugged my broad shoulders, running my hands over the cotton t-shirt with a skateboarding logo on it. I wasn’t really one to get dressy unless it was when my parents forced me to go to bougie social events with them, so she shouldn’t be surprised that this was what I’d chosen.

Huffing, Belle pushed past me and entered my room, going straight for the closet. “The point,” she said over my shoulder, shoving my clothes around on the rack, looking for something, “is that your date is literally in the Ritz. You can’t wear something you’d wear to the gym.”

“I wouldn’t wear this to the gym,” I defended, and she turned around to glare at me.

“Landon,” she leveled her gaze at my shirt, “you wore that shirt to the gym last week. I was there.”

“Okay, but I didn’t wear the shorts,” I gestured to my Volcom khaki shorts. She was right. I loved wearing this shirt to the gym. Maybe that was why I’d chosen it.

“You’re changing,” she finally found what she was looking for, yanking it from the far back of the closet and hanging it on the door handle as she moved to the other side of the closet to find some pants. I closed the distance between us, grabbing the absurd shirt. It was black with ridiculous flora designs all over

it, and even though the designs were barely noticeable, I still hated the shirt.

“I’m not wearing that,” I told her, grabbing the shirt and reaching around her to shove it back into the closet. My chest pressed against her back as I leaned forward to put it back into the mix of all the clothes. I couldn’t say it was unintentional.

“Landon!” she screeched, snatching it from my hand before I could fully seat the hanger on the rack. She turned around, holding the garment in the tiny amount of space she’d gained between us when she’d turned. She pushed it against my chest, but I didn’t take a single step back. Didn’t want to. I towered over her and was nearly twice as broad as her. She shoved me again, a little bit harder this time, frustration evident on her face. “You have to. This restaurant is super nice, and your date will be dressed well. You have to at least look like you’re trying.”

“If she doesn’t like me in my normal state, then why would I want to date her?” I asked, reclosing the tiny space between us. She had to tilt her head back just to lock eyes with me, and I smirked at her. I loved how small she was compared to me. I also loved the little scowl she had on her face.

“That’s not the point! She’ll like you regardless, but you need to look like you’re at least trying!” She turned back around, grabbing a pair of black slacks that were wedged between a tight rack of clothes and the wall. I never wore them and really didn’t want to now. “There’s no point in this game if you don’t put some effort in, Landon.”

Her voice showed that she was a little more than frustrated, so I softened. I couldn't understand why she would care so much about this, about me making a good impression on the date she'd chosen or looking nice in an upscale restaurant, but it was clear that it mattered. My shoulders slacked, and I stepped away from her. She immediately walked into the small amount of space between me and the doorframe to the closet, leaving the room with the clothes. I watched her as she walked away, her petite but muscular body looking amazing in the skin-tight blue dress she'd chosen. My eyes stayed glued to her until she was out of the room, and then I finally followed her.

I could tell by the noise of something rusty that she was in her room, so I stepped in, stopping under the doorway. She was struggling with a large ironing board, trying to get it to latch. Instead of just watching, I stepped to her and pulled the ironing board that was nearly bigger than her away from her, yanking the legs until it latched. Then, I set it up so she could use it. She gave another frustrated huff before grabbing my clothes that she'd thrown on her bed.

"You're going to be late now," she mumbled, laying the open shirt on the board. Belle cursed under her breath as she realized the iron was nowhere to be seen before stomping back over to her closet. When she returned, her iron was in hand. I picked up the ironing board and moved it to the side of her tidy room, near an outlet.

"I can take care of this if you want?" I told her, trying to grab the iron from her hands. She twisted it out of my reach,

glowering at me.

“No, because as soon as I leave, you’ll just throw these back in your closet and go like that.” She shot another disgusted look at my outfit, and I tried hard not to laugh at her. She was adorable when she was mad like this. “Besides, I haven’t heard the doorbell.”

I stayed silent, knowing that she was probably right.

Once the iron was hot, she began smoothing out the wrinkles the shirt had incurred from being smushed in the back of my closet. I grabbed the pants off her bed, bringing them over to her once she finished with the shirt. At least I was a team player, despite really not wanting to change.

She threw the pants at me when she was finished. “Change.”

I gave her a mock salute before retreating to my room. I changed quickly, looking at myself in the mirror to make sure everything looked alright. I actually looked quite handsome dressed like this, but it just wasn’t me. But if this is what Belle insisted on, I would do it.

I’d do almost anything for that girl.

I found shoes that matched, along with a belt, and donned them before leaving my room. Belle was in the kitchen, sipping from a glass of water. Her eyes glanced up when she saw me enter, and I held my hands out slightly, palms up.

“Happy now?” I asked, giving her a smirk as she looked me up and down.

“Much better.” She put the glass down and approached me, straightening the collar of my shirt. It felt dolly domestic, but not in the way I was used to for us. “Now go, before you’re late. Jessica is meeting you at the restaurant.”

“Text me if you need anything,” I told her, finally giving her a serious face. I knew her date well enough, but it wasn’t like we were friends. He could be worse than I thought. “Max should have already been here, actually.”

I looked down at my watch, seeing that it was seven-o-five. He was supposed to pick Belle up at seven. I didn’t want this date to go well, but I would have appreciated Max being on time.

“It’s fine.” Belle grabbed one of my arms and forced me to turn around before pushing at my back with her palms.

“If he is too much late, I might have to kick his a—”

“Really, it’s not a big deal. I’m sure it’s traffic. And if you don’t get going, you’ll be late.” She pushed harder, trying to shove me out the door. “Have fun!”

I turned once I was right at the front door, pulling her into my arms for a hug. We hugged all the time, but for some reason, she stiffened. “Enjoy your date, Belle.” I pulled away, smirking.

She had a puzzled look on her face, but I slipped out the door before she could say anything.

I walked to my car, seeing that there was still no other car on our road. Max was definitely not Belle’s soulmate. Actually,



I'd intentionally picked him because I knew they wouldn't work out. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to actually pick someone great for her. Max was a guy I'd known at the gym for a while, and from the handful of conversations I'd had with him, he wasn't the brightest guy. He was strong, fit, and conventionally attractive, but Belle wanted—needed more than that. She was intellectual and needed someone who could keep up with her in conversation. He also had a habit of making all conversations about working out or sports. Belle hated sports, at least the most common ones.

I peeled out of our driveway, putting the address in my GPS. It told me that I'd be a few minutes late, but I wasn't too worried.

On the drive, I gave myself a pep talk. I would put full effort into the date, and I wouldn't think about any other women. Specifically, the woman I'd always wanted but never had and never would have.

When I'd finally made it to the parking lot, I texted the number Belle had given me. She'd made me promise not to text it until I got here, which meant that she didn't want me to text this Jessica girl until the date so that I couldn't cheat and find out who she was. All I knew about her was that she went to fitness classes with Belle.

That made me slightly hopeful. If I had to date someone and actually try to make a connection with them, I was glad that Belle picked someone who was also into fitness. I'd always wanted someone to work out with and fulfill my gym crush

fantasy. Belle probably understood that when she picked Jessica.

Guilt filled my chest as I realized that Belle had actually put effort into picking someone for me, while I picked one person I knew she wouldn't like. I was kicking myself over that when Jessica texted back, telling me she was already inside.

Swallowing my guilt over the situation for now, I shoved my phone in my pocket and walked into the hotel, heading straight for the restaurant.

I'd never been here before, and though I knew it was in the Ritz, I wasn't expecting it to have the energy it did. From the second I walked in, I felt like someone had stuffed me into a tiny shoebox and vacuumed the air out of it. The place was nice, yeah, but certainly not the place for me.

I told the hostess my name, and she led me to a darker area of the restaurant.

There, sitting alone at a high top near the bar, was a beautiful blonde. She stood up immediately upon seeing me, a dazzling smile on her face.

I thanked the hostess before walking up to Jessica. I offered her my hand to shake because what the hell else was I supposed to do on a blind date? Instead of taking it, Jessica moved in, wrapping her arms around my shoulder. Her body was pressed up against me during the hug, and I awkwardly wrapped my arms back around her. She was tall, but thin in my arms.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Jessica gushed, pulling away from the hug but staying close to me. I smiled at her charmingly, knowing that I needed to put my best foot forward.

“You too, Jessica.” I walked to her chair and held it out, even though she’d already been sitting, and helped her into her seat before moving to the other side of the table.

I looked at her some more, appreciating the way she looked. Her lips were painted red and turned up at the corners as she looked me over as well. Her eyes were a beautiful brown color, and her makeup only made them stand out more. Long blonde hair was curled perfectly as it fell around her shoulders, long enough to reach her waist.

When she was standing, I briefly noticed the dress she wore and how it clung tightly to her backside. View I wouldn’t mind seeing again.

“Sorry I was a little late,” I told her, knowing that I probably shouldn’t tell her that I was late because of Belle.

She picked up the martini that was already in front of her. “It’s not a problem.” She smiled as she sipped daintily from her glass.

“Tell me about yourself, Jessica,” I asserted, knowing that wasn’t the smoothest way to get to know someone. But again, I had no idea what the normal blind date protocol was.

She grinned and leaned her forearms onto the table. “I’m twenty-six, originally not from the island, but I moved here four years ago for a job. I’m a fitness trainer for the biggest

gym on the island and have a ton of clients that I get to help every day.”

“Oh, that’s super cool,” I said, trying not to just leave her talking without my engagement. “Have you—”

“Thanks!” She interjected, cutting me off. I brushed it off, even though that was a huge pet peeve of mine. I’m sure she was just excited. “It’s really great to show others how to work out properly! Other than training, I also do a lot of modeling. I’ve worked super hard for my body, and obviously, I want to show it off. I work with some fitness brands and even some swimsuit brands through social media.”

When she paused to take a drink, I decided to talk. “Modeling. That’s really great. How long have you—”

“It’s something I’ve always dreamed of doing, ever since I was a little girl. Now, I’m living my dreams!” She grinned at me and paused, as if giving me permission to speak now.

I gritted my teeth, trying to remind myself to do my best on this date. “That’s great that you’ve gotten to follow your dreams. Where did you grow up?”

“I grew up in a small town just thirty minutes outside Tallahassee. Then after I got my bachelor’s in exercise science and passed my certification, I knew I wanted to move somewhere coastal. So when I found Monster Mega Gym here on the island, I knew I would move here.”

“How do you like—” I was trying to ask her how she liked Amelia Island, but I didn’t get that far.

“Honestly, I always knew I would get to model. And I worked so hard for my body that it was bound to happen. It’s amazing to feel so right in my own body.”

“Mhmm,” was all I could respond. I really hated getting blatantly cut off in conversation. It was rude, and honestly, I didn’t understand why she wasn’t cognizant of what she was doing.

Finally, the server came and took my drink order, but I couldn’t even do that without getting cut off.

“I think I’d like to have a—”

“You should really try their old-fashioned! My brother says that it’s amazing here.” Jessica smiled enthusiastically, as if she didn’t just interrupt me to tell me what to order on our first date.

I turned my eyes to the waitress, who was looking at me curiously but expectantly.

And because I occasionally had an asshole streak, I answered, “I’ll have water.”

“Sparkling or flat?”

“Flat. With lemon.”

The waitress nodded, shooting a side glance at Jessica before walking away. Slowly, I turned back to her, bracing myself for the rest of the night. I hadn’t gotten a word in edgewise, and she’d only cared about talking about herself. I hoped that these first few minutes were only a product of nervousness and eagerness.



Isabella

Fifteen minutes after seven, my doorbell finally rang. I steeled my expression before opening the door. Though he was very late, I told myself that I would do my very best on this date. I didn't care for a love connection and knew that it wouldn't happen, but that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the company and the date. Besides, I needed to at least give dating a try again.

After an excruciating break-up, I was ruined for romance. Men sucked, and they genuinely didn't care about women. Not the way that they should. To be honest, I never thought I would date again. Because the only man I needed in my life was my father, and I supposed, my best friend.

But the thought of him getting a serious girlfriend terrified me. It had always been "him and me" for such a long time, and I relied on him for everything. He was my unwavering support whenever I needed him most, and the thought of losing that connection terrified me.

So maybe I could give another relationship a try.

Max wasn't off to the greatest start by being late, but I was ready to change my mind about him the second he opened the door.

Curly dark hair sat atop his head in that sexy I'm-not-trying way that seemingly only men could pull off. He had deep olive-toned skin and caramel eyes that glittered in the rays of the setting sun that peeked over the house. He was not as broad as Landon, but definitely broad enough. More than most men. He was wearing a dark grey t-shirt and dark jeans, paired with white sneakers. It was a casual outfit that made me



wonder if I'd overdressed. His massive biceps strained against his shirt and I sent a mental thank you to Landon. He knew I was a sucker for good arms.

“Isabella?” He asked, grinning with a thousand-watt smile. I could actually swoon.

Maybe love at first sight was real...

“Hi! Max?” I asked, shoving my hand out between us because what else was I supposed to do when greeting a total stranger?

“Sorry I'm late, I got hung up at the gym and didn't want to show up all sweaty,” he explained, giving the mental image of him in the gym, dripping in sweat. I wouldn't have minded if he'd shown up like that.

I cleared my thoughts quickly, realizing that maybe it had been too long since I'd gone out with anyone. That was the only logical explanation as to why I was acting like he was the sexiest man alive.

“It's no problem,” I answered, stepping out onto the front porch with him. The amber glow of the evening sun seemed to wrap a halo around his car, which was a sleek red Mustang.

With a hand on the small of my back, he led me down the steps and to the passenger door of his car, which he opened for me. Already, this man had points in my book just for doing that. The only man I'd even known to do that for me was Landon, not even my father. None of my past boyfriends ever opened doors for me.

Once we were both in the car, he backed out of the driveway quickly and zoomed off. I giggled nervously, enjoying the rush of going fast but also panicking because I only liked going this fast when I was the driver. I had a control issue in vehicles.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he launched the car onto the highway.

“Figured we could go to the pier and have dinner ocean-side.” He looked over at me, grinning. “You’re absolutely stunning.”

I blushed under his gaze, which flicked between me and the road. Boldly, he reached over and placed a hand on my knee. It didn’t bother me, but I definitely thought it was a little too early for the passenger princess treatment.

“Thank you,” I said timidly, biting my lip to prevent myself from full-blown grinning.

After squeezing my knee, he pulled his hand away and turned on the radio. Instantly, the staticky sound of sports announcers blared through the speakers before Max hurriedly turned it to a normal volume.

“Sorry,” He said. “You okay with listening to the game on our way?”

I raised my eyebrows, hearing the announcers talking about the play currently happening in some football game. I cringed internally.

“Sure,” I said, trying not to let my disdain show through in my voice. I hated ball sports. They were boring, and after

dating my ex, who was a sports fanatic, I decided that I would never force myself to be a sports fan for someone else again.

The entire drive, Max and I didn't speak. Instead, the car was filled with sounds of the game being broadcast, along with Max's reactions to things happening. He even got so excited at one point that he whooped loudly, scaring me out of the zoned-out daze I'd been in.

Finally, we'd pulled up to the pier parking. I unbuckled, assuming that we'd get out and head to dinner. But nay, Max sat still and intently listened to the game. I took a slow, deep breath as I tried to rein in my emotions. Just because he was passionate about football didn't mean he wasn't a good guy.

"Yes!" He yelled, pumping his fist slightly before turning the car off. "Sorry, my favorite team is playing right now." He gave me a meek smile, and it washed away my worries.

"It's okay," I said, smiling back as I got out of the car.

Before I was fully standing, Max was there, taking my hand and closing the car door behind me. The gesture made me blush again as he turned us and kept my hand in his. We walked towards the steps to the pier. He held my hand the entire walk to the local pub we walked into, McCully's. Max told the hostess his last name, which was Arbor, and she led us to the outdoor seating that looked over the water. It was beautiful, even if I'd lived here and seen this view for years.

"I can't believe Landon has been hiding you for all this time. I've known Landon since he started coming to Goldenrod a few years back. He tells me you two are best friends?"

“Yeah! We’ve known each other since college and have always been friends,” I responded, smiling at the waitress who approached the table.

“Do you like beer?” Max asked, and I nodded.

“Two house beers,” Max told her. “And two waters.” He looked at me and winked.

After she walked away, he turned back to me fully. “Have you ever eaten here?”

“Nope,” I responded, leaning forward onto the table. Max leaned in too, and our faces were only a few inches apart.

“They have the best shrimp on the island, in my opinion. And their house beer is the best I’ve ever had.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’m excited to try it.” The waitress came back with our drinks and took both of our orders. I hadn’t even had a chance to open my menu yet, but Max seemed to know this place like the back of his hand. He ordered me a shrimp and steak plate, and I asked for asparagus and rice pilaf as the sides. He ordered the same for himself, but with fries and broccoli.

“So you work in accounting like Landon? Do you two work together?” Max asked, taking a sip of his beer. I did the same before responding, smiling at the taste. He was right, it was pretty good.

“We work for the same company, but in different departments. He’s in auditing for all of the subsidiaries of the

company, and I work for the legal side of the company in forensic accounting.”

“Forensic?” He asked, clear that he wasn’t in business or finance.

“Basically, I investigate fraudulent reports, unethical spending, or illegal practice. Our company is nationwide, so I work on more cases than one would expect. We have a team of attorneys that I work with to resolve issues.”

“I didn’t even know that was a thing, but that makes sense. I bet that’s very interesting,” he said enthusiastically.

“What do you do?” I asked.

“I’m the food and golf manager at the Dolphin Resort. I’ve worked there since I was in high school and worked my way up.” He leaned back in his chair, and I watched his chest as it stretched. It was impressive and spoke to his character that he’d worked for the resort for so long and had climbed the ladder.

“What do you do for fun?” I asked, hoping that we’d have overlapping interests.

“I go to the gym. A lot. And I love football and baseball, so I go to a lot of games. Honestly, that’s pretty much it outside of work.”

I nodded, taking another sip of my beer. “Do you like hiking? Surfing?”

“Nah. I’d rather just go to the gym and catch a pump.” He shrugged like that wasn’t the worst answer ever. I loved hiking

and went regularly. I was no surfer, but I did enjoy spending time at the beach.

“Favorite book?” I asked, knowing that the answer could tell me a lot about him. Landon wasn’t a huge reader, but I’d convinced him to read a few of my favorite fantasies and he’d loved them.

Max chuckled, leaning forward. “Haven’t read a single book since high school.”

I raised my brows. “Really? You’re missing out!” I said tightly, but I meant it very seriously.

“Kind of a waste of time. If they’re any good, they get made into movies, so I just watch those.” His answer nearly had my jaw dropping, but I held it together. As a book nerd, that was the worst thing anyone could ever say.

“So it’s really just the gym and sports?” I asked, trying to sound funny. I probably failed.

“Yeah, no need for much else.” He grinned, totally oblivious to how I felt about that answer. “Do you like football? I could take you to some of the games if you’d like.”

“I’m not really a fan of sports, to be honest.” It was my turn to shrug, and his eyes widened.

“Seriously? How could you not be a fan? They’re so fun to watch.” He was incredulous, and I guessed I couldn’t blame him.

“Just never really been my thing. I do enjoy motocross, though.” I’d grown up watching supercross and motocross, so

naturally, I was still very interested in it. Landon also rode often, and I would go to the track with him occasionally. We'd watched every season of racing together since we met.

Max scoffed. "That's not a real sport. No worries though, we'll make you into a football fan."

I ground my teeth together as I smiled and laughed with a clenched jaw. Did this man have no idea how offensive his words were? First of all, motocross was certainly a real sport that took a very high level of athleticism. Second of all, he would not be making me into a fan.

Our food came out, thankfully ending the conversation. I hoped that we would avoid topics like that for the rest of the night so that I could enjoy this date.





Landon

I was perhaps a little too eager to hear how Belle's night had gone. After I returned home, I sat on the couch in the dark, watching the time on my phone. Would they hit it off? Would she go home with him, or worse, bring him back here? Was she comfortable with him? Was she safe?

Ten rolled around, and I started getting nervous. I'd been back for an hour already, and it seemed like a reasonable time for the date to conclude. Surely if she didn't like him, she would have texted me if he made her uncomfortable.

I sent her a quick text, asking if everything was okay. Usually, she was really good about responding, but after ten minutes, my worry ratcheted up.

After stewing, I decided to get up and go look for her. I knew where their date was, and I would simply just go see if she was still there. If Max's Mustang was still parked by the pier. If she wasn't, I would call her.

Just as I grabbed my car keys to leave, I heard the rumble of an engine pull up in the driveway. Quickly, I moved to the window and peeked out, seeing that it was indeed Max's car. Relief washed through me.

Until I watched as Max got out and walked around the car, opening Belle's door for her. She took his hand as she stood from the car, and he pulled her close. She didn't seem to mind that, either. Maybe their date was a success?

I would have to find someone worse next week.

They exchanged a few words in the night air, illuminated only by the bright lights on the porch of our house. He gave her cheek a quick kiss, and then she dropped his hand and came to the door.

I bolted away from the door, running to the kitchen so that she wouldn't know I was watching her the entire time. All I could think was how grateful I was that she didn't invite him in.

As soon as I heard the front door open and close, I walked out of the kitchen casually, as if I didn't know that she'd just gotten home.

“Hey, Belle,” I greeted, seeing her drop her purse very dramatically. I cocked my head sideways, waiting for her to meet my eyes.

Her head snapped up as if I startled her, but she instantly smiled at me. “Hi.”

She straightened her back and walked towards the kitchen, brushing past me. I was dying to know how her date went, but didn't want to seem too eager. I turned and followed her, watching as she got her tea kettle out of the cabinet and moved to the pantry to pick out a tea. This was her nightly routine, and if I could predict which tea she was in the mood for, I would have done it for her. But she never picked what I expected.

So I just moved to the other side of the kitchen where the Keurig was and put a pod in it, starting my own nightly drink. Yes, I drank coffee all hours of the day.

“How was your date?” She asked, something in her voice that I couldn’t place.

“Good.” Was all I could give her. How did I explain that she picked the literal worst girl ever for me to go on a date with? I didn’t want to hurt her feelings or make her feel like she did a bad job. But dang, was Jessica not even close to soulmate material. “Yours?”

“Good.” There was that tone in her voice again. I replayed it a few times while I waited for the coffee maker to finish. I knew that Max was most definitely not her type, so I concluded that her date was not good, just like mine wasn’t.

And then it dawned on me that perhaps Belle had also set me up with someone she knew I would dislike.

Laughter boomed out of me, uncontrolled. I didn’t even try to hold back as I turned around, watching Belle do the same. There was a confused look on her face for all of one second before she busted out into laughter as well.

“You weasel,” I called her, holding my stomach from the laughter.

“What?” She held a hand to her chest as if I’d offended her gravely, but the look in her eyes told me everything that I needed to know. “You didn’t fall head over heels with Jessica?”

I let my laughter run its course and waited for it to turn into mild chuckles. “Oh, yes. It was love at first sight! I adore when someone cuts me off every time I start talking.” I

laughed again, thinking about the absurdity of the date I'd been on.

"I knew it! Just like I love men who only know how to talk about football and the gym!" Belle came over to me, putting a hand on my arm as she laughed. "I knew wedding bells would be ringing as soon as he told me that Motocross wasn't a real sport."

All laughter from me ceased, and I straightened. "He what?"

"Yup! Max said that moto wasn't even a real sport."

"Did you line him out?" I asked, all humor gone. I hadn't known that Max was that bad. Motocross was Belle's favorite, thanks to her family's love for it, and for mine. She was the only one of her sisters that cared for the sport, but her love for racing was fierce. It's one thing that brought us closer as friends.

"I held my tongue," She said proudly. Shaking her head, she returned to her tea kettle, which had a temperature gauge on top. I'm sure she was checking how close her water was to tea temp.

"So I take it the date went bad?" I asked her, trying to hide any hope from my voice.

"Bad is one way to put it."

"Then why are you just now getting back?" I leaned back on the counter behind me, taking the cup of fresh coffee into my hands while I watched her.

She sighed, turning to shoot me a glare. “Because...Max not only wanted to eat waterside, but he then wanted us to go into the bar and sit and watch a football game.”

“No,” I said, genuinely shocked. There was no fizz in making a girl sit with you and watch sports on a first date. Especially because I’m sure, she expressed her disinterest in watching.

“Yes.” She rolled her eyes and turned back to the tea kettle, pulling it off the stove. “It was the most miserable thing ever.”

Her tone held a note that wasn’t joking, and guilt flooded my chest. Her ex-boyfriend always made her watch football and basketball with him, and would even get mad at her if she would read a book or use her phone during it. He made her miserable, so I’m sure tonight was truly awful.

I fled the space between us in the kitchen the second she put the hot kettle down, wrapping my arms around her, banding them across her chest. I leaned my head down, nuzzling it into her neck.

She softened after a second, muscles relaxing under mine.

“I’m sorry, Belle,” I told her, squeezing my arms a little tighter. I had to refrain from kissing her neck in this position.

Her hands reached up and tucked around my forearms, her head tilting to rest against mine. “It’s okay. But you owe me.” Her voice was light, and I sighed in relief.

“Now, please explain why you thought Jessica would be a good idea.” I moved my arms away from her chest, pinching

her sides.

She shoved me away, turning until we were face to face.  
“The same reason you thought Max was a good idea!”

Then we were both laughing again.

After her tea was finished, we both moved to the living room, where we recounted our poor dates. How Jessica never let me finish a sentence and how Max made everything about sports.





Isabella

After our disastrous first round of dates last week, both of us decided that we should actually take it seriously. If we were going to spend time on this, it might as well not be wasted.

So Monday night, Landon and I decided to talk through the qualities of potential candidates. I had three girls in mind that I knew Landon could like, and I asked him yes or no questions to help me narrow down the selection. He did the same with me, and by the end of the night, we'd made our choices.

This time, I'd set Landon up for a date at a bar so that he didn't have to dress outside of his comfort zone. He, of course, thanked me profusely and wore chinos and a t-shirt.

For me, he set it up so that I would drive to the location instead of being picked up. Just in case anyone tried to hold me hostage to watch a football game again.

"You look great, Belle," Landon complimented the second I came out of my bedroom. I was wearing a light blue sundress that came to my mid-thigh. It had spaghetti straps and a straight neckline. It was pretty adorable, and I loved that I had an excuse to dress up now. The date was only at a local restaurant, but I loved wearing dresses. I didn't care if my date showed up in sweatpants; I was still going to dress nice.

"Thanks," I said, ruing my hands over the tops of my thighs to smooth out any wrinkles. I was thankful for the late summer tan that I had because otherwise, I would be too pale for this outfit.

“Maybe I should just take you out tonight instead,” he said, and I laughed.

“Sure,” I joked, shaking my head as I went to the kitchen for some water. I was ready too early, which was normal for me.

“Call me if you need anything tonight, okay?” Landon said, appearing in the doorway.

I nodded, and he vanished. The door to the house opened and closed quickly.

The second date was definitely better than the first. Once I arrived home, I was at least not the most annoyed person in the world.

Landon had set me up with someone that contracted with his department at our firm. Apparently, they’d gotten along well enough to exchange numbers and hang out a few times.

Trent was easy-going and polite. He opened the doors for me and pulled out my chair. Most importantly, he never mentioned football or any other ball sport.

He ordered food for me after a long interview about what I did and didn’t like. It was actually pretty sweet, and what he chose for me was amazing. Since it was a Cuban restaurant, I ended up trying something I would have been too nervous to order otherwise.

I sat on the couch, lifting my feet onto the table to ease the ache there. The heels I had worn were so cute and showed off my toned calves, but they were murderous to my feet.

Turning on the TV, I decided I'd wait up for Landon. I wanted to hear about his date since I'd concluded that I'd matched him with the perfect girl.

Thirty minutes later, he strode through the door with a smile on his face. I raised my brows at him as he slammed himself down on the couch next to me.

"That's a pretty big smile. I take it things went well?" I asked, suddenly not wanting to know the answer. It was obvious that the answer was yes, but I didn't like that for some reason.

"Yeah, Allie was great," He said, leaning his head against the back of the couch and closing his eyes. "How was Trent?"

"He was fine," I answered honestly. "Probably no second date for me, though."

"No?" He lifted his head, looking at me. "Did he talk about football?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "No, he was great. But there just wasn't a spark or anything. He's definitely someone I could be friends with."

Landon did something that was between a scoff and a laugh. "Too bad for him. Because your best guy friend position is taken."

"I can't have two?"

"Nope. Never." Landon leaned into me playfully.

“So will there be a second date with Allie?” I asked, leaning back into him. This was normal for us, but for some reason, it felt...off.

“Nah. Not a love connection.” He wrapped an arm around me, grabbing the remote out of my lap. Then, he immediately started browsing Netflix. I knew this meant he wanted to stay up watching something, and I could melt into the couch because of it.

“That’s too bad,” I responded, watching as he scrolled through our options.

“She was great. Definitely better than Jessica, but we just didn’t have much in common. She’s literally never seen Star Trek.”

I gave a dramatic gasp. “Seriously?”

“Dead serious. She also hasn’t seen any of the Lord of the Rings.”

“No wonder you don’t want to go out with her again,” I mused, shaking my head furiously when Landon clicked on a horror movie. Landon put his hand on top of my head to stop the shaking and tried to force me to nod.

“Come on, Belle. We’re watching this. Everyone is saying it’s the scariest movie they’ve seen all year.” He dropped his arm back around my shoulders and pulled me closer.

Landon loved to watch scary movies. And he loved to make me watch them with him. The problem was that I was a huge

chicken when it came to horror. Yet I still watched them with him.

“Which is exactly why we shouldn’t watch it!” I said, laughter in my voice.

“You know you want to,” He teased, turning his face to look at me. After a few seconds, he scrolled away.

“No, we can watch it. It’s fine.” I snuggled in closer, knowing that the horror movie was the only excuse I had to do so.

I wasn’t sure why, but I thought that I wanted that. All of these years of friendship and never had my thoughts been like this.

I’m sure it was just the notion of dating that had me ready to feel affection again. It had nothing to do with Landon.

“If you say so,” He agreed, grinning at me as he selected the movie and pressed play.



Landon



After I got back from the gym Monday morning, I knew I would need a little extra energy to get me through the day. My workout was crap, and I knew it was because I hardly slept.

The coffee at home wouldn't be enough for me. Especially knowing what today would hold at the office, I knew this was an espresso kind of day.

After a quick shower and outfit change, I headed to Grumpy Coffee Co. It had fast become everyone's favorite coffee shop in town, and I liked it a little extra because of who owned it. Or rather, who owned the bakery next door.

After parking my car a few blocks down, I walked to the coffee shop. I had more than an hour before I needed to be at work, so I would be able to take time to drink my coffee and probably doom-scrolling.

"Hey, Landon," Liam called as soon as I walked in. He and Emma had been engaged for a few months now, and I'd never seen the guy so happy. Of course, I didn't know him well other than when he and Emma dated in college, but even then, I'd only met him a few times. He was happy then, and when he moved back to the island and he was not with Emma, he was the biggest dick in the world. Now that they'd worked out their issues and he literally changed his entire store so that it wouldn't compete with hers, he was genuinely one of the nicest guys I knew. I'd gotten to know him a lot better since he was now at every family event. I always went with Belle since she never wanted to be the only one on her own. Her younger

sister usually couldn't make family events since she'd moved to New York.

"Morning!" I said as I approached the counter. I ordered my coffee and made small talk with Liam about the upcoming Labor Day event at Belle's parents' place.

Once the barista handed me my coffee, Liam and I parted ways, and I found an empty table on the side of the shop. Taking a seat, I pulled my phone out to scroll through social media.

The scroll was pointless, but relaxing. I would be super focused on work today, more so than usual, so I deserved a little mind-numbing. A few videos I sent to Belle, knowing that she'd get a laugh out of them. And one about a puppy that would definitely make her cry.

"Landon?" I lifted my head when I heard a feminine voice call my name. I saw a dark-headed woman standing to the side of my table, her brown eyes shining as she smiled at me. I squinted, knowing that I knew this person but not quite placing her name or how I knew her.

Suddenly, it came to me. "Tiffany?"

"Yeah! Hi!" She opened her arms like she wanted a hug, so I stood, wrapping her in my arms briefly. Then I took my seat, motioning for her to sit as well. She was holding an iced drink already.

"I didn't know you lived on the island," I said, remembering that after college, she'd moved to Tampa.

Tiffany was one of the girls that hung around in the circles that Belle and I always had. We were never good friends or anything, but she was a nice girl and was super intelligent. I'd always wondered why Belle wasn't close to her.

"I actually just moved here last week!" She said, taking a sip of her drink. I watched her full lips close around the straw. Were her lips always that luscious? "I googled the closest coffee shop, and this is what popped up."

"Oh, well, welcome to Amelia." I raised my drink to her in salute before drinking. "Did you move here for a job?"

"Yeah. I work in bookkeeping for Stockend Law. Well, I start next week. I'm still getting settled and moved in." I couldn't help but watch her as she spoke, taking in how good-looking she was. Her eyes were nearly amber; they were so light, and she wore her makeup in a smoky wing that drew attention straight to her. Her lips were glossy and large, and oddly her mouth looked really good when she was talking.

"Oh, congrats."

"Thanks! Have you been here ever since graduation?"

"Yeah, it's great here." Her eyes were appraising me, and I didn't mind one bit. Actually, I was starting to wonder... "Did you move here by yourself? Or with someone?"

"All by myself! Starting over here," She answered, giving me a sheepish smile. She straightened and looked as though she remembered something. "Didn't you move here with someone else from our class? What was her name..."

“Belle,” I answered, my lips turning up at the thought of my best friend.

“Yes! Isabella! She was so precious! Are you two still friends?” He leaned forward, and then suddenly flinched. “Or are you two together now?”

“We’re still great friends. But no, we’re not together. We do have a house together, though.”

“I was always jealous that you two had such a tight friendship, honestly. It’s really sweet.” Tiffany reached across the table and grabbed my arm, and I didn’t mind it.

“It’s just always been like that for us.” I shrugged, hoping to steer the topic away from Belle. As much as I loved to think and talk about her, I was finding myself curious about Tiffany. I knew that Belle and I were supposed to be in a matchmaking game, but what was the harm in me finding someone on my own? Especially when Tiffany just dropped so casually in front of me.

“Are you busy this Friday?” I asked. I’d never been one to be shy about asking a girl out—well, except for one—so I didn’t hesitate.

“Nope!” She grinned expectantly, knowing what I was about to ask. I smirked at her.

“Would you like to go out? I can pick you up at six?”

“That would be fantastic, Landon.”



Isabella

“So tell us how date number two was!” Mandy said before I could even sit down. It was too early in the morning for them to be grilling me about a date, especially since I hadn’t had any coffee yet!

“Was it as bad as the last one?” Leslie leaned in, holding her coffee cup between both hands with a look of unbridled curiosity on her face. I knew they’d go wild on me if I didn’t give them some information in the next ten seconds.

I laughed, bringing my piping hot coffee to my mouth, not caring that it burnt my lip because it gave me a few extra seconds.

“His name was Trent.” Both of them leaned in even more at this tiny bit of information that I’d given them.

“And?” They both said in demanding unison. I rolled my eyes.

“And he was fine. It wasn’t as disastrous as Max, but it wasn’t love at first sight either.”

“So, will you go on a second date?” Leslie asked, and I immediately shook my head.

“Nah. He’s definitely not the one. He didn’t talk about sports at all, which was a huge plus, but he also didn’t have anything interesting to say. Just made me talk the whole time and responded with one-word answers the whole time.”

“Sometimes the silent ones are better anyway,” Mandy suggested, a smirk on her lips. “Less pestering.”

“True, but I don’t want them that silent,” I added, just as Landon took a seat next to me.

“Yeah, you need a man who can talk just as much as you do,” Landon teased, jumping into the conversation immediately. I sent him a glare over my shoulder. “What? You talk a lot and need someone that can keep up!”

“If you knew that, then why didn’t you set me up with someone more talkative?” I argued, and knew my point was valid.

“I didn’t know he was that quiet! I just thought he wasn’t big on random conversation at the gym.” Landon shrugged, and I just rolled my eyes, which seemed to be what I always did around him.

“So, do you have a more talkative date planned out for Belle this week?” Mandy asked, Cooper taking his seat next to her. He placed a box of pastries down in front of her, but her focus was on Landon. I considered stealing a Danish because I was sure she wouldn’t notice.

“Actually, I was going to talk to Belle about that. Just hadn’t had the chance to yet.” Landon’s eyes flicked to me but then went back to Mandy, as if he didn’t want to hold my gaze. “I have a date this Friday with someone I’ve known for a bit, so I can’t play the game this week.”

It took a lot of willpower to prevent my eyebrows from shooting up my forehead.



“What?” Leslie yelled, definitely too loud for a coffee shop. She smiled at the people that turned their heads to look at her before turning back to the table, glaring at Landon. “Who?”

“Someone Belle and I went to college with. She moved to the island recently, and we ran into each other. Here, actually.” Landon sipped his coffee that I hadn’t noticed he’d brought to the table. Then I realized it was my coffee. I gritted my teeth but kept my hands in my lap no matter how much my rising anger made me want to snatch it out of his grip.

Not that I cared to share my coffee with Landon. I never minded that. It was just that he had just told the whole group he’d found his whole date and hadn’t even said anything to me about it yet, coupled with the way he was avoiding my eyes.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t set Belle up with someone, though.” Cooper finally joined the conversation, his arm draping around his girlfriend’s shoulders. The girlfriend who still hadn’t noticed the pastries. The pastries I was seriously considering snagging since I was now stressed out.

But I didn’t understand why this news stressed me out. Or hurt my feelings. I didn’t really care about the game that much in all reality. So why did I feel betrayed that Landon had found himself a date with someone else?

“Well, if she doesn’t want to play because I’m not playing, I’m not going to set her up with anyone.” Finally, Landon turned to look at me.

“Yeah. I’m fine with not going out this Friday. So don’t bother finding anyone.” I said it as casually as I could, hoping

that my hurt feelings wouldn't shine through.

Landon nodded and went back to drinking my coffee. Again, I suppressed the urge to rip it out of his hands. Instead, I just got up and went to the counter again, ordering another black coffee, this time with a double shot of espresso.

"Everything good?" The voice behind me made me jump, and I turned to see Andrew behind me. I guessed he just got here and I'd barely beaten him to the counter.

"Everything's great!" I responded cheerfully, giving my friend a smile. "Landon stole my coffee, so I'm just getting another one."

"You two always share everything," Andrew chuckled, patting me on the shoulder as I moved to the pick-up area.

Apparently, we didn't share everything, because Landon couldn't even tell me that he was going on a date this Friday and that the game was off.

And it pissed me off.

Once I returned to the table, I took my seat next to Landon, but subtly moved my chair over an inch so that he wasn't crowding my space. Usually, it didn't bother me, but my anger towards him was boiling, and I didn't even want to accidentally brush arms.

I was lost to whatever conversation the group was having, silently sipping my new drink while my traitorous best friend continued drinking my first one like he'd bought it himself. All I could think about was his betrayal, and I obsessed over

wondering who this girl was. Especially since Landon had mentioned that we knew her in college.

Regardless of who it was, I still found it offensive that Landon had never said anything to me about this. Was he just going to wait until Friday, when I'd set him up with someone else, to tell me that he already had plans? And that he hadn't set me up with anyone?

I tried to keep my thoughts under control but only grew angrier and angrier as time passed. Thankfully, the conversation had moved away from our dating game, and I didn't have to endure any more questions.

I tried not to cringe when Landon's arm went around the back of my chair, and that's how I knew I was truly pissed. I usually didn't mind in the slightest when he did that, but now I just wanted to throw his arm off of my chair. He already had my coffee; he didn't need my space, too.

Everyone's conversation droned on until a new voice caught my attention.

"Landon! Hey!" I looked up from staring a hole into the table to see a beautiful brunette who looked vaguely familiar. She put her hand on Landon's shoulder since he was sitting at the end of the table. Her eyes glanced in my direction, landing on the arm around my seat. Before her gaze could move away, Landon stood, pulling her into a hug.

"Hey, Tiffany!"

And I remembered exactly who she was, then.



Landon

I guessed I couldn't be too surprised to see Tiffany here since this was where I'd run into her on Monday morning as well. But I was so tied into my group of friends that I never expected anyone to interrupt. The moment I saw her look in Belle's direction, I stood up, pulling my arm away from Belle's seat. I could practically feel the tension that Belle held the whole time we'd been there, and I didn't want to feel anymore from Tiffany.

"You come here on Wednesdays, too?" She asked, her arm remaining on me, sliding from my shoulder to my bicep. I don't know if she thought I wouldn't notice, but I felt the light squeeze that she gave my muscle and tried not to be too proud of what I knew she felt there.

"Every Wednesday! This is our group," I said, pivoting to introduce her to my friends. "Andrew, Leslie, Cooper, Mandy, and Belle. You remember Belle, obviously."

"Yes, of course!" She exclaimed, moving around me with open arms. I watched as Belle awkwardly stood to give Tiffany a hug. I gulped. "It's been so long! I can't believe you're still on the island!"

"Yep! I'll always be an island girl." Belle patted Tiffany's back before moving away from the hug.

"I completely understand why! I love living here!" Tiffany turned to the rest of the table. "So nice to meet all of you!"

The group returned the sentiment before Tiffany finally walked back to me, where I was still standing.

“Can you walk me to work?” She asked, her hand on my arm again. It took everything in me not to look back at Belle, who I walked to work with every Wednesday and a lot of other days. But we’d started dating, and I’m sure she understood that our friendship things wouldn’t always be the same.

“Of course,” I said, grabbing my coffee cup from the table. I didn’t remember buying it, but I’m sure that was because of how tired I was.

“See you all later!” Tiffany waved to the group before looping her arm in mine and leading me out the door of Grumpy Coffee. I didn’t look back to my friend group, feeling slightly uncomfortable that I was leaving my group of friends to walk with Tiffany.

It was only a couple of blocks to work, and I was fairly certain that Tiffany’s was only a few further. Despite having driven my car here, I walked with her instead of inviting her to drive. We’d be able to talk more that way, and there was more than enough time for me to walk her all the way to her building and then come back to mine.

“Are we still on for Friday night?” Tiffany asked, walking extremely close to me. Every time that I took a step to the right just to give myself a little more walking room, she mimicked the action. I was a broad man, and I enjoyed having enough space to walk, but I tried not to let it affect me. Tiffany had always been a little too comfortable being touchy and close with people, so I knew it was just her personality.

“Absolutely,” I responded shortly, not understanding why she would ask such a thing.

“I was just checking.” She grinned at me and looped an arm through mine. Again, personal space issues. But I also guessed that the fact that I’d just confirmed our date made her even more comfortable. “You aren’t seeing anyone else, though?”

“No, why?” I asked, laughing at the idea. I wouldn’t even count the two dates I’d been on the past two weeks because they were blind and went absolutely nowhere.

“Just wondering,” She said, but I could tell there was more that she wanted to say. If I stayed silent long enough, I figured she would just say it. And I was right. “Do you still have feelings for Isabella?”

I scoffed immediately, probably too quickly. “Of course not, Tiffany. And I never had feelings for her in the first place. We’ve always just been great friends.”

“You sure? Everyone in school definitely thought you were in love with her,” She countered, and I stopped walking, turning to her.

I hadn’t been aware that I was always so transparent and readable. I thought I’d been more covert about how I felt about Belle, especially back then. Apparently not.

“I’ve never had feelings for her, Tiffany. We’ve never even dated. So no, I don’t have feelings for her.” I sounded as confident in my statement as I could, especially knowing that there would never be anything between me and Belle. I had



resolved myself to that fate long ago, and the feelings I most definitely did have for her were tucked away neatly, along with all of the other foolish dreams I'd had for myself. "You don't have anything to worry about."

And she didn't. Because I needed to move on, and Tiffany was the perfect way to do so. If she was anything like the girl she used to be, I knew we would be able to have fun together and actually have a great relationship.

"I was just making sure. To be upfront with you, I had a massive crush on you in college, but knew that we were going in separate directions. And with how Belle was always with you, I figured you two would eventually be together. So I just wanted to make sure that you two weren't..." She laughed nervously, and I reached out and grabbed her hand from where it was looped through my arms. I gave it a quick squeeze, but she held tight when I went to let go.

"We're not," I assured her again, watching her lips turn up.

We continued walking, enjoying catching up with each other. She told me all about her life in Tampa and how she'd gone crazy for a few years. She told me how exciting her first job was because it was for a business that really focused on employee wellness. But despite it being so great by providing snacks around the clock and having mental relaxation rooms, it still turned pretty sour when her boss was sleeping with his secretary. The toxic work environment and legal battles resulted in a mass exodus of the company's workers, including Tiffany.

Then she asked me about how life was on the island after college, and she actually gave me time to tell her things without interruption. She genuinely listened and engaged without turning the conversation back around to herself, checking off one of my biggest requirements for a woman I will date.

“This is me,” She said softly, still not having let go of my hand. I turned towards her, genuinely happy that I had agreed to walk her today. It better prepared me for our date on Friday, and I was looking forward to it now more than ever. “Thanks for walking with me.”

“Anytime. Let’s do it again sometime?”

“I’d love that,” She answered, dropping my hand and wrapping her arms around me in a hug. I returned it easily, and then she left, walking into her building. I took that time to admire her slender figure and professional skirt that showed off her amazing calves.

This was good. Finally, a girl that I could start a relationship with that I liked.



Isabella

I sat at the counter in my sister's new home, watching as Emma danced around the kitchen in her pink gingham apron, singing to the music their Alexa was playing. She used a wooden spatula—one that was definitely dripping red sauce—as her microphone, leaning into Liam as she shouted a lyric about their love. His warm eyes watched her with adoration, no matter how silly or messy her actions were.

It was wild to me how, in such a short amount of time, their animosity for one another had turned into such an intense love. It had been nearly a year since Liam proposed, and they still gave each other the biggest googly eyes I'd ever seen. The love they showed to each other melted my heart while simultaneously causing a tiny green monster to rear its ugly head at me. But the likelihood of me finding what they had was slim, especially since the one chance I thought I had ended so catastrophically.

“You never sing with me,” Emma complained, shoving her freshly coated spatula microphone in Liam's face.

He smirked, leaning forward to lick the red sauce off the spoon. “No need to add to what is already a spectacular show, baby.”

“Thank you,” she said proudly. “But I need a backup singer.”

“I think that is a job better suited for your sister,” Liam answered, shooting me a devious glance.

“Nope! Not backup singer material! A dying cat chorus would be better suited for my vocal talents.”

Emma huffed, turning back to the sauce and pasta she was cooking. Not only was my sister an excellent baker, but she had also really gotten into cooking ever since moving in with Liam. So when she invited me over tonight for homemade lasagna with freshly made noodles and sauce, I wasn't going to turn her offer down. Especially since it was Friday, and the blind date I was supposed to go on never got planned because Landon had decided that he wanted to go out with someone of his choosing and therefore didn't need to set one up for me.

But I wasn't annoyed. Or bitter. Or anything.

He could enjoy his date to who knows where, and I would enjoy Emma's scratch-made lasagna.

I hummed to the new song that came on as Emma started to assemble the layers of the lasagna. Every move she made seemed to be to the beat of the music, and I nearly laughed at how cute it was. She had always been so unapologetically herself, wearing almost exclusively pink and being so bubbly and fun all the time. It was no wonder that Liam—who externally had the facade of a saltine cracker—was attracted to her. Because of opposites and all that jazz.

“Okay! Now that the lasagna is in, we can have our appetizer and wine!” Emma squealed, walking into her chef's pantry to grab whatever the appetizer was. Their new house was huge, and the kitchen we were in now was the size of an industrial one. The marble countertops extended forever, giving plenty

of preparation room for Emma and Landon in their cooking and baking adventures. They had a chef's pantry, which was a fancy way of saying a secondary kitchen with enough cabinet space to stock a department store. There was even a large industrial fridge in there. Despite only the two of them living here, I knew they loved to have friends and even employees over for themed parties, which I knew was solely Emma's idea. And Liam loved her enough to play along.

When she emerged, she had a massive charcuterie board in her hands, overflowing with cheeses, crackers, and fruits.

She walked it to the large island I was seated at, placing it down within arm's reach.

"This is too pretty for me to eat," I told her, admiring what had to have been hours of preparation. The salami and pepperonis were wrapped into little roses, and the cheeses were cut into tiny flat squares, aligned in little swirls on the board surrounding the meats. The grapes were placed carefully in spots, along with strawberries cut accordion-style. Crackers of four different varieties were nestled between everything, filling the board completely. There were other things on the board I couldn't even name, and I was so impressed with her hard work.

"Oh, please. I made it knowing it would get destroyed in five seconds, so please. Eat it. I'll pour the wine."

"Baby, I'll get it," Liam said, putting his hands on Emma's shoulders and directing her around the island to sit next to me. After bending to press a kiss to her head, he walked back into

the pantry where I knew there was also a fully stocked wine fridge. I used that time to determine which part of the charcuterie board I would be ruining first, and decided to take some cheese and salami first. I'm sure that Emma knew exactly what type of cheese this was and how it paired perfectly with the cold meats on the tray, but all I cared about was that it tasted delicious. In fact, I couldn't help myself as I continued pulling things off of the board.

“Where did you say Landon was tonight? He never misses dinner here.” Emma reached in front of me to pull her own little stack off of the charcuterie board, and I finished eating what was in my mouth before responding.

“I didn't. He's actually on a date tonight.” I tried to keep any bitterness out of my voice, still not over the whole situation.

“He is?” She gave me a shocked look, as though she couldn't believe that a grown man would go on a date. The cheese, meat, and cracker stack she was about to eat was in front of her mouth, which was open.

“Yeah. A girl we went to college with actually that just moved to the island.” I shrugged, turning to the food and hoping that she would drop it. Liam emerged from the pantry with a chilled bottle of wine. Red, by the looks of it.

“Landon?” Liam asked, the same confusion on his face. Emma gave him a look, and I'm sure they were having a completely silent conversation that only they could understand. When Liam looked back at me, he still seemed confused. “As in your roommate?”



I nodded, wondering again why that seemed so surprising. After watching them share another look, I spoke up. “What? Is he not supposed to date or something?”

“We just...” Emma started, not seeming to be able to find words. She usually never stuttered or fumbled words unless she was upset.

“We just thought he was too in love with you to date someone else.” Liam finished her sentence for her, leaning across the counter to grab some of the appetizer, acting nonchalant.

I barked out a laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“No really! Why haven’t you two ever tried dating?” Emma asked, suddenly her normal boldness again.

“Why would we? We’re great friends.”

I watched Emma and Liam share another frustrating look before Liam started pouring our glasses of wine.

“You two get along perfectly. Almost too perfectly, to be honest. And you already live together, so you know how messy he is and how annoying he can be about random household things,” Emma stated, turning a glare to her fiancé.

“Just because I want the—” Liam started to argue with whatever her statement had been about, but she cut him off.

“Anyway, you two have already done most of the hard part. And you obviously care for each other. Not to mention that he looks at you like you hung the moon.” Emma swooned, as if she didn’t have a man doing exactly that to her right now.

I just rolled my eyes. “He doesn’t look at me like that,” I assured them, but neither of their expressions softened. I kept my face set in lines, not wanting to expose the way the thought made me feel. Did he look at me like that? No, there was no way. But if he did... “Sure, we get along great and live together easily, but that doesn’t mean we’re romantically compatible.”

“I don’t know, Izzy. I’ve seen you two together a lot. Both of you are always gravitating towards each other. He loves you, I just know it. Even if you refuse to see it,” Emma insisted. Something in my chest burned at her words, but I chalked it up to indigestion.

“Sorry to burst your rosy bubble, Em. But he isn’t. In fact, he’s going on a date with a girl that was super sketchy to me in college, and Landon definitely knows about that. So I think it’s safe to say he’s not in love with me.” I ended the conversation by picking up my wine and downing half of the glass in a second.

I didn’t look, but I just knew that Emma and Liam were probably sharing another look. Gritting my teeth, I tried to calm the building anger in my head. They were both just trying to set me up in a relationship because they wanted me to have what they have. Their insistence had good intentions; they weren’t just trying to force something on me. I didn’t have to get mad at them about that, even though I found their persistence incredibly annoying.

Knowing that I needed to steer the night as far from this topic as possible, I grabbed my wine and took another swig before placing it in front of where Liam stood on the opposite side of the island. After I gave him a sweet smile, he refilled my glass, and I swiveled in my chair to look at my sister.

“So, update me on all the wedding plans.”



Landon

Tiffany had a shiny new apartment in the business area of the city. She offered to bring me up before our date to check it out, but I turned her down, telling her I would see it at a later time. The answer seemed to satisfy her because she gave me a wide grin in response before getting in my car.

“Where are we going?” she asked excitedly, which was endearing. I looked over at her in my passenger seat, a cream silk dress creeping up her tanned thighs as she settled.

By all accounts, Tiffany was extremely attractive. It was obvious that she was active, especially by the looks of her toned biceps and shoulders. Her long brown hair was styled in loose curls, and she wore minimal makeup, giving her the perfect beach girl look. She was stunning, and her plump lips were coated in a glossy nude color.

“Sandbar,” I said simply, putting the car in drive.

“What’s that?” she asked, reminding me that she didn’t know much about the island.

“Oh, it’s a great restaurant on the beach. They have a little bit of everything.” It was an easy choice, since I had no idea what Tiffany looked like. But I wasn’t about to be the guy that asked her what she wanted because I’d learned that usually women didn’t want to pick food out of the fear they’d pick wrong.

“Oh, yay! Thanks for picking something out. I’m the worst about picking food.” I obviously had hit the nail on the head, and I couldn’t help the smile that came to my face.

Once we were at the restaurant and seated, things became so relaxed. There weren't any of those first date nerves between either of us, and conversation flowed as though we were two old friends that had everything in common. This was definitely the most we'd ever interacted with each other, and I started to wonder why that was. We had so much in common, like our enjoyment of physical fitness, hiking, and '90s action movies. Every topic was easy to talk about with her, and by the time we got our food, we were barely able to stop talking long enough to eat what we'd ordered.

“Why didn't we ever get together in college, Landon? If we would have hung out together just once, we would have realized how compatible we were.” Tiffany spoke the thoughts that were in my mind, but hearing them from her made me wonder if that was really true. There was probably a reason I didn't hang out with her too much in college, especially not alone. Whatever it had been, I couldn't remember. A lot of my college memories were hazy now that I'd moved on and been inundated with so much information in my job and current life.

“I'm not sure,” I responded, trying to think back to that time. But came up blank. All I remembered were the few times Tiffany had been around at parties or smaller gatherings with Belle and our friends. “But you're right.”

After we were finished with our food and Tiffany turned down dessert, I walked her to my car and opened the door for her. When the engine rumbled to life, Tiffany turned in her seat to face me. I pulled out of the parking lot while I waited for what she wanted to say.

Boldly, without a hint of reservation, she asked, “Do you want to go back to my house?”

My gut reaction was to say yes, of course, but something stopped me. This was only our first date, and I couldn’t help but wonder now what it was that had prevented me from asking her out in college. Aside from the fact that I was busy with studying and being obsessed with Belle. But I knew there had been something else. And that had me wanting to pump the brakes tonight.

Which meant I needed to come up with a way to say no. And fast. That wasn’t something I’d ever been good with and had never done in this particular scenario.

“I should get home tonight. I have an early training session tomorrow that I need to be rested for,” I said, and it wasn’t a lie at all. Still, it was a dick answer, and I knew it. “But I would love to go out again. Whenever you’re free?”

“Are you busy after your training session tomorrow?” She asked, seeming unfazed by my answer.

I mentally went over my plans for Saturday, realizing that I had none after the gym.

“Nope, I’m completely free afterwards.”

“Perfect. Let’s go hiking!” She had so much enthusiasm, and I couldn’t help but be affected by it, a grin taking over my face again.

“Got a trail in mind?” I asked, turning down the street that led to her apartment.



“I’ll let you choose.” She reached over, lacing a hand on my arm that was on the console.

When we finally pulled up to her apartment building, I helped her out of the car and walked her to the entrance.

“I really had a great time tonight.” I entwined our fingers for a second, still worried about her being upset that I’d turned her offer down.

“Me too, Landon. I’ll see you tomorrow,” She responded, stepping towards the door. I pulled it open for her, dropping her hand. “Oh, and tell Isabella that I said hi.” She grinned before stepping through, waving me goodbye.

Pushing the front door open, I could already feel the exhaustion taking over. I’d been up way too long today, having stayed out much later than I usually did. Monthly game nights were the only time I usually stayed up past eleven, since I almost always got up early to work out.

Before I even crossed the threshold, I decided that I wouldn’t be going to the gym tomorrow morning.

All of the lights were still on, which surprised me. I would have figured Belle would be fast asleep by now, but the faint sounds coming from the kitchen confirmed that she was indeed awake. Unless there was an intruder.

“Landon?” She called, hearing the front door close. So, not an intruder.

“Yeah, it’s me!” I called back, kicking my shoes off. Which I knew Belle hated and would most likely move later, but I was

too tired to do it now.

Popping her head out of the kitchen, Belle's wide eyes met mine. Her dark hair was pulled up into a messy bun, and she was wearing a beige lounge set—not pajamas, as she'd told me so many times. Whatever makeup she'd been wearing was washed off. Though this was a sight I'd seen hundreds of times, it wasn't one I could ever get used to. She was flawless, no matter how much she insisted that her uneven skin tone made her look tired when she wasn't wearing makeup, or how she felt uncomfortable when her hair wasn't done. I didn't see anything but beauty when I looked at her, and wished she understood that. Wished she could see herself through my eyes.

And that was precisely why I hadn't been dating anyone. Because as long as this girl was in my life, it would be hard for me to forget how perfect she was.

“How was your date?” She asked, walking back into the kitchen as I followed her.

I don't know why I'd always held out hope that one day, she would feel the same way about me that I did about her. Why I'd refused to date girls because I was praying that one day, Belle would be mine.

“It was great, actually,” I told her honestly. “The best date yet.”

I saw the way her face twitched, and knowing her as well as I did, I knew it was because my words had hurt her somehow.

Ah, because she had set up the other dates. And I'd just dissed them. Not knowing how to fix that fumble, I just continued.

“We get along really well, honestly. She listens and responds well, too. I took her to Sandbar, and we were there for way too long. Didn't even get dessert either. I tried to get her to order some, but she wouldn't,” I rambled, trying to gauge her reaction to my words.

“That's great!” She responded enthusiastically, no hint of hurt feelings or anything other than happiness for me. It told me that she truly reciprocated none of the feelings I had for her.

It was frustrating, but there was nothing I could do about it. If we'd been this close for this long and she still didn't have any feelings for me, she never would, and I had to stop waiting around for her. I had to stop acting like one day she would magically declare her love for me because it wasn't going to happen.

“Do you remember why I never hung out with her in college? I feel like there was a reason, but can't remember it at all.”

She stared at me, her face carefully blank. “Nope. No idea.”



Isabella

The house was too quiet. It had been too quiet for longer than it ever had been before. When I got ready to go to work, the house was empty. When I got home, the house was empty. There were no sounds of 80s rock music coming from Landon's bedroom like there usually was every time he was home. There was no scent of freshly brewed coffee in the air. Not even the sound of the laundry machines comforted my ears.

It had been nearly a week since Landon's first date with Tiffany, and I had barely seen him.

Tonight, I had finally decided I was done with eating Lean Cuisines and decided to cook a regular meal. In normal times, I would do this with Landon, and we would make enough food to take to work the following day, or reheat at home on the weekends. But since he wasn't here, I decided not to make so much food. Instead, I made something I loved and only made enough for two meals.

Once the jumbo shells were cooked and cooled, I began filling them with the cheese mixture I'd created, trying not to be too aggressive with my actions despite my frustration.

Landon had seemingly gone all in with Tiffany, despite them having only reconnected recently. I'd never seen Landon spend so much time with a girl he'd only begun dating, but maybe them already knowing each other had something to do with it.

Every morning, instead of coming home from the gym and eating breakfast with me, he'd gotten ready and left the house

to meet Tiffany at Grumpy Coffee. Aside from Wednesday morning when we'd met up with our group of friends, Landon had been absent. And even on Wednesday, Tiffany had swept into the coffee shop and stolen Landon from us.

Maybe it was the jealousy developing in my gut, but I would have sworn the wink she'd sent me was malicious. As though she knew exactly what she was doing, and was glad to do it.

Just like every morning, Landon had also been absent every night. Staying out with Tiffany, taking her to eat, going to the gym with her, going hiking, or whatever else they were doing. I'd pretty much only seen him in passing.

Despite how much I tried to deny it, I couldn't ignore the feeling that reared its ugly head inside of me. The jealousy that had begun to consume my thoughts.

At first, I told myself it was just a friendly jealousy, because Tiffany had taken time away with my best friend. I tricked myself into thinking I was just upset that Landon and I hadn't watched a movie together in over a week, which was a record for us. That we didn't walk to work together on Wednesday.

But tonight, cooking the stuffed shells made me realize that maybe it wasn't just the loss of the tight friendship that I was jealous about.

Perhaps it was the fact that I started thinking about how he said they'd had so much in common, and had been spending so much time with her. I'd envisioned what that would look like for her. Knowing Landon, he was the perfect gentleman. Always opening her doors, pulling chairs out for her, making

her walk on the inside of the street away from the traffic. He would be paying attention to her every word, responding in thoughtful ways that only enhanced the conversations. Landon would also compliment her often, telling her how good her outfit made her look, or how her hair was styled well. He'd never let her pay, and always try to spoil her.

Envisioning him like that had always been something I'd kept off limits in my mind. And rightfully so. Because now that I was doing it, I realized that it was something I wanted. I knew Landon so well, and he knew me. We were as close as any friends could get, and I had refused to think of us as anything but that. Now that he was with Tiffany, though, I was reconsidering my thoughts about that. Why had I always been so afraid to date Landon? I couldn't imagine anything happening between us that would make it impossible for us to be friends if we didn't work as a couple.

But now it was too late.

Even when Landon had dated other people, I had never felt jealousy. I had always refused to think about it, pretending that I never looked at him as anything other than a friend. A brother, even.

For some reason, now that he was with Tiffany, my thoughts had changed.

And, of course, he had to get back into dating with her.

Of all of the women he could bump into in the world and start dating, it had to be Tiffany Carmick.



We'd all gone to college together, and since we were all in accounting, circles of study groups had formed. Though studying rarely occurred, we had a group of about fifteen people that would regularly meet up to talk about projects and then we'd go out to eat and drink. Tiffany had weaseled her way into that group our sophomore year, and never failed to make it clear that she hated me.

It never mattered what project it was or if we were just hanging out with the group at a restaurant, Tiffany always had some passive aggressive comment to make about me. Others didn't really notice, because Tiffany would always say it in the sweetest tone, but I knew exactly what she had been doing.

One time, the group of us had gone out on a weekend, and Landon and I had danced for what felt like forever on the dancefloor. When my feet couldn't take anymore, I returned to the table where only a few people were sitting, one of which had been Tiffany. The second I sat down, I asked her if she was having fun, seeing as she seemed to be having a bad night. I was just trying to be nice, and potentially ask her to come dance with me, but her response prevented any other words from coming from my mouth.

“Oh, yes, of course! It seems like you're having a lot of fun out there dancing too! I could never do something like that. But I'm glad you don't care about what others think about you! I wish I could be like that, sometimes!” The syrupy-sweet voice she used was a stark contrast to the glare in her eyes as she communicated everything she hadn't directly said. That

she thought my dancing was something to be embarrassed about.

But being my nonconfrontational self, I just nodded, telling her that I was indeed having fun, and then got up and left her there. I found Landon in the crowd and asked him if he would go back to campus with me.

That night was the first and only time I'd ever told Landon about the animosity that I could feel Tiffany had for me. He comforted me and assured me that my dancing was no worse than his, and that she was just jealous that she wasn't having as much fun. His words made me feel much better, as they always did, and he promised that if I felt silly for dancing, he would always try to look sillier so that people looked at him and not me.

Her passive aggressive statements continued throughout our entire college career, but I usually just brushed them off. I refused to give her any satisfaction, but still she wouldn't relent.

Which was why I was incredibly shocked to hear that Landon was now going out with her, and spending so much time with her. He obviously didn't remember exactly why I disliked her so much, but it still hurt that he would start dating her with how she used to treat me. But of course, I couldn't say any of this to him, and wouldn't.

So I would just cook breakfasts and dinners by myself until they stopped hanging out so much, if they ever did. And apparently, I wouldn't be getting any more blind dates set up

by Landon, because he was too wrapped up in Tiffany to remember the game.



Landon

“Fancy seeing you here,” Belle said when I walked through the front door of the house. She was sitting on our couch, watching her favorite show for what had to be the millionth time.

“I live here,” I said, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Are you sure? I haven’t seen you in like ten days.” She lifted one of her eyebrows at me in accusation.

My face was hot under her gaze, but there was nothing I could say. Because she was right. I’d been out almost every waking moment of every day since Tiffany and I’s first date.

I couldn’t necessarily say it was because I was head over heels for Tiffany. Our time spent together was fun and enjoyable, and I’d really liked getting to know her better. But the more time I spent with her, the more I wanted to avoid Belle. I wanted to keep the lingering feelings that I had for her buried deep beneath everything else going on in life, so I stayed away from home as much as possible. It wasn’t good for me to build a relationship with one woman only for those feelings to be knocked down every time I saw Belle’s stunning eyes looking back at me.

I knew Belle’s schedule well, and did everything that I could to be gone when she was home.

Today, I couldn’t bear to do it anymore. I had gone far too long without seeing or talking to my best friend one on one, and I didn’t want to let this distance between us continue to build.

So instead of trying to make an excuse to brush off Belle's statement, I just shrugged, slumping onto the couch next to her. "I promise I'm not living anywhere else," I responded stupidly, throwing an arm around the back of the couch and consequently around her shoulders.

"And here I'd begun to wonder if you were house hunting with Tiffany," she said, and I wished she would have said it with more jealousy in her tone, but it was kind and gentle as always. Making it painfully obvious that she was in favor of my relationship with Tiffany.

Which I should be happy about. But I wasn't. And that feeling in my gut was precisely why I'd been avoiding Belle.

"That won't be happening any time soon," I informed her, laughing at the idea of buying a house with a girl who I hadn't even officially asked to be my girlfriend.

"Hmm," she mused quietly, her attention on the show. I'd seen this episode at least three times before, having watched this in passing with Belle.

"How have you been?" I asked her, trying to slide my hand stealthily to the remote, which sat next to her thigh.

"The same as always. Gym, work, sleep, repeat," she answered, her eyes still trained on the television. It made me sad to think that she'd been doing nothing other than her normal routine while I'd been spending every night out with Tiffany. Usually, her weeknights were filled with cooking dinner with me or watching movies together. But now that I'd busied myself, she was in this house alone every night.

I didn't know how to respond without sounding like a total jerk, so I changed the subject.

“Movie night, Tuesday?” I asked her, knowing that the newest movie in one of the cinematic universes that we loved would be available to stream tomorrow night. Not to mention we often used Tuesday nights to watch movies together.

She finally turned her head to look at me, surprise on her features. “Really? You don't have plans?”

“Just ones to sit right here, eat a heinous amount of popcorn, and watch the new Alpha movie.” I grinned at her, seeing the happy expression on her face. It eased a tightness in me that I hadn't realized was there. One that was surely formed out of worry that she was upset I'd been missing from her daily life for so long. Worry that she wouldn't want me in her daily life anymore now that she'd had a taste of it.

“I'm in!” She responded excitedly, and I used the opportunity of her distraction to snatch the remote and quickly click on the Netflix button, switching the streaming app of the TV. “Hey!”

She tried to grab the remote from me, which ended in an all-out wrestle match between the two of us. Belle really loved that show, and she wasn't playing games when it came to her rewatch, apparently. Our arms and hands were tangled as we both tried to get the most purchase on the remote to claim the screen for ourselves, and somehow, she ended up in my lap, her back to my chest, as she tried to use her body weight to pry the remote from my hands.



“Easy, tiger,” I commented through my laughter, my grip still strong as steel to prevent her from taking it away. At this point, I didn’t care a bit about what we watched. All I cared about was winning this match and preventing her from getting the glory. And if I was completely honest with myself, I knew that I enjoyed the position we were in with her on my lap. I enjoyed the closeness and how I could smell her lavender-scented hair. How I could feel her body against mine.

As soon as I acknowledged that feeling, I let my grip on the remote loosen so that she won the battle. She whooped in excitement and turned to look at me, still in my lap. She stuck her tongue out at me, her hair disheveled, and my breathing all but stopped, along with my heart.

The smile on my face slowly slipped as I realized how dangerous this was. Again, why I avoided her.

“I win,” she said breathlessly, sliding off of my lap and back to her original seat. Her cheeks were flushed, but her eyes stayed on mine.

“You may have won the battle...” I said, but with none of my usual enthusiasm. It was a statement we both often used when we had fake fights around the house.

“Oh, I’ll win the war. Always, Landon,” she said, finishing the statement for me.

And it was too much. I had missed her so much, but there was nothing that I could do about the way I felt about her. No amount of time away from her would fix the aching in my heart that I had held for nearly eight years now. I realized that

I was in a dangerous situation because as long as she was in my life, especially so central, I might never be able to get over her. I might never be able to give my all to another woman, all because I was obsessed with my best friend, who had never and would never see me as anything but that.

Finally, Belle turned back to the television, resting on the couch as she watched her show. I didn't want to make it awkward or obvious that something was wrong, so I waited for an episode in silence. Then, I made an excuse about needing real food and excused myself to the kitchen. Gratitude flooded through my veins when she didn't follow me as she usually did, and I got to work cooking some chicken and vegetables. I made enough for Belle and took a plate to the couch for her.

Instead of sitting next to her, I took a seat in the armchair that was next to the couch, needing the space between us. Even after cooking, I still couldn't get the rumbling for her out of my chest. The longing that she was something that I would never have, though I desperately wanted.

As I ate, I pretended to watch the show with her, but I was absent. My mind tried to calculate if I could even continue things with Tiffany, who I really did like. But would it even be fair to her? On the other hand, though, I'd never told her that we were anything serious yet, and maybe she was what I needed to get over Belle. It was clear that we were exclusive, but neither one of us had made anything official.

Regardless of what I did with Tiffany, I knew that Belle was it, as long as she was this close. Hell, I still might not get over

her even if I move to Northwest America. Thousands of miles still might not be enough for me to finally move past the feelings I had for her.

And why did it take a dating game for me to realize how severe these feelings really were?



Isabella

I wasn't sure why I was so excited about this movie, but my body was thrumming with energy by the time I left work on Tuesday.

Scratch that, I knew why I was so excited, and it had nothing to do with the movie. It had everything to do with my best friend finally making some time for me and spending it with me tonight to watch the movie. I actually didn't care that much about the movie itself.

After nearly two weeks of Landon being missing in action, aka with Tiffany every waking moment of every single day, he'd asked me for a movie night. I was relieved that he still even considered me a friend, what with the distance he was so obviously putting between us.

Briefly, I wondered if Tiffany had requested that Landon spend less time with me. It seemed like something she would do, given her passive-aggressive nature and obvious dislike for me. Would Landon let someone like Tiffany come between us and our friendship? Would he allow a girl he'd only been dating for a few weeks dictate his friendships?

These were all thoughts that haunted me through the night, but I had to force myself to stop. I had no claim to Landon or his time, and while we were best friends, that was all that we were. I wasn't his girlfriend, so there wasn't much that I could say. If Tiffany did become his serious girlfriend and asked him to stop hanging out with me, there was nothing I could do or say to change that.

Regardless of all of that, Landon was spending tonight with me. We would watch one of our favorite movie series together, eat lots of snacks, and hopefully catch up on everything. I hoped that this night together would close the gap that I could feel forming between us.

Once I got home from work, I started getting everything ready for us. Landon would be coming home soon, and I wanted everything to be ready for us to start our night. The movie was long, and we were both the kind to go to sleep early, so we always started our movies early. That meant I needed to have all of the snacks and drinks ready to go when he got here, along with getting dinner started.

I'd decided when I went grocery shopping a few days ago that we'd have hot wings, so I'd bought drumsticks and the sauce that both of us were obsessed with.

Pulling the air fryer out of its home in the pantry, I started prepping the food for when he got here. I took time patting the chicken dry and mixing together the dry seasonings that I would put on them while they cooked. Once that was finished, I got to work cutting celery and making little bowls of ranch for us to dip our wings in. I had everything perfectly prepped and ready to go.

When I checked the clock, I realized that nearly an hour had passed. Had Landon gotten home and gone for a shower without me noticing? I guess I had been so caught up in my prep work that I didn't hear him.

I walked to his bedroom door and listened for the sound of his shower, which was always loud. But there was no sound.

Knocking, I called out, “Landon? You in there?”

When I got no response, I ran to the living room, opening the front door to check on the driveway. And his car wasn't there.

Had he got caught up at work? It had happened before, and I was sure that was what happened. Closing the front door, I walked back to the kitchen and put the chicken back in the fridge until he got there.

I grabbed my phone to check if he'd texted me, but had no notifications. So I sent him a quick message asking him what time he would be home. I wanted to remind him about our movie night, but knew that he wouldn't have forgotten. And I didn't want to come off as clingy or anything weird.

While I waited, I decided that I would go watch my favorite show to pass the time. If he'd gotten caught up at work, I'm sure he'd be home soon enough, but I might as well rewatch my show.

Minutes of waiting turned into multiple episodes. I kept telling myself that he was just busy with work, checking my phone every five minutes to see if he'd responded.

Still, he didn't text back. He didn't walk through the door and apologized for being late. He didn't flop onto the couch and immediately tried to change what was on the TV.

I just watched by myself, eventually getting up to fix myself a sandwich out of sheer hunger. I microwaved a bag of



popcorn to tide myself over until I heard his car pulling into the driveway.

But that never happened. And eventually, I fell asleep on the couch.

My dreams of being in an intergalactic love triangle were rudely interrupted when a thud and a crash sounded. I screeched, sitting upright on the couch and effectively sending my bowl of popcorn tumbling to the ground. Dazedly, I stood and looked at the door, instantly wondering if I'd left it unlocked and an intruder had let themselves in.

But what my eyes found was no intruder.

A giggling Tiffany hung off of Landon's neck, her lipstick smudged all over his mouth and neck. Her hair was mussed, and it didn't take a genius to realize why.

Tiffany's eyes were on me, a smirk on her mouth as she stared. I'd gone still before slowly moving my eyes to Landon, who looked shocked.

"Sorry, we didn't know you were awake," Tiffany said in that fake sweet voice. She turned back to Landon, putting a hand on his chest and pulling him further into the house. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she looked at me and gave me a smug grin, as if she was glad I saw this.

I didn't have a response because the truth was rumbling in my mind. My blood roared through my ears, and whatever came out of Tiffany's mouth next was unheard.

Landon had forgotten our movie night. Either that or he'd intentionally skipped it. All to go out with Tiffany. Who looked smug in a way that told me she knew exactly what was happening.

My gaze flickered from Tiffany to Landon, whose mouth hung open still. As if realizing his mistake. Whether the mistake was forgetting our movie night or getting caught skipping it, I didn't know.

Silently, I stepped over the spilled popcorn and started moving towards my bedroom, knowing that I wouldn't last much longer out there. This hurt. In a way, I couldn't fully comprehend, but I knew that if I didn't walk away, I would cry in front of both of them.

"Belle, I—" Landon started, and I held up a hand to him, not needing to hear his words. He stopped talking, allowing me to walk to my room without another word uttered.

And because I loved torturing myself, I let a tear fall as I listened intently to the two of them. Waited for the door to close to Landon's bedroom and to hear their laughter.

But instead, all I heard was the front door closing.



Landon

I opened the passenger door to my car, unable to look Tiffany in the eyes as she lowered herself back into the seat. Taking a deep breath, I stalked around to the driver's side and took my own seat, pulling out of the driveway as I yanked the seatbelt across my body.

I was fuming, angry only at myself and my own stupidity. But I had to keep my cool as best as I could because Tiffany was still with me.

I was such an idiot. When Tiffany called me at four, asking me to go to a new cocktail bar that had opened downtown, I immediately accepted. I hadn't turned her down for any of the ideas she'd had, going out with her nearly every day or night. It was natural for me to accept. And since I was nearly always with her, I hadn't gotten into the habit of making plans.

Yet none of that was an excuse for what I'd just done to Belle. For standing her up for the movie night that I'd organized, that I'd asked her to join me for. I was in disbelief that I would let something so important slip past my mind so easily. Just at the words of Tiffany, I had forgotten the plans I'd made with my best friend. Left her to wait on me all night.

The image of the snack platter that she'd carefully made sitting on the coffee table, untouched, was burned into my mind. It was all I could see as I drove.

"What's wrong?" Tiffany asked, her voice carrying a tone I didn't understand. And as awful as it was, I didn't care what the tone meant at the moment because I wasn't thinking about tending to Tiffany.

“I messed up,” I admitted harshly, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles were white. The more I thought about it, the more fury built inside of me.

“What do you mean? It’s not a big deal that we woke her up.” Tiffany obviously didn’t get it, and that was fine. She couldn’t understand.

“No. I promised Belle that I would have a movie night with her tonight. And forgot all about it. Stood her up.” I spoke, chopping, unable to organize my thoughts. Instead, I focused on not wrecking my car as I made the short drive to Tiffany’s apartment building.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You were just out with your girlfriend. I’m sure she understands.” Her voice struck me the wrong way, but I brushed it off.

“No, I messed up. I didn’t even have the decency to text her where I was, and she must have been waiting on me for hours.”

“Don’t stress out about it, Landon,” she said, placing her hand on my thigh and rubbing what I assumed she thought were comforting circles. They just annoyed me. “Like I said, she can’t blame you for spending time with your girlfriend.”

I didn’t want to deal with the argument that would result if I reminded her that she was not my girlfriend officially, so I let it slide. But I couldn’t let her other words slide.

“Just because I was with you doesn’t make what I did right. I didn’t tell her I wouldn’t be there. Our movie nights are

usually pretty elaborate, and we always cook together. So I'm sure she prepared all of the food and was just waiting for me. She even made a snack tray." I was rambling, only digging myself into my grave further. It was making me even angrier the more I thought about what I did to her. How I treated my best friend.

"That's a little excessive, don't you think? She shouldn't be putting that much effort into a movie night with her friend. Unless she has feelings for you, Landon. And quite frankly, you shouldn't be spending that kind of time with her now. You have a girlfriend, so you shouldn't be having cuddly movie nights with another girl."

There were so many things wrong with what she just said, but I addressed only one.

"Cuddly? We were going to watch a new galactic movie together and eat junk food. We weren't going to cuddle. It's not like that at all," I defended, suppressing the urge to roll my eyes. And the urge to pick her hand up off my lap and throw it off of me.

"Regardless, you shouldn't be having what seems pretty much like a date night with someone that isn't your girlfriend," Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest, and I again fought to control my eye movement. I didn't like the possessive vibe coming from her, especially since it was unwarranted.

"There aren't any feelings between us, Tiffany. We have been best friends for eight years and enjoy spending time

together. That's all." I tried not to growl the words out at her because I didn't want to hurt her feelings tonight, too. All I needed to do was get her home and then race back to Belle and apologize.

"I just wish you wouldn't spend time with her like that. Especially because I think she has feelings for you, Landon."

"If she had feelings for me, I would know. And she would have told me by now. Don't worry about it." I was a bit gruff in the way I said it, but I wanted to make it apparent that the conversation about that was over. If she said one more thing about me not spending time with Belle, I knew we wouldn't last. Thankfully, she stayed quiet.

When I pulled up to her apartment, she remained seated for a second, and nothing but the rumble of the engine made a sound. Finally, she turned in her seat to look at me, so I angled my head to make eye contact.

"Come up with me," she suggested, grabbing one of my hands. At the moment, I was so mad at myself for what happened tonight that I nearly shook her touch off. But I stopped myself, knowing that would only sour things between us even more. "We can finish what we started here, and you can just stay the night."

Not a single cell in my body wanted what she was offering. My anger ratcheted higher at her words, realizing how tone-deaf she must be. She just listened to how upset I was with myself for standing up for my best friend, yet she asked me to



stay the night at her place. Which meant that I wouldn't be going home to profusely apologize to Belle.

“No, Tiffany. I'm going home. I'll call you tomorrow.” I removed my hand from hers and turned away from her, staring out through the windshield. I wasn't going to argue with her about it, so I would let her take as much time as she needed to realize that I was seriously not getting out of this car and going to her apartment with her. And in my anger, I wasn't even going to be walking her to the door, despite how late it was. I knew that made me a jerk, but at the moment, there was only one woman I was concerned about.

Maybe that should have tipped me off to end things with Tiffany, but it still didn't. I still had hope that I could juggle my close friendship with Belle while still enjoying a romantic relationship with someone else.

Tiffany huffed and opened her car door, stepping out into the night. She slammed the door shut, and just as I was about to shift the car into reverse, she opened it again.

“Here's your phone,” she said as she grabbed my phone from her purse and tossed it onto the seat. “You left it in the car earlier when you picked me up, so I put it in my bag in case you needed it.”

And then she slammed the car door again and stomped around the front. I watched her walk into the building, not even looking over her shoulder at me.

Before I left, I grabbed my phone to check it. I realized I hadn't had it on me since Tiffany got into my car after work,

and therefore hadn't checked. On my lock screen was a single notification from Belle. I opened it and nearly threw the phone out the window when I saw that she had sent it at six-twenty.

Belle: What time will you be home? I've almost got everything ready for dinner! Your favorite snacks are ready too.

I drove home as fast as I could, hoping that Belle would accept every apology I gave her. I would get on my knees and beg for forgiveness from her if I needed to. Because no matter where our lives went, no matter who I dated or who she dated, she was still my best friend, and I still cared about her enough to make sure that we were okay. To make sure that she knew how much I loved and appreciated her. As a friend.



Isabella

As much as I just wanted to fall asleep and forget that tonight even happened, I couldn't. No matter how long I kept my eyes closed or forced myself to breathe evenly, blissful sleep wouldn't come. Instead, tears continued to stream down my cheeks as the scene replayed in my head.

Landon had truly stood me up for his girlfriend. For Tiffany. The passive-aggressive mean girl from college. The one who did anything she could to boot me out of our group but never succeeded. Until now, when she managed to boot me out of my own friendship. The look on her face made me wonder if she'd known all along that Landon and I were supposed to have a movie night and if she intentionally pulled him away.

But I couldn't blame her, in the end. That wasn't fair to her at all, actually, even if she did intentionally sabotage our night. Because Landon was the one who had stood me up. Forgotten about our plans and didn't even have the decency to tell me he wasn't coming. That was all on him, no matter what role Tiffany played.

I should probably just get over it and move on. Landon was dating someone now, and that had to shift the dynamic in our friendship. We couldn't be having movie nights together just the two of us, regardless of how long we'd been only friends. Regardless of the fact that we'd never even as much as kissed before. Or the fact that we'd lived together for three years now, nearly four. It was just how life was. And even if Landon dated someone that was cool with how close he and I were,

our friendship would always have to come second to his relationship. It needed to. That was the right way to do things.

That train of thought had me realizing that our friendship wouldn't last forever. It couldn't. Because one day, we would get married and would have someone more important in our respective lives. There would be no more movie nights or gym days together. There would be no more us. Sure, we would probably stay in touch and eventually our kids would become friends, but we wouldn't be like we were now. The sooner I accepted that, the less pain I would feel.

But I didn't want to accept that. In fact, I wanted to scream into my pillow at how unfair it was for the world to give me such an amazing person and for it to only be temporary. For it to only be while we were unmarried and single. The thought of losing what we had made my breathing heavy and my tears increase. Because Landon was my person. My everything. He'd been there for me during breakups, mourned with me over pet deaths, helped me through the hardest parts of college. He celebrated victories with me with a huge smile on his face always.

And the idea that he wouldn't be an ever-present figure for the rest of my life shocked a realization into me. I loved Landon.

Now, I always had loved Landon and recognized it as the strong friendship between us. But I loved Landon. As in, I trembled at the thought of losing him. Mourned the idea of a life without him. I felt for him what I'd never even felt for any

boyfriend that had ever had a place in my life. Landon had done for me more than anyone else in my life ever had. He was always there, constant, through every phase of life. Ready to be the guy I could vent to, or the one I could party with when things were great. He always had a goofy smile and a hug ready for me and listened to my words like they were treasure. Like I was treasure.

I was in love with Landon.

And it was too late.

He was with Tiffany, and already I could feel our relationship changing. Never when he dated before did he shove our friendship to the backburner like he had now. He'd never forgotten me for his girlfriend.

He must really like her, and that was why this was different. They were different. We were different. This realization, coupled with the sting of betrayal from tonight, was enough to keep me staring at the ceiling, wondering what was next for me. Maybe I could just move on and pretend nothing ever happened. But I was no actor. I knew that I wouldn't be able to do that without something to distract me.

While I was plotting my next steps, I heard the front door open, then close. My whole body tensed, and I didn't dare move, afraid that I would make a noise.

"Belle!" Landon called, and I gritted my teeth to prevent the natural reaction of responding. I didn't ignore Landon. Ever. Even when I was mad. But now, I was more than mad. I was heartbroken.

“Belle! Are you asleep? Actually, I know you’re not. Listen,” he said at a volume that even a sleeping person would wake up to. “I messed up so bad. I know. And I know there’s no excuse for what I did, but I will beg for your forgiveness if I have to.”

His words had me wanting to vault out of my bed and open the door, but I remained in place. I couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Because things had to be different now. He knocked on my door, and I jumped. “Come on, please let me apologize to your face, Isabella.” The use of my full name had my tears flowing heavier. He rarely used it unless he was super serious. “I can’t believe that I forgot about tonight, and I promise I’ll do whatever I need to to make it up to you. I’m an idiot, Belle. And I need you to know that you’re still important to me. Our friendship is still important. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Isabella.”

I bit my lip to prevent the sob that wanted to escape. He didn’t need to hear how hurt I was right now because then he would just assume it was about tonight only. But it was about so much more, and I couldn’t even explain why. That wouldn’t be fair to Tiffany, Landon, or myself.

“Please, open the door,” he begged, turning the handle only to find it locked. I was glad that I locked it because I didn’t want him seeing any of this. He didn’t need to know that I was more than just a little hurt by his actions. That my feelings for him were balancing on a fine line between friendship and more. More.



I was foolish for wanting him. I knew that. I'd had more than enough time in our eight-year friendship that I could have fallen in love with him, wanted us to be more than just friends. But I hadn't. And now that he was with someone else—regardless of how I felt about Tiffany—it wasn't fair for me to come out about my feelings for him. No, it was wrong, and I would get over it.

Because, above all else, my friendship with Landon was what mattered.

I pulled my phone out and downloaded the stupid dating app that everyone used now. I'd seen multiple ads on social media about how everyone was meeting their forever life partner on this app, and I needed to get out of the funk I was in. Perhaps I was just wearing rose-colored glasses around Landon, or missing our friendship. And once I started dating again, I would get over it.

Even though Landon was the one that was supposed to be setting me up on dates in our dating game, I started swiping. Landon was gone by now, and I breathed in relief that he wasn't going to try to talk to me anymore tonight.

Despite the late hour, I was already matched with three men that I'd swiped right on. Two of them had already sent me messages, so I replied to each one of them. Before I fell asleep, I had a date set up for Friday with a guy named Zach. His picture was a very beachy looking, active guy with blonde hair and green eyes. He had a picture of him on a surfboard, him with what I assumed was his mom, and a picture of him

reading. We had a conversation about the cat, who was his one and only roommate in the apartment he lived in on the business side of the city. He worked as an environmental engineer and had been living in the city for six years. Our conversation was goofy and lighthearted, which was exactly what I needed.



Landon

“Good morning,” I said as I sat down at the table with four of the usual group. They all stared at me in silence as I scooted my chair into the table and took a sip of coffee. For some reason, everyone was giving me the same odd look.

“Where’s Belle?” Mandy asked, giving me an accusatory glare.

“I thought she would already be here, actually.” She was gone before I left for the gym and still gone when I got back, so I’d assumed she would have been at Grumpy Coffee before everyone else, as usual.

But her seat was noticeably empty. The guilt I felt last night hadn’t gone away, and her absence only made the feeling intensify. I was the worst.

The group remained silent, everyone eating or drinking whatever they’d ordered. It was the most awkward encounter with them that I’d ever had, and my conscience told me that it was because they knew. Belle wouldn’t tell the whole group what I did. No, she wasn’t that kind of person. Instead of sharing hurt feelings with Mandy or Leslie, she would keep her hurt feelings to herself. So I knew they didn’t know what happened last night, but somehow I still felt that they knew something.

“What?” I asked, finally unable to withstand the silence any longer. Mandy specifically kept looking at me with that suspicious glance.

“I’m just wondering how you don’t know where Belle is... when you live with her.” Mandy crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes flaring with anger as red as her short hair. “And you had a movie night with her last night.”

I looked away at her words, not wanting to admit that I didn’t actually have the movie night.

“You did have the movie night last night, right? I thought she said it was Tuesday,” Leslie chimed in. I ran a hand over my face.

“No, we didn’t.” Please, would they just leave it at that?

“Why not?” Mandy demanded, leaning across the table. In return, I leaned back, running a hand through my hair.

I stayed silent, and everyone’s eyes were on me. Even Andrew and Cooper were waiting for my response. After Mandy gave me another look that said, “Just spit it out,” I sighed.

“I forgot about the movie night.”

“What?” Leslie and Mandy both asked at the same time, their tones matching levels of confusion and shock.

“How do you forget?” Cooper asked, and I cut him a glare. He was totally not being a bro right now.

Knowing that I wouldn’t make it out of this coffee shop without giving them some answers, I responded. “Tiffany called me before I left for work and asked me to go out with her. My mind completely slipped, and I forgot that I promised Belle that I would have the movie night with her.”

“You didn’t,” Leslie whispered, as if she actually didn’t believe me.

I just nodded shamefully.

“No wonder she’s not here.” Mandy was now fully glaring at me.

“Not cool, Landon,” Cooper added.

“I know. I feel terrible about it, and Belle won’t talk to me. I walked in, and she had gotten snacks ready...and just waited for me. When I got back from taking Tiffany home, she was locked in her room and wouldn’t let me talk to her. I called her twice this morning, and she won’t answer.” I explained myself. Why? Because I apparently wanted to dig my own grave.

“Hold on. Did you walk in your house with Tiffany?” Mandy asked, horror on her face.

I nodded again.

“Disrespectfully, I wouldn’t speak to you either if I were her.” Leslie picked up her coffee, stalking from the table. “I can’t believe you would do something so inconsiderate to her.”

She walked away, moving into the bakery next door.

“I didn’t mean to,” I muttered, knowing that I deserved her anger but still feeling sorry for myself.

“You obviously didn’t mean to, but you also didn’t try to prioritize your plans with Belle,” Mandy scolded, rolling her

eyes and getting up from the table as well. I could feel her disappointment in my gut like a knife. And I deserved it.

“Dude,” Cooper said lowly, watching his girlfriend walk away. I knew he would follow her out, but he gave me a long look. “You better start planning to grovel because I guarantee Belle won’t be forgetting this anytime soon.” Then he left.

Andrew didn’t say anything yet, just continued slowly shaking his head at me. When he finally stood to leave, he rolled his eyes as he looked over my shoulder to the entrance of the store. “Fix it,” Andrew said lowly before walking away.

I turned around, wondering what would have him rolling his eyes, and I nearly did the same thing, but caught myself. I don’t know why it felt natural to have that response, but I cringed at myself and sat up straighter, painting a smile on my face.

Though I couldn’t say that I was happy to see Tiffany stride right up to me. I guess I was so upset about what I did to Belle that I couldn’t see Tiffany without thinking about it yet.

“Hey babe,” she cooed as she sat next to me. Her slender arm wrapped around my neck, and she leaned in for a kiss that I barely returned. “Where’s the rest of our group?”

I didn’t comment on how she called it our group, inserting herself into my circle of friends that she has never once tried to get to know. I shook it off and responded.

“They all left a little early this morning to get some things done, and I just stayed behind. I was actually about to...”



Looking around, I tried to think of an excuse not to have to walk her to work today. I needed a second to myself this morning just to try to figure out what to do next, and since I was so torn up about Belle still, I knew I wouldn't be good company for Tiffany. Especially with how I'd been acting since she showed up.

“Walk me to work?” she asked, pulling me to stand with her. I took in her slender form dressed in a tight-fitting black dress, but it did nothing for me today. I was really off.

“Sorry, Tiff. I need to run home and grab some things before work, and—” I looked at the watch on my hand— “I have just enough time to make it there and back to work on time.”

I moved out of her grasp, smiling broadly at her and hoping it didn't look as fake as it felt.

“Oh,” her face fell, and more guilt ate at me.

“I'll see you later, yeah?” I asked, and without waiting for an answer, I bolted from Grumpy Coffee and got in my car to go home. I needed nothing at home, but I just needed some time to think.

I turned down the first street on my left, not knowing where I was going to waste the extra time I had this morning. I looked out at the shops that I passed as I drove and whipped my car into a parking spot the second I saw the store, which sparked an idea.

The hours on the door thankfully told me that it was open, and I almost ran inside.

The floral shop smelled overwhelming, and since I didn't know the first thing about buying a friend flowers, I walked up to the counter where a young girl was working. She gave me a broad smile and asked how she could help.

"Yeah, do you know what I can send to my best friend as an apology?" I gave her an uncomfortable smile, my neck burning hot.

"What did you do?" She asked unashamedly. I blanched at her question but quickly schooled my expression. "It'll help me decide what's best."

I lifted a brow at her, feeling like that wasn't how this worked, but what did I know.

"I stood her up for a movie night we planned. We live together, and I've been busy lately, and I told her we'd have a movie night but then completely forgot and came home like five hours late," I rambled, not sure exactly how much information she needed but also not able to control the stream of words once they started pouring out.

The girl slowly nodded, giving me a skeptical look. "So you really need to apologize."

"Yes, and she won't answer any of my calls or texts and is avoiding me."

"Okay, so you need something good. Do you want it sent to her work?" She asked, grabbing a pen and chewing on the end as she considered what to do.

"Yes, please."



Isabella

The texts in my group chat with Mandy and Leslie told me all that I needed to know. Landon fessed up to standing me up for our movie night.

I knew that not going would raise questions, but I just didn't want to talk to Landon this morning. If he wanted to, he could have avoided telling them why I wasn't there. But he didn't. He told all of them about his mistake.

Part of me felt bad for doing that to him, but another part of me was smug about it. He completely forgot me, and having to tell our friends was the least he could do to make up for it.

But I wasn't going to think about him anymore today. I would get over the hurt feelings soon enough, and things would go back to normal. I'm sure it would take a few days to soothe the sting, but I would be fine. My friendship with Landon would be fine.

I went about my day at work, minding my business in my cubicle. It wasn't a glamorous work setup, but it got the job done and gave me enough privacy to look at memes without being stared at. However, it didn't hide when a delivery man walked in with a massive bouquet of flowers and was directed by the office secretary. He headed down my work aisle.

"Delivery for Isabella Sterling?" He said, and everyone started giggling as my mouth dropped open.

"Um, yeah, that's me," I said, motioning for him to put them on the open spot on my desk.

He nodded and set them down before walking back to the exit.

“Flowers?” Danika, the girl across from me exclaimed, standing so she could see over the divider between our desks. “I didn’t know you were seeing anyone, Bella!”

I laughed nervously, feeling everyone’s eyes on me. “I’m not. Not really. I have a date this Friday, but I didn’t expect him to send me flowers.”

“They’re so pretty!” Someone said.

“And huge!” Someone else added. And that they were. Yellow tulips, red carnations, and other flowers I couldn’t really name were bundled into a tall vase, the flowers flowing out of the top of them and bursting with color. These had to have cost a fortune, and I honestly wasn’t sure how Zach knew where I worked. I knew it was a small island, and I told him what I did, but I guess he had the internet sleuthing skills of a teenage girl.

I pulled the little white card that was stuck in between two flowers out, dipping it open where no one else could read the message.

As soon as I saw the handwriting, I knew my facial expression was full of shock. Quickly, I tried to cover up my reaction to seeing familiar writing and a few lines of words.

“What does it say?” Danika asked, leaning over as if she would be able to see the note.

I folded it back up quickly, shrugging my shoulders with a smile. “Just that he’s excited for our first date on Friday.”

“If he’s already sending flowers, he must be a great guy!”

“Or he’s just trying to impress her because he’s actually a terrible guy.”

“No, that arrangement is too big for him to be a bad guy. Sucky guys don’t just send massive bouquets...”

I let the conversation between my coworkers drown out as everyone sat back down. Looking around, I opened the card again and read the sloppy but readable script.

I know you’re mad. And I’m sorry. What I did sucked, and I know these don’t make up for me being a terrible friend, but I hope they at least make you smile. Landon.

Even though I wanted to hold all of the anger I had for Landon in my chest, I just couldn’t. A small smile formed on my face as I put the note in my desk and situated the flowers.

Despite the flowers, I still wasn’t ready to face Landon. I didn’t know how I would react to an apology, and I certainly didn’t know if I would be able to keep my mouth shut about Tiffany and her catty ways.

Instead of being a mature adult and dealing with this head-on and getting it over with, I avoided Landon like the plague. Instead of going home, I stayed at the library until it closed, and then snuck in the back door of the house and locked myself in my room. Because that was the most reasonable plan of action for me.

I repeated the same procedure Thursday morning and afternoon, and Friday morning. Unfortunately, there was no way I could avoid him Friday night. Maybe it was the time passed, or the fact that I was going on a date, but I felt more confident in myself and my abilities not to get upset if Landon decided that we would talk about it.

I left work on time and went home to get ready for the date. Not surprisingly, Landon wasn't home when I got there. While I curled my hair and did my makeup, though, I heard the front door open and close, and the telltale noises of Landon making coffee. Nervously, I continued getting ready and listened as he talked on the phone. I had no idea what he was saying, but hearing his voice assured me that it was indeed Landon and not a stranger breaking in and making themselves at home.

I put on a black dress and a pair of matching wedges, a perfect outfit for tonight. It was in between casual and dressy, and since I didn't know where we were going, it would be versatile enough to fit in anywhere.

Looking at the time on my phone, I realized I had about ten minutes before I needed to leave to meet Zach at The Pink Bakery. Grabbing my small black purse, I left my bedroom to get a drink of water. The second I stepped out into the hallway, I made eye contact with Landon. His eyebrows shot up when he saw me, and we both stopped. Silently, he just looked me up and down, and I wondered what he was planning on doing this far down the hallway. Definitely coming to talk to me.



“Belle, you look amazing,” He complimented, a smirk pulling at his lips.

I grinned, smoothing my hands over the front of the dress. “Thanks!”

“Going out with your sister again tonight?” He asked, and I immediately barked out a laugh and rolled my eyes. Of course, he would assume that I was hanging out with Emma.

“No, actually. I have a date tonight.” I moved past him, trying to get to the kitchen.

His eyebrows shot up, and he followed after me. “A date?” His voice was slightly choked, and I let myself smirk, knowing he couldn’t see.

And because I was a terrible person, I nodded. “We didn’t have plans tonight, did we?” I asked, knowing it would strike a nerve.

He was silent in response but followed me into the kitchen. Quickly, I pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge and saw him just staring at me from the corner of my eye.

“Enjoy your night! If I don’t leave now, I’ll be late.”

Still, he remained silent and let me walk to the door without any other words.

“I figured there was no better way to start a first date than with a little dessert, right?” Zach said as soon as I walked over to the table he had been sitting at in the bakery. He had texted me and told me to come inside when I got there, and as soon as I walked in, he stood up from his seat. I was thankful that

he started this off as though we'd known each other forever. There were no awkward forced hugs or weird hellos. Just straight to the dessert.

Giggling, I took the seat he pulled out for me. This bakery was so precious and cute with the pink bistro tables and bubbly atmosphere. My sister did such a good job on it, and I would always be so proud of her.

"I can't say I've ever had a date start with dessert. But I think this is genius," I responded as he pushed the little plate with three macarons toward me.

"I wasn't sure if you liked French macarons, but then I realized that if you didn't like them, we probably wouldn't work out anyway." He grinned, his white teeth standing out against his tan skin. I laughed again at him, enjoying this already.

"Then this date will go extremely well, because these are the best macarons ever." I picked up a pink one, hoping it was strawberry, and took a bite.

"I'm fairly certain they infuse them with an addictive substance because I can't go a single week without coming here to pick up twenty-four macarons for the week." He picked up one from his little plate and shoved the whole thing in his mouth.

After enjoying dessert, Zach bought more macarons for us to take for a second dessert post-dinner. It was adorable and charming all at once, and I was glad to be with him. Then we walked to a nearby restaurant.

“You look amazing, Belle. I should have started with that, but I chickened out and talked about dessert instead,” Zach commented as we waited for our food.

Leaning forward, I rested my forearms on the table. “Thank you! I wasn’t sure how to dress, but I think I chose right.”

“Oh, you definitely chose right. Now, we have to enter the question and answer part of the date. So I hope you’re ready to get completely grilled,” he told me, laughing at his own corny joke. And that started our back-and-forth questions. Zach gave me plenty of time to answer his questions and didn’t interrupt me when I was talking, which checked a huge box for me. We didn’t get through a ton of questions because each one opened entirely new conversations that we strayed to before eventually circling back to a new question.

It was a perfect first date. By the time he walked me back to the bakery, I knew that I wanted to see him again. He was perfect for me, really. He checked all of the boxes and was a perfect gentleman the entire night. We shared the last six macarons that Zach had saved as we walked. He told me about his favorite things to do on the island and insinuated that he wanted to do them with me, which made my stomach flutter.

“Thank you for a wonderful night,” I told him as he opened the door to my car for me. I slid into the seat and watched him grin down at me.

“I just can’t believe I found a fellow macaron lover. Hopefully, I can convince you to go out with me again soon?” He looked hopeful and was so charming.

“That depends. Will there be macarons on this second date as well?” I teased, though I knew I would go regardless of what desserts there were.

“Of course, milady. As many as you would like,” he responded, and we both laughed.

“Text me?” I said as I pulled my seatbelt on. He leaned onto the frame of my car, towering over me.

“Will do. Drive safe, okay?”

I nodded, still grinning like a madwoman as he shut me in my car. I drove home, listening to my favorite female pop star and singing at the top of my lungs. I was genuinely so happy and content after that date, and not a thing aside from this song was on my mind. Until I pulled into the driveway, and reality slapped me in the face.

All the house lights were on, but that didn't necessarily mean that he was awake because I was always the one to turn them off at night. Since it was only ten, I figured that Landon hadn't gone to bed yet, meaning I would most likely walk past him when I tried to slip into my room. Opening the front door, my suspicions were confirmed when I saw Landon sitting on the couch. He stood as soon as I walked over the threshold.

“Hey,” he started and rubbed his hands on the jeans he was still wearing. “Glad you made it home safe. I'm assuming he wasn't a creep who tried to lock you in the basement?”

I laughed but cut it short. “No, he wasn't a creep.”

“Good. So...” he rocked on his heels for a second as he drew out the word. “How was it?”

“It was good,” I said awkwardly, walking to the kitchen for another bottle of water. Thankfully, Landon didn’t follow me, so I took the water and made a beeline for my bedroom, avoiding any further conversation with my roommate and best friend.



Landon

I knew it was a bad idea, but I did it anyway.

It was our tradition as a group, and I invited someone new without asking everyone else. I mean, I told them in advance that I was bringing Tiffany to game night. But by “in advance,” I meant about thirty minutes before they arrived at my house. I sent a simple text in the group chat, letting everyone know that there would be an extra guest joining tonight.

Did I think it would be a warm welcome for Tiffany? Yes, because my group of friends are nice and kind. But did I think they would want a new person to join without even having talked to her before? Probably not. And to make it worse, no one responded to my text. And I knew they’d all read it because they were all always on their phones. So they knew but just ignored it.

I didn’t exactly invite Tiffany to the game night, though, but that wasn’t something I could tell my friends. That felt rude to Tiffany if I just told everyone that she would be there because she essentially invited and inserted herself. And after she knew about the game night being tonight and told me she wanted to come, what was I supposed to do? Say no? Tell the girl I’d been dating for a few weeks that she couldn’t hang out with me and my friends because she wasn’t part of the inner circle? Yeah, I didn’t see that going over very well.

Currently, I was the only one at the house. Belle went out to get more Dr. Peppers because, in her words: “I need my lucky game night drink; otherwise, I’ll lose everything.” To which I



reminded her that she literally never wins anything. Regardless, she insisted on the sodas and left to get them. That left me fixing the snack trays that she usually took care of, and I realized how serious the job was. There had to be enough snacks in this house to feed an army, but what was supposed to go on the tray?

I started with the Trader Joe's salsa, of course, filling a large bowl with the contents of the jar and placing it in the middle of the tray, surrounded by chips. There were no double-dippers in our group because we weren't heathens, so we all felt comfortable sharing one salsa bowl. I added a bowl of M&Ms, along with fruit snacks that I emptied from their individual packages. That was all I could fit on the tray, and I wondered how Belle always fit so much on the tray when she did it.

But everyone coming over knew they could get any snacks they wanted at any time, and it wasn't a big deal. The snacks didn't have to be perfect.

The sound of the door opening pulled me from my snack tray dilemma, and I poked my head out of the kitchen to see Andrew walking in with a deck of cards and a bag of Doritos.

"What's up, dude?" he asked, looking around the house. "Anyone else here?"

"Nope," I told him as he set the chips down on the dining table where we always played.

"Good. Need to tell you something."

“Go ahead, shoot,” I said, wondering what he could need to tell me that he had to make sure no one else was there.

“I was talking to Leslie about Tiffany,” he started, and I immediately got angry.

I knew it wasn’t cool of me to invite her, but they could at least all have enough respect for me not to talk about her.

“Easy, man. Just hear me out. I was just wondering if you remembered why Tiffany and Belle weren’t friends in college?” He held up his hands, and I realized I must have jumped to conclusions about why they were talking about her.

I shrugged. “I mean, I guess they just never got close. Why?” I shoved my hands in my pockets, not really recalling anything major.

“I don’t know, man. Leslie told me that she thinks Tiffany was pretty rude and ugly to Belle in college, and that’s why they weren’t cool.”

“Rude how?” I asked, feeling something dirty rise in the pit of my stomach. I hoped that that wasn’t even close to the truth and it was just a misunderstanding.

“Not really sure. That’s all I know. I just wanted to see if you knew about it at all,” Andrew just shook his head, proverbially absolving himself of any responsibility in the conversation.

I racked my brain, but couldn’t remember anything. “I don’t know, Andrew. Tiffany was always sweet in college, so I can’t imagine her being ugly to anyone. Especially Belle.”

“Okay, sure.”

After that weird conversation, I couldn't help but keep thinking about it as everyone else arrived. Had Tiffany been mean to Belle? Wouldn't Belle have told me if something like that happened?

As soon as Tiffany arrived, I put the worries out of my head. She was so sweet and caring for everyone around her, and I just really think that there was a miscommunication somewhere.

"Hey everyone! I brought chips and queso!" She said proudly, holding a crockpot with a grocery bag hanging off of her forearm. Immediately, I rushed over to take the crockpot from her and free her hands. I walked it into the kitchen to plug it up, and she followed me.

"Thanks for bringing this, Tiff." I turned the crockpot on low and turned to her, taking the grocery bag from her and setting it on the counter.

"I couldn't come empty-handed!" She responded brightly. I heard Belle's voice as she walked in, saying hello to everyone, and figured that Tiffany and I should join them. With a hand on her back, I led her out of the kitchen and nearly choked on the air as I saw Belle.

Well, it wasn't the sight of Belle that stopped me. It was the guy that was with her.

"Zach!" Andrew exclaimed, walking up to the beach-haired surfer boy, giving him a bro hug.

“Wait, you know each other?” Belle asked, a smile wide on her face as she looked between them. When Zach finished his hug with Andrew, he took the case of Dr. Peppers from Belle.

“Yeah, we met at a Christmas party that our companies threw a few years ago. It was at that dingy bowling alley a few miles inland, and both of our companies had their party at the same time,” Zach answered her, a grin on his stupidly handsome face.

“It’s been too long, man. We should get a beer sometime,” Andrew suggested, patting Zach on the shoulder as he walked to the dining table and set down the case of sodas.

“Absolutely!”

“I didn’t know you were seeing Belle,” Andrew said, and I watched as Belle took in the whole interaction. She seemed happy.

“Well, I didn’t know you even knew her. Rude of you for not introducing me to her ages ago.” Zach walked over to Belle and slung an arm around her shoulders as if they’d been dating for years, not a week. It made my blood boil.

“Belle! I didn’t know you were seeing anyone!” Tiff chimed in, walking over to both of them and holding her hand out to Zach. He took it politely, shaking it.

“It’s pretty new, but he feeds me macarons from my sister’s bakery.” Belle giggled, looking up at Zach.

“That’s...nice.” Tiffany took a step back, her shoulders stiff. “I’m glad you’re finally seeing someone. I was starting to

think that you were going to stay single forever!”

Even I cringed at that comment. Mandy, who was sitting on the couch and watching the entire interaction, let her mouth hang open in shock at the comment.

I was sure that Tiffany didn't mean anything by it, but that she was just trying to tease Belle to fit into the group. But the girls in our group didn't rag on each other like that.

“This girl? There's no reason on this green earth that she could stay single forever unless she wanted to. I mean, have you seen her?” Zach said, confidently defending Belle. Jealousy coursed through my veins. Because I should have been the one defending my best friend. Not some schmuck who wooed her with macarons and his perfectly white smile.

Belle lightly slapped a hand against Zach's well-defined chest, looking up at him like he hung the moon. Yeah, I got that. He literally just swooped in like a perfect gentleman when someone else said something offensive. “You're too sweet.”

“It's true. Do I need to find you a mirror to look in to remind you of how stunning you are?” Zach asked, and then he literally booped her nose. It was cute and annoying as heck.

“You two are literally adorable, but if you do that again I'm going to be sick. So please, keep the ridiculously cute comments and actions to yourselves, or I'll be forced to eat my weight in salt to balance the sweetness overload,” Leslie commented, pushing the two lovebirds aside. I related to her sentiment, except I wanted to punch Zach in the face. Why?

Because he was being too sweet to Belle. Too good. Too perfect.

And I realized that I hated him for that.

For reasons, I couldn't admit to myself.

Belle gave a very fake gasp, holding a hand to her chest. "That was us being too sweet? You wouldn't want to hear the conversations we have over pastries, then." She winked, and I refrained from gagging.

"Are you two done? Because this is game night, not barf night." Cooper pushed his way to the dining table, pulling out Ticket to Ride from the small game cabinet behind it. He held up the box, earning approval from everyone.

"Don't worry, I'll teach you how to play. We have to play in teams anyway since there are so many of us now." Belle grabbed Zach's hand and pulled him into a seat at the table, a quick glance in my direction. Tiffany joined me at my side, pulling on my hand to get me to join everyone as they gathered around the table. But my feet were glued to the ground momentarily, as I considered how appropriate it would be to chop Zach's perfectly sandy hair from his head. Maybe knock him down a peg or two. Or maybe I could just punch him?

"Come on," Tiffany said, knocking me out of the pleasant daydream. I had no reason to feel this animosity toward Zach, but I couldn't help it. The feeling was natural at this point, and I was just mad.

Mad that she started dating Zach. Mad that I didn't set up the date. That she deviated from the game.

And I knew that was the most hypocritical thing ever because I literally broke out of the dating game first. But still, I could stew in my hypocritical frustration with Belle.

Tiffany and I sat down across the table from Zach and Belle, the only last two seats. With all of the seats filled, Cooper started laying out the colored train pieces and game cards. Leslie jumped up from the table and ran into the kitchen, emerging with a small plate of snacks from the tray I'd left in there. Not that the tray would fit on the table during this game.

Cooper explained the rules to the two guests tonight, and then we began playing.

And that was a crazy experience. It made me wish I had the flu so I didn't have to experience this at all.

First of all, everyone loved Zach. He was easy-going and conversational with everyone. Questioning the table about their favorite foods, favorite roller coasters, and whether or not the final Avengers movie ruined the Marvel franchise. He made the girls laugh multiple times, including Tiffany. Overall, he fit into the group easily.

Me? I could do without him. I would have preferred if he just left mid-game rather than make jokes and charm everyone. I kept quiet, barely responding to anyone about the game or anything else.

“What about that new movie coming out next month? The one about the—” Belle started.

“Oh! Yeah! There’s that new romcom coming out next month! Baby, we should go see it together!” Tiffany said, turning to me and grinning.

“Sure,” I responded, having no idea what movie the girls were talking about.

“Oh, I actually meant the new war movie about—”

“War movies are so not my thing. Neither are those silly space operas.” Tiffany giggled, and I turned to her with a lifted eyebrow. I actually found myself wanting to tell her that she should take it back because those were my favorite movies. But then her eyes flicked to Belle, and so did mine. Belle just had a blank expression on her face, so when I looked back at Tiffany, I was confused as to why she was smirking.

“That’s okay, Belle. I’ll take you to see that one. It looks really good, actually,” Zach answered, swooping in, of course, to save the day.

The game neared its end, and there wasn’t a clear winner. Once Andrew and Leslie had only two trains left, we played our final turns. Then, we got to counting destination card points.

“We have the longest route!” Belle exclaimed, pointing to her and Zach’s very long train expedition. I tried not to roll my eyes.



“One twenty-seven,” Mandy announced, laying her and Cooper’s cards out and smiling proudly.

“One twenty-two,” Leslie said, defeated. That earned a cheer from Mandy.

“Ah! One thirty-one!” Tiffany exclaimed, beaming up at me excitedly. I couldn’t help my little smile.

“No way,” Belle whispered, but we all heard it. She looked at Zach in disbelief, and he just grinned.

“It’s okay, Belle. I hear you always lose,” Tiffany comforted, but her voice was more teasing than kind.

Belle shook her head, grinning. “One forty-seven!” She squealed, standing from her chair and fist-pumping. Zach stood with her, and she threw her arms around his neck in celebration. “We won!”

“It was all you, Belle,” he told her, squeezing his arm around her waist.

“That’s never happened before,” Cooper mused, and everyone was grinning ear to ear with how happy Belle was. Except for me. “Congrats, Belle.”

“Thank you, thank you,” she said with a bow. “Now, after that riveting experience, I need some food.”

Grabbing Zach’s hand, she pulled him away to the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with you, Landon?” Andrew asked in a low tone, leaning towards me.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been acting like a rude cardboard cutout all night,” Cooper commented, and my eyes flew to his side of the table. Mandy nodded in agreement.

“Nothing’s wrong. Just don’t feel great tonight, I guess.” I shrugged, then felt the press of Tiffany’s hand on my shoulder.

“He had a long week. Do you want to go back to my place to rest, baby?” She pressed her chest against my arm, and I had a hard time not leaning away.

“No, I’m fine.” I gave her a fake smile and started cleaning up the game board.



Isabella

“Is everything okay with Landon?” Zach asked as soon as we were in the kitchen alone. The group was having a conversation in the other room, and I heard multiple voices but couldn’t hear what they were saying. So I knew they wouldn’t hear us.

“He’s acting super weird, sorry,” I answered, feeling bad that my best friend had been shooting daggers at Zach all evening. Zach being the carefree guy he was, didn’t seem to be offended by it though, and I was thankful for that.

“No apologies needed.” He put his arms around my shoulders, pulling me into a hug. I leaned in, breathing in his musky cologne. I needed to just stay right here for a second and avoid the other problem out there.

The entire night, Tiffany had been giving me these super odd looks, a cross between smug and annoyed. Additionally, every single time I said anything, she would cut me off and interject her own thoughts and opinions without ever letting me finish. I wanted to call her out on it, but there were two problems with that. One, I wasn’t a confrontational person, so I certainly couldn’t boldly speak my mind about someone else’s behavior. Two, it felt like that was something Landon should have noticed and said something about. I didn’t expect him to say something to Tiffany in front of everyone, but he could at least whisper to her or pull her aside in a nonchalant way and ask her to not constantly talk over me.

But he didn’t even seem to notice, which wasn’t surprising.

It hurt my heart because I felt like he was letting his care for me fall into this great nothingness in favor of pleasing Tiffany. I didn't need him to pick me over her, but he could have at least not sat by and watched her treat me poorly.

But I knew it wasn't fair of me to think any of that. So I let it go.

I made Zach and me a plate of snacks to share, and he added some of what he liked to it. Before I could pick the plate up and walk out with it, Zach grabbed my shoulders and turned me around in his grip, so that my back was to the counter. He leaned down, leaning on the counter and effectively caged me in.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight," he said, brushing a strand of hair from my face.

"I'm glad you were available. And without you, I would never have won my first game ever."

"You've really never won before?"

"Really. I'm actually just so bad at games it isn't even funny. But I still love playing."

"Maybe you just needed me as a good luck charm," he quipped, smirking down at me as he leaned in. We hadn't kissed yet, but my stomach turned over, thinking about kissing him. It wasn't that I didn't want to, it was just that tonight didn't feel like the right time.

A high-pitched giggle at the entrance to the kitchen stopped Zach's movements, and he stood up straight, taking a step

away from me. He grabbed my hand though, keeping us in contact. Both of us turned to look at the commotion, seeing Tiffany pulling Landon down to her level for a kiss. Immediately, I looked away, not wanting to watch her obvious display. Grabbing the plate of food, I looked back at Zach. He cleared his throat, and Landon's spine shot up straight as a rod. He looked over at us, his hands trailing down to our joined hands, and I could have sworn I saw anger flash in his eyes.

There was no way he was mad that I was holding hands with Zach when a second prior his lips had been Tiffany's. I rolled my eyes, pulling Zach to walk out of the kitchen. We barely squeezed past Tiffany and Landon because neither of them even took a step to the side. The whole time, Landon stared down Zach as though he was doing something wrong.

Finally past them, we went back to our seats at the table, where Andrew and Cooper were arguing over what game to play next.

"Perfect! Zach, break the tie. Should we play Dutch Blitz or Uno?" Andrew asked, looking up at Zach as he took his place.

"Well, if you don't want to lose, we should probably play Uno because I'm a professional Blitz player." Zach shrugged, his fake arrogance making everyone laugh.

"Well, now we have to play Blitz to put you in your place," Cooper decided, throwing the Uno card to the side. There were two packs of Dutch Blitz out, perfect for eight players. When Landon and Tiffany joined us again, oddly silent and weirdly

behaving, Cooper passed out everyone's stack of matching cards.

"Landon, you have some major competition here," Andrew said, motioning to Zach.

"Please, no one is competition in Blitz," Landon scoffed, glaring at Zach. And though it was just a card game, I knew the glare had nothing to do with it. What Landon was so mad about, though, I had no idea.

"May the best Blitzer win," Zach teased, and if it were possible, I was sure that steam would have rolled out of Landon's ears.

This game was extremely cutthroat and fast-paced, everyone racing to get rid of their solitaire cards with community suit piles in the middle of the table. We were all standing up and throwing cards across the table, screaming at each other when someone beat the other to the stack they wanted to discard on. It was hilarious and stressful all at once, but we loved it.

Usually, Landon did win. But that didn't make the rest of us want to play it any less. Because the few times that someone else did beat Landon, we all celebrated.

"Blitz!" Both Zach and Landon yelled at the same time. But Zach had placed his final card down first, technically.

"A tie!" Andrew said, laughing with everyone else at the table.

"It wasn't a tie. Obviously, I put my card down first," Landon insisted, staring at Zach.



“No, you didn’t,” I snorted, rolling my eyes at his behavior.

“I did!” Landon said with a raised voice. Everyone’s laughter died immediately.

“It’s fine,” Zach said quietly to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me into him. He placed a kiss on my head and started sorting all the cards. “We’ll just play again.”

From that point on, it was just incredibly awkward. No one really said much, and the second game was nowhere near as fun. When Landon yelled out Blitz with a smug expression directed at Zach, no one really responded or reacted. We all just quietly started picking up the cards.

“I think we should call it a night,” Mandy said to Cooper, her eyes flicking over to me.

Sighing, I agreed. I thought it would be best for this terrible game night to just be over, because it was just too weird and awkward now. It made me mad, to be honest, because it wouldn’t have been this way if Landon hadn’t made it so.

And I knew I was also partially to blame. I was so mad when I saw the text from Landon saying that Tiffany would be joining. Knowing that would make me an uncomfortable seventh wheel, I’d called Zach up and asked him to come over too. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty because I realized that I shouldn’t have done that. But how was I supposed to know that Landon would have a major problem with him?

“Yeah, baby. Why don’t we go to my place and watch a movie?” Tiffany asked, pulling Landon in for a kiss. When she

pulled away, I didn't miss how she looked over at me with a grin.

"Sure," Landon responded, obviously mad still.

Silently, everyone packed up their things, and I started to clear the table of the snack plates and bowls. Zach helped me, and we took everything to the kitchen. When we emerged, everyone was grabbing their bags and getting ready to walk out the door.

The first people to leave were Tiffany and Landon, which loosened everyone else up in the house.

"What crawled up Landon's backside?" Mandy asked, shaking her head.

"Yeah, what was his problem?" Leslie added, both of them looking to me for answers.

I just shrugged. "How am I supposed to know?"

"You live with him."

"I've never seen him act that way before, so who knows? He'll get over himself eventually, I'm sure," I answered, not wanting to talk about it anymore. It was uncomfortable enough when he was here.

Cooper and Andrew were snickering about something, but stopped when they realized that no one else was talking.

"Sorry it was...odd," I told everyone, as if it were all my fault that we cut our evening shorter than usual.

“Better luck next time,” Cooper said with a shrug, grabbing Mandy’s hand and pulling her out the front door. “See you on Wednesday.”

“Bye, guys,” I said to everyone as Andrew and Leslie followed them out.

And then it was just Zach and me, and I was so embarrassed for the way Landon treated him.

“I’m so sorry, Zach. I swear, I’ve never seen Landon act that way before. He really is a good guy, I promise. He’s just been...different lately.”

“Don’t worry about it, Belle. You don’t have to apologize for him. You wanna know what I think it was?” He pulled me over to the couch and made me sit with him. When I nodded, he continued. “I think Landon doesn’t like seeing you with another guy.”

“What?” I said incredulously, laughing at the idea. “That’s ridiculous. We’ve been friends for a long time, and he’s never acted that way when I brought any other guys around.”

“Are you sure? Because he was seemingly only mad that I was there. He just kept glaring at me in this oddly possessive and threatening way, as if he was mad that I was even breathing the same air as you.” Zach let a small smile form on his mouth to lighten his tone, but I still considered if he was right.

I shook my head. “Landon has never expressed interest in me. I highly doubt he disliked you just because you were with

me. Did you maybe cut him off in traffic one day, or something, and he's been holding this long vendetta against the guy in the yellow Camaro?" I knew it was ridiculous and unlikely, but it was better than believing that the alternative could be true. "Plus, he literally brought his girlfriend tonight. Why would he be jealous that you were with me?"

"Maybe he's realizing that he wants you." Zach was all serious now, looking down at me.

Again, I just shook my head. "He had all the time in the world for that and never made a move. So even if that was what was going on, that ship has sailed."

"Has it? You got a guy in your life?" Zach teased, scooting closer to me.

"Sort of. There's this really cute guy who likes to buy me sweets."

We both laughed and settled into a night of watching my favorite show on the TV, which Zach had no qualms about.

Still, I wondered what Landon was doing and why he had acted so weird.



Landon

“You’re here way earlier than you ever are,” Belle commented as I sat down across from her. Usually, I sat right next to her with an arm slung around her chair, but things were different now. We were different now. And I hated it, yet didn’t have the slightest clue how to fix it.

“Bad day at the gym. I just decided to cut my losses and leave early.”

“Ah,” she mused, sipping her liquid sugar with a drop of coffee in it. She usually drank black coffee, but today she must have been feeling adventurous.

“Been a minute since we’ve actually talked.” The truth in my statement hurt because we’d never been the type of friends to go long without talking.

“Yeah, we’ve both been really busy.” She just shrugged, as if it didn’t bother her at all, and that drove me insane.

“What have you been up to?”

“Well, Sunday, Zach took me surfing,” She said, and my eyes nearly popped out of my head.

“I thought you were terrified of the water.” Never once did this girl swim in the ocean if her feet couldn’t touch the ground. Belle was terrified of drowning, and more terrified of open water with waves that could take her and rip her out further into the sea. All the times we’d been to the beach together, she would hardly even get in. I knew it had something to do with an accident when she was a child and a riptide caught her.

“I was. Well, I still am, but it wasn’t real surfing.” She took another drink of her coffee before continuing. “We used the same surfboard and just caught little waves. I never even stood up. But it was really fun, actually. We’re going to go again this weekend.”

I just stared because it was all I could do. “Did he know that you were afraid of the water?”

“I told him, but he promised me that the second I felt uncomfortable we would go back to the shore. Honestly, it was almost obnoxious how many times he asked me if I was okay or if I wanted to go back to the shore. But I really enjoyed it and want to do it again. I think it might be exactly what I need to get over my phobia.”

“You don’t have to conquer your fears just for him,” I remarked, rolling my eyes. I really didn’t like this guy.

“It’s not for him, Landon.” She leveled a glare at me that would take me to the ground if looks could kill. “I liked it for myself and would like to get over my fear of the ocean. I do live on the beach, after all.”

Her full lips were pressed into an angry, thin line, and I realized I crossed into a territory that I shouldn’t have. Made a mistake with my words.

“I’m sorry,” I said genuinely, relief coursing through my body when she visibly relaxed.

But that didn’t stop me from asking my next question.

“What about our game?”



Belle laughed. “What about our game?”

“You started dating. I thought I was supposed to set you up with people,” I explained, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” She pushed her chair back from the table, leaning away from me.

“What? We were playing a dating game.”

“Yeah, we were. And then you started dating Tiffany, who I did not and would not have ever set you up with. And then you didn’t care to set me up on another date and didn’t even tell me until it was too late. So excuse me for thinking that I could choose to go on dates with whoever I wanted to. I wasn’t aware that only you could do that.”

She stood up, grabbing her coffee and her purse.

“Belle, don’t—” I stood up too, holding a hand out to stop her.

“No, Landon. You don’t get to act like a pompous jerk on Saturday night when Zach is over for game night when you also invited Tiffany, and then come in here and act like I’m not allowed to date someone if it wasn’t through the stupid game we were playing. You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.” She was mad, but still kept her voice low enough that only I could hear her.

She was also right. But everything inside me revolted, and I couldn’t accept the reason why. Even though I knew fully well why I was acting like a complete jerk to my best friend.

“It’s completely different, Belle. I already knew Tiffany and ran into her. You... I don’t know, used a dating app or something. Plus, what do you even have against Tiffany?” I knew they were all the wrong things to say, but I couldn’t stop myself, and I couldn’t take the words back.

“It’s not different, Landon, and you’re acting like a spoiled child. And you know what? The fact that I even have to tell you why I have a problem with Tiffany is ridiculous. It’s very telling about how you feel about our friendship that you don’t know.” And then she walked out, shoulder-checking me as she passed me.

“Um...” Cooper started, announcing his presence as he approached the table with his drink and pastry. Mandy was by his side, giving me suspicious eyes. “What was that about?”

I threw up my hands in exasperation and sat back down in my chair. “Who knows.”

I could pretend all I wanted, but I still knew that I’d messed up. Apparently, it was all I’d been doing since starting this stupid dating game with Belle. I couldn’t seem to say the right thing or do the right thing, and I knew I was only hurting Belle. I was ruining the perfect friendship that we had, and sooner or later, it would break if I kept acting this way.

But I was trapped in this cycle of anger and longing and jealousy, and nothing I could do would get me out of it.

“Did she call you out for being an absolute idiot at game night?” When I looked up at Mandy in surprise, she rolled her eyes at me. Leslie and Andrew sat down as she continued. “I

don't know what got into you, but you were so rude the entire night, especially to Zach and Belle. And honestly, you were even rude to Tiffany.”

“I wasn't,” I argued, but Leslie jumped right into the argument.

“You were, Landon. You acted like a jealous boyfriend and as though Belle was cheating on you by bringing Zach. And Tiffany was right there. Honestly, if you're so in love with Belle, you need to just break things off with Tiffany so you don't hurt her.”

“I'm not in love with Belle. How many times do I have to tell you guys this?” I was so frustrated, and knew this was going to end poorly too.

“If you're not in love with her, and you truly don't want to be with her, then you need to stop acting like a territorial boyfriend to Belle. And stop making her feel like she can't be with Zach. And, you need to especially stop acting that way when Tiffany is around you and Belle, because all you're communicating to her is that you're using her to distract you from your feelings for Belle.” Mandy leaned across the table, nearly getting nose to nose with me as she lectured.

“I don't have feelings like that for Belle! I told you guys, I'm her best friend, and nothing is going to change that. I'm dating Tiffany, and I can't help that I think Zach is a prick.” I leaned back, huffing in annoyance.

“The truth is in your actions, Landon. So either align your actions with the truth, or accept that your actions are

displaying the truth so obviously for everyone else to see,” Mandy finished, standing from the table. “But until you can get the two lined out and figure out what you want, you’re just going to make everyone around you uncomfortable and miserable.”

And then all of my friends stood with her and left. Yeah, I got sympathetic looks from Cooper and Andrew, but I could also see their agreement with Mandy in their eyes.

What made it all the more agonizing and frustrating for me was that everything that Mandy had said was right.

So I either needed to learn how to change my truth—that I actually hated seeing Belle with any other guy, not just Zach—or I needed to accept the truth and move forward. Needed to tell Belle how I felt and end things with Tiffany.

But I knew that I was too much of a coward to ever admit how I really felt.



Isabella

Life was weird. And so is everyone in my life.

“Babe, don’t you think the skirts you wear to work should be longer?” Zach asked, picking me up from my house to drive me to work. It was something we did nearly every day so that we could spend more time together.

I looked down at my skirt, which came a little lower than mid-thigh. It was actually a skort, not that that really mattered. But I saw nothing wrong with it.

“No, I think this is fine. Why?” I responded, trying not to think too much about what he’d said.

“I just think you should be more conservative in what you wear to work. Especially since we’re dating now. You have no reason to be dressing like that.” His tone was nonchalant, but I didn’t miss the way his eyes cut over to me in disapproval.

I nodded, though I knew that I wouldn’t listen to a thing he said. I would continue dressing however I wanted to, regardless of what he said.

Though I knew better, I wrote his statement off as nothing more than new relationship issues. But it wasn’t exactly what it was.

Since we’d been regularly dating for the past three weeks, it had grown almost painfully obvious to me that this wouldn’t work out long term. But instead of ending things now to spare my feelings, I stayed with Zach. Truly, I enjoyed spending time with him, going out on dates with him, and doing

adventurous things together. Eighty percent of his personality was perfect for me. The other twenty, however...

He had this controlling edge to him. And there were nearly no limits to the things he would make comments on. How I wore my hair – sometimes it would be “in his way,” and he would make me put it up for his convenience. Though it was something small and nearly meaningless, it got pretty annoying stacked up with all the other little things he liked to comment on and ask me to change.

Some of the more major ones had to do with how much I worked out, what I ate, and what I wore. It started with him recommending that I get the salmon instead of the cheeseburgers at the restaurant. Then it turned into him asking me how much oil I used when I cooked and telling me that I needed to switch to clarified butter so that I would stop poisoning my body. That carried over to every time we went out to eat.

Then we would go to the gym together, and he would ask me about what I was wearing, saying that the running shorts I wore were too short, or that my tops were too tight. Typically, I let it slide off of me and not worry about it.

I knew it was toxic behavior that I should make clear to him that I wasn't okay with. Tell him that I wouldn't continue this relationship unless he stopped trying to transform me into a different person, control what I ate. But I didn't. I let him continue saying these stupid things and acted as though it wasn't a big deal, even though it definitely was.



Thankfully, I was strong enough in my own independence to not let his comments bother me too much. I knew my worth and knew that his opinions didn't change that. I also convinced myself that the positives in our relationship outweighed the annoying negatives.

He pulled over to the side of the road in front of my building, leaning across the car to kiss me. I returned it quickly and thanked him for the ride before stepping out of the car.

Walking into the building, I found myself pulling the hem of my skirt down, now concerned that it looked unprofessional.

“Long time, no see,” a too-familiar voice said from behind me. I turned, seeing Landon walking into the building at the same time.

I didn't know what to say in response. We had been avoiding each other pretty much since the last time I'd attended our friend group's weekly catch-up. Since then, I went to the gym earlier than him and came home when I knew he would be gone. I'd missed all the coffee dates with our friends, apologizing to them for it, but still refusing to go.

My chest ached as I looked up at my best friend, if that was even what I could call him anymore. We were barely acquaintances at this point, with how much we avoided each other. This man who had been my ride or die in everything was now nothing more than a stranger. At least, that was what it felt like.

I laughed uncomfortably. “Yeah.”

“Everything been good with you, Belle?” he asked, and I only nodded in response. “Good. Look, I’m really sorry. But I can’t do this avoiding each other thing anymore. Can we talk tonight after work? Maybe watch a movie?”

I raised a brow at him, having a few angry remarks that I wanted to say about watching a movie. But I held my tongue. In reality, I didn’t want to hold a grudge against Landon again. But I still couldn’t help the hurt I was harboring over him dating Tiffany. Yes, part of it had to do with the fact that I was realizing that I felt more for him than simple friendship. But most of it was the fact that she was openly rude to me, as she had always been in college, and he was blind to it. Had completely forgotten about it, seemingly. Which just made it all the worse.

At the end of the day, though, I couldn’t keep living the way I had been for the past few months. I couldn’t keep doing everything in my power to avoid Landon and be mad at him.

“Sure.” I kept any emotion out of my voice.

Relief washed over Landon’s face at my response, and I couldn’t help a small smile.

“I’ll make all the snacks and dinner, Belle. All you need to do is show up.” He looked so hopeful that I couldn’t stop a full grin from taking over my face.

“As long as you actually show up,” I said jokingly, but then I saw his face fall. I felt like a jerk for saying it, but I couldn’t take it back now.

“Promise.” He nodded, patting the side of my arm before taking off to his floor to work.

I did the same and spent the entire day at work wondering what tonight would be like, and how awkward it might be.

Landon almost always got home from work after me, but today, his car was in the driveway when I arrived home. I just walked since I told Zach that I didn’t need a ride home, but I was still expecting Landon to be at work. He usually stayed later than our normal four-thirty end time.

When I walked in, my senses were attacked. There was a massive bowl of tortilla chips on the coffee table in front of the couch, and three bowls of salsa were sitting there as well. The sound of my favorite characters reached my ears from the television, and I saw that my show was on. And it was one of my favorite shows.

The spicy aroma of tacos filled the entire house, and I salivated at the smell. Fajitas were one of my favorite meals, no matter how hard it was to get the smell out of the house for a few days. I could even hear the sizzle of the onions and peppers cooking in the kitchen.

“Queso’s in here!” Landon called from the kitchen, and I grabbed the bowl of chips and the salsa that I could tell was my favorite from Trader Joe’s. Yes, I ate it enough that I could tell exactly which of the three it was.

Walking into the kitchen, I set the chips down on an open counter and started dipping chips into my salsa, seeing a small warmer of queso next to the stove where Landon was cooking.

I stood next to him, seeing that he had a smaller bowl of chips next to him so that he could eat the queso while he cooked.

And suddenly I felt weird. This was our old normal, and it hadn't been this way in so long. We used to always cook meals together, or one of us would cook for the other just to be nice on days when either of us stayed at work late. I didn't know how to behave now that things seemed okay.

Taking some of his chips, I used them for the queso and salsa, which were great mixed together. For now, I would just act normal since it seemed like the only thing I could do.

“Ah-ah!” Landon said, noticing that the queso was now mixed into my salsa bowl. “You just cross-contaminated.”

“Oh, did you think that I was going to share this?” I joked, holding the bowl away from him in an obvious claim.

“Yes, I was planning on having some, too.”

“Too bad, Landon. This is my special salsa. You can eat the other two kinds out there.” I moved the bowl of salsa close to my chest, cuddling it like it were a pet. Landon grabbed a chip and turned towards me, making it clear he was coming for my salsa. “No!”

I jumped away from him, running to the other side of the kitchen to protect my salsa.

“Fine. But I'll get some later.”

“Not if I eat it all myself.” I shrugged, grabbing chips from the big bowl and dipping all of them into the salsa.

Landon just rolled his eyes and laughed, returning to cooking the fajitas on the stove.

Once dinner was finished, we made our plates and moved to the living room to eat on the couch. Again, it was incredibly normal for us, and part of me wanted to just avoid talking about anything serious so that I could avoid any of these happy, warm feelings from fading into something less.

“Thanks for cooking,” I said, moaning as I took a bite of the chicken. He seasoned these to perfection, as usual. “It’s amazing.”

“Of course. I’ve missed us having dinner together.” He gave me a weak smile, and I knew that it was going to be awkward from here on out.

I held back a snide response that I wanted to give him about how we could have had dinners together if he hadn’t been acting so weird about Zach, and also spending all of his time with Tiffany.

“Me too,” I responded instead, proud of myself for being mature about this. I could do this. If we could get through our feelings together in an understandable, calm way, we could fix the crack in our friendship.

We ate for a few more minutes in silence, the only sounds of the crazy characters on the TV as they tried to cook the Thanksgiving turkey in the dryer, which is hilariously stupid and unrealistic, but still entertaining.

“Belle, I’m sorry,” Landon started, turning to me and placing his plate on the coffee table. “I know that things have been so off between us and I know a lot of it has been my fault. I shouldn’t have acted so terrible about Zach and to him, and I definitely shouldn’t have told you that you cheated our game by going out with him. And goodness, I’m so freaking sorry for missing our last movie night. I can’t believe that I did that, and I will get on my knees and beg for forgiveness if I need to. For all of this.”

I just stayed silent, trying to process all of the words he’d given me. I didn’t want to respond too quickly or react in an unreasonable manner. That would definitely not help us get through this rocky spot.

I nodded, about to say something, but Landon continued. “I guess I was just worried about losing more time together, and I spoke and acted out of anger. I was wrong, and I really am sorry. But I want our friendship back to the way it was before.”

My nod became more fervent. “I want us back to normal, too. I don’t like this space that’s been between us for the past few weeks.”

“Do you forgive me?” He asked hopefully.

“Of course I do, Landon.” It was an easy decision.

He leaned against the back of the couch, throwing his head back as if I’d just lifted a massive weight from his shoulders. I giggled, but tried to think about what I needed to apologize

for. I wasn't going to let myself believe that I was innocent in all of this. There were always two sides to the story.

But I struggled with self-awareness, and was coming up mostly blank.

"I'm sorry for...well for how I act around Tiffany. I guess I just haven't gotten over how she acted towards me in college and I haven't given her a chance to prove that she's different." I knew I was lying, because Tiffany had proved that she was the same as always. But maybe I was biased. Maybe I wasn't giving her enough of a chance. I'd certainly changed a lot since college, so why shouldn't I allow her to do the same? Perhaps I'd been looking at her through a broken lens this entire time.

"Belle, it's fine. Don't even worry about it anymore." Landon placed a hand on my knee, rubbing a small circle with his thumb before removing his hand.

I took a deep breath, nodding. "I'm also sorry for reacting so intensely when we talked last. I could have definitely controlled my emotions more and not just gone to yelling at you. Maybe we could have avoided all of this." And my apology was real. I definitely reacted before I gave myself time to process the argument, and I could have said so many other things that wouldn't have been so severe.

"Again, don't worry about it. No apology needed. I acted like a jerk and honestly, I would have responded the same way that you did." Landon pulled me in for a hug, taking the plate

out of my lap. “I just want my best friend back. Can we go back to normal now?”

“That depends. Are we going to watch space operas until we pass out?” I asked, hopeful that we would finally watch the movie we were meant to watch all of those weeks ago. I had refused to watch it without him, even with how mad I’d been with him.

“Of course, Belle. I wouldn’t want to do anything else.”





Landon

When I was a kid, my parents barely had anything. I grew up in a trailer in a poor neighborhood in Florida, wearing clothes until they had holes in them. But I never thought twice about the way I lived, until it got better.

My parents were extremely hardworking but dealt a bad hand when they were just starting off. But as I grew up, they worked really hard on a consulting business while they worked full-time jobs. Eventually, their business grew into something they never could have imagined, and our lives changed. Suddenly, we moved out of the trailer park and into a four-bedroom house in a nicer area, only a few minutes from the beach. It was like a luxury to me.

I went to a great school and had more opportunities than most because of my parents' hard work, and I never forgot.

But their new house...it was something else entirely.

Five years ago, they moved to a different city about forty-five minutes away and on the mainland of Florida. It was in a quiet neighborhood—and by neighborhood, I meant that there were some houses in the vicinity of their new house, but you couldn't see any of them. Because their new place, more aptly called a manor, was sitting on a sprawling lawn that was bordered by trees all around.

“I don't know that I've ever been to a house this big before,” Tiffany commented as I pulled up the driveway that was lined with perfectly manicured shrubs.

I laughed uncomfortably. “Yeah, I hadn’t either until they moved here.”

“You didn’t grow up here?” She asked, staring out the window at the beautiful landscaping. I was proud of the hard work that my parents had put in to get to this point, truly. But it made me uncomfortable the way that Tiffany ogled it.

“Nope. Grew up in a double-wide,” I told her, driving the car through the circular path in front of the house and parking it behind some of the other cars here.

We were early to the party, but there would always be people earlier than me.

Including Belle.

I spotted Zach’s car just a few cars forward and tried hard not to roll my eyes. Ever since I’d apologized and made a promise to try harder with Zach, I had tried harder. At schooling my tone and expressions around him. I still didn’t like the guy, because something was off with him. In the few times that I’d been around him and Belle, I’d noticed him cut her sharp glances and speak harshly to her, even if it was under his breath. I kept my comments to myself, but I wanted to curse the guy out for being ugly to my best friend.

But I would behave tonight. Of course. I promised Belle that I wouldn’t do anything otherwise.

Plus, there would be so many people here that I knew and could talk to, I probably wouldn’t have to interact with Belle and Zach too much. Not that I didn’t want to spend time with

Belle tonight, but I just knew that we'd both be busy. And I was aware that there was some sort of bad blood between Tiffany and Belle, though I still didn't know what. Honestly, I'd kind of forgotten before this moment that the tension between them even existed.

I got out of the car and walked around to open Tiffany's door, helping her out of the car. She was wearing a slim-fitting dress and some serious heels that I told her she'd regret by the end of the night. Regardless, she looked nice. Then I popped the trunk and grabbed the large wrapped box for my parents, carrying it behind Tiffany as she walked up the stairs of the house. There were at least twenty stairs to the door, and I didn't want Tiffany to have to walk them without holding onto me. So I sat the gift down and grabbed her hand, helping her up all of the steps. Then I raced back down to grab the gift as a few more cars started pulling in.

"Thank you," Tiffany said, grinning at me. I nodded, leading her into the house. Immediately, I dropped off the present on a table that already had other presents, then grabbed Tiffany's hand and led her through the house.

I could already hear the chatter of guests before I got to the large atrium where they hosted the party. It was a massive room that was the size of a house. High ceilings with skylights, glossy floors, and a wet bar made the room luxurious and perfect for hosting many guests. And I knew there would be many tonight.

There were a lot of important people in my parents' lives. Through the years of building their business, they'd made a lot of lifelong friends and business partners. They'd also made a lot of connections from the two churches they'd gone to. That, plus the large family that my dad had and the two sisters that my mom had, parties thrown here were never small. Mom and Dad said they could never choose who not to invite, so they just invited everyone.

Lining the far wall of the room that had the wet bar, there were two long tables that had black tablecloths over them. On top of the tables was an array of foods that they'd had catered, since my mom definitely couldn't cook for over fifty people.

Guests were already mingling and catching up with each other since the last time my parents had thrown a party, and I scanned the room for the people I had come here for.

It was their fortieth anniversary tonight, and romantic music played over the speakers, perfect for the theme of the night. Spotting them talking to another couple, I led Tiffany in their direction. We weaved between guests that were too in their own world to step just slightly, one way to make it easier for us to get through, but I couldn't be upset about that. In the corner of the room, I spotted Belle and smiled...that was until I saw the stressed out look on her face and the way her eyebrows were knitted together. She was upset. Angry even, as she spoke to Zach, whose back was turned to me.

What they could be arguing about at this party that couldn't wait until later was beyond me, but I would find out later.

Especially if he was making her that angry. For now, though, I looked away and focused on getting to my parents.

“There’s our boy!” Mom said loudly when we were still ten feet away from them. My skin flushed as multiple eyes turned our way. I closed the gap between me and my mom, pulling her small frame in for a hug. I saw them often enough, but she always acted like I only came over once a year. Or maybe even once a decade. “I missed you so much, Landon!” She pulled me down by my neck to place way too many kisses on my cheek. But I let her do it anyway. Every time she saw me.

“Missed you too, Mom.” I stood up straight, letting Mom look over my outfit as I gave my dad a hug as well. That one was much shorter than the first hug. “And you, Dad.”

“Knew you did.” Dad shrugged, smirking at me. Then he nodded to the girl behind me. “Who’s this?”

I turned, motioning for Tiffany to join me at my side. “This is Tiffany. We’ve been seeing each other for about two months now.”

Tiffany stuck her hand out to shake, and my mom looked at it for a second too long before taking Tiff’s hand. I cocked my head to the side slightly, unsure of what the hesitation was from.

“Yes, Tiffany. That name sounds familiar,” Mom started, turning to Dad. Tiffany shook his hand as well, and then dropped her hand to her side. “Didn’t you two go to college together?”

I nodded, and Tiffany beamed at Mom recognizing who she was.

“Yes! I recently moved to the island and bumped into Landon at Grumpy Coffee Co. And the rest is history!” Tiffany was enthusiastic, if not a little annoying, with how she spoke to my parents, and Mom only nodded.

“That’s nice,” Mom commented, looking over at Dad who just nodded. Then she turned her eyes on me and smiled tightly. “Find us later, dear? We have more guests to welcome.”

“Of course,” I answered, and they walked away.

The whole interaction was super weird. Usually, my mother was warm and open to anyone she met. Just now? She acted like Tiffany had the plague and she couldn’t get away fast enough. I wrote off the interaction to Mom feeling weird about me bringing over a girl without telling her, but I would have to ask her about it later anyway. Thankfully, Tiffany didn’t seem put off by any of it.

We moved to the food table, grabbing plates and loading them with appetizers. Everything looked amazing, so my plate was piled high by the end of it.

“Let’s see who else we know here,” I tell Tiff, hoping to find some other friends to chat with. I can’t keep my eyes from flickering over to where Belle is standing in the same spot as before, still arguing with Zach.



“Belle and Zach are over there,” Tiffany mentions, and I look around as if I hadn’t just been looking at her. Tiffany points, and I nod, using it as an excuse to walk over to them.

As soon as I’m in earshot of their conversation, I stop, listening to the words pouring from Zach’s mouth. The whole time, I’m focused on the tears that seem to be welling up in Belle’s eyes.

“Stop being a baby about it. You’re not eating this junk food, Belle. You don’t have any wiggle room in those pants, anyway.” His tone is enough to set my veins on fire, the sound condescending and belittling. But his words sent me over the edge.

I set my plate down on the table a few feet away and quickly approached Zach.

“You’re really going to cry in front of all these people just because I told you to watch your figure?”

“Hey, man,” I said, trying to stay calm. I put a hand to his chest, forcing him to take a step back from Belle, who he had been looming over as an intimidation tactic. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

Zach took a step back and turned to me, hate in his eyes. “Get your hand off me, Landon. And don’t try to tell me how to talk to my girlfriend.”

I removed my hand, but didn’t step away from him. In fact, I stepped between him and Belle.

“You’re insane if you think I’m going to walk away and let you keep degrading Belle like that.”

“What do you care? All I was saying was that she should skip all the fattening foods over there. She’s missed the gym too often lately, and it’s starting to show. If I want to tell my girlfriend how to keep her figure trim for me, I will. I won’t have a fat girlfriend.”

My vision was blackening, and all I could think about was how terrible this guy was and how terrible he was for Belle. So before I could take a breath and temper myself, I swung a fist at his stupidly pretty face, knocking him right on the cheek. Gasps rang out around me, but I didn’t see anyone but Zach, who had dared to talk down to my girl.

He swung at me, and I easily dodged him. Vaguely, I felt someone pulling on my left arm, but my right arm was still free to throw another punch. This one landed at the bottom of his jaw because he anticipated it. Before either of us could swing again, my father stepped in between us, pushing me back. Another man grabbed Zach by the arms and pulled him back. Still, he shouted obscenities and threats as we locked eyes over my dad’s shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Dad yelled at me, but I could just hear Zach’s words to and about Belle as if he were still saying them.

“Landon!” Dad cut me off, but I was seething, wanting to finish the statement.

Why was it that every guy she dated treated her like garbage? Were there not any other guys in the world that didn't think they were owed the right to disrespect and disregard her? Was I the only one that saw her for what she was truly worth?

"Hey," Dad spoke, snapping fingers in front of my face. "What's going on?"

"He thought he could disrespect Isabella," I said angrily, watching someone hand Zach something cold across the room. He didn't deserve that.

"You still didn't have to start a fight with him," he said under his breath, his frustration with me apparent. But I didn't care. I would make a scene worse than this one was if anyone ever talked to Belle like that again.

"You would have if you heard what he said," I growled. Dad finally let go of me, and I rolled my shoulders, watching Zach leave the room.

"Baby, why the heck did you do that?" Tiffany said lowly, obviously embarrassed. Her eyes kept darting around the room, noting who was still looking at us.

"Because no one is allowed to talk to Belle that way." I worked my jaw, finally turning to look at Belle, who was standing in my mother's embrace, tears falling down her face. Belle gave me a death glare, and I slumped.

That was when the guilt hit me. It wasn't guilt for causing a scene at my parents' party or for hitting Zach. No, it was guilt

for embarrassing Belle even further. I had drawn attention to the problem by fighting with Zach, and that was all my fault. Even when she was red in the face with tear streaks on her cheeks, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid my eyes on.

I rubbed a hand down my face, focusing back on Tiffany. She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the side, away from listening ears.

"She is not yours to worry over!" Tiffany hissed, folding her arms across her chest. I took in a deep breath, already realizing where this was going.

"She's still my best friend, Tiff. And I am not going to just stand by and pretend that the way he was talking to her was okay." I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest also, trying not to roll my eyes.

"Whatever, Landon. It's embarrassing that you would fight someone at your parents' party over your friend. Who is not your girlfriend. But when your parents were being rude to me, you said nothing," Tiffany said in a low voice, glaring at me. "I'm leaving."

"Come on, Tiff. You can't just leave." I grabbed for her hand when she started to walk away, but she yanked it away from me.

"I can and will. You need to figure out if you were lying when you told me you feel nothing more for Belle than friendship. Because from where I stand, every time she's

around, you only have eyes for her. I'll get an Uber, so don't worry about me." And then she stomped away.

I sighed, wondering how I'd messed up tonight so thoroughly.



Isabella

I don't know if I've ever been so embarrassed or humiliated in my entire life. And it was everything I could do not to break down into tears. After everything happened in the atrium between Landon and Zach, I'd dismissed myself to the restroom to wash my face. Then, I sought Landon's parents and apologized before telling them that Zach and I would be leaving. I couldn't handle being at this party anymore now that everyone had seen what had happened.

Zach led me to his car silently, getting in the driver's side while I walked around to the passenger side. His face was already starting to bruise in the two spots where Landon had punched him, and I couldn't help but look at it. I felt so bad that Landon actually stepped in and punched him, but honestly, he deserved worse. I was secretly glad that Landon stood up for me, and honestly wished that I could punch Zach myself. The way he spoke to me tonight was the worst it had ever been, but it was in line with all of the other opinions he had about me.

And I knew it was over between us. Before Landon had even stepped in, I knew that I wouldn't be continuing this relationship with Zach. He didn't deserve my time, and nothing he did or said would change my mind about that. I'd already wasted too much time with him, allowed him to speak to me poorly too many times. I knew I was worth more than being degraded, told what to do, what to say, or what to eat.

So I sat quietly in the car as Zach drove us back to Amelia Island, staring out the window at the passing scenery. The sky



was darkening, both from the night and from the rain that seemed to be rolling in. Soon, the sound of the music in the car was drowned out by the sound of droplets hitting the car. It was fitting for the mood that I was in. I felt as dreary as the weather, wondering how I would be able to break things off with Zach easily. I didn't think he would get aggressive with me, but I also didn't think he'd let me just end things without a fight. He didn't like to feel out of control, and I was not going to give him any of it as I ended things.

Once we finally drove back into familiar territory, I tensed up, trying to run through what I would say in my mind. I rehearsed it over and over, trying to find the simplest, shortest thing I could say to him the second we pulled into my driveway.

But Zach took a turn I wasn't expecting, making me tense up for an entirely different reason. I had no clue where he was driving us, because he was definitely driving in the opposite direction of my house. I wasn't even vaguely familiar with where we were right now, and that made me sick to my stomach.

"Where are you going?" I asked, trying to keep the unease out of my voice. "My house was the other way."

"We're going to my house. I'm not taking you back to your house tonight." Zach's voice was tight and angry, and it only further worried me.

"That's typically something you would ask me if I was okay with. Which I'm not. I want to go home." I made my tone firm

so that I didn't sound weak or as worried as I was.

“You're not going to be anywhere near Landon. Honestly, you need to move so that you don't have to live with him anymore. He obviously has feelings for you.”

“Okay, first of all, you don't get to tell me where I live or who I'm around. Especially when that person is my literal roommate.” I turned in the seat to look at Zach to see if he was actually being serious, because there was no way he thought that he could actually control something like that in my life.

But alas, he was stone-faced and serious. “Belle, you need to find a way to move out. We can move your stuff into my place if we need to, because you aren't going to see Landon anymore,” Zach said again, completely ignoring me. And I knew that was how this conversation would keep going.

Zach's grip on the wheel was white-knuckle tight. His eyes were locked on the road. “Turn around and take me home, Zach,” I told him evenly, hoping that he would actually listen to me. “I'm not going to do that, Bella. You're coming home with me.”

“I will be doing no such thing. I'm done with your controlling crap, Zach. We're done. Turn the car around, or pull over and let me out. Now.” I was angry. So angry that I let it come out in my words and in the way I glared at Zach. He turned his eyes to me, and it was clear that he was infuriated.

“Be reasonable, Bella. You're just mad right now. Come over, spend the night, and in the morning, we'll talk about your living arrangements then. It's been a long night,” he said,

his voice suddenly soft and comforting. But I wasn't buying any of that.

“Pull the car over now!” I raised my voice, hoping to convey exactly how I felt about this. I'd rather walk home from wherever I was than be in this car one more second.

“You can't be serious, Bella—”

“Pull over!”

Huffing in annoyance, Zach slammed the brakes, sending me lurching forward, held back by only my seatbelt. He did that just to scare me, so I held back any expression on my face.

“Lose my phone number, Zach.” I grabbed my purse and threw the door open, not caring how hard it swung on its hinges. Without even looking back, I slammed the door. Not a second later, Zach pulled away, his tires squealing and leaving me on the road in the middle of a place I was unfamiliar with, water kicking up and splashing all over me. Not that it would have mattered because it was raining anyway.

But still, I felt an immense amount of tension release from my body. The rain didn't even faze me. Thankfully, I wasn't just on some random back road. We were still in an area with sidewalks, so I just took the sidewalk back in the direction we came from, trying to get my phone GPS to give me directions home.

The second it pulled up on my phone, I groaned, seeing that it would take me over an hour to walk home. Still, I didn't regret the decision I'd made and would gladly walk every step

of it if it meant that I didn't have to be in the car with Zach. He was officially out of my life, along with all of the terrible behavior he liked to give.

It left me alone with my thoughts from tonight. How Landon stepped in without hesitation, defending me against Zach. How he didn't miss a beat after Zach insulted me yet again before throwing a punch square to the face.

Now that the embarrassment of how it had all happened had faded and I was cooled down, I was actually considering crying all over again. Because Landon was the only man, it seemed, who ever cared about my well-being. Cared about treating me with dignity and respect and care. Every other guy I'd ever dated didn't care about me, even a fraction of how Landon did.

And though I knew it was crazy, I wondered if we would ever have a chance together. As more than just friends. Landon would never have to defend me from my boyfriend ever again if he was my boyfriend. Even our friends had pointed out before how perfect we would be as a couple, how well we got along. We already lived together, so we knew we could cohabitate well, which was a real concern for any relationship. We liked all of the same things, and we had the same values, and essentially the same life goals. Our friendship had lasted this long, and even though there was always the fear of a romantic relationship ruining our chances of being friends should something not work out, was that really a good reason not to be together?

I loved Landon, and maybe this was the first time that I could admit that it was something more than friendly affection that I felt for him. Scoffing at myself, I shook my head. Landon was in a committed relationship with Tiffany, and honestly, he seemed pretty happy. Who was to say that they wouldn't always be together? Who was to say that she wasn't his future wife?

I sure hoped not, but I couldn't make that decision for him, and if he was happy with her, I would never say anything otherwise.

Knowing all of this, I would have to stuff away the feelings that I had for Landon and let them fizzle away. But I knew that wouldn't happen.



Landon

I left shortly after Tiffany, apologizing profusely to my parents for everything that had happened tonight. Mom had just smiled at me warmly, telling me that she was proud of me for standing up for Belle, even if it did cause a scene at her party. I parted with a promise that I wouldn't repeat that scene at their next party.

I had noticed that Belle and Zach left a little bit before I did, so I waited an appropriate amount of time, hoping that I wouldn't run into him in my own driveway while he was dropping her off. The drive home felt so much longer than I expected. I just wanted to apologize to Belle for embarrassing her by drawing attention to the situation and beg her for forgiveness, which seemed like a common theme in our friendship lately. Apparently, I was on a streak for being a poor friend.

That line of thinking led me to wonder about what Tiffany had said to me. That I "obviously" had feelings for Belle. Was that true? Did I really behave like Belle was my entire world?

First of all, she was. I knew that without having to think about it too hard. She was everything to me, and had been for such a long time. She was not only my best friend, but she was my best. She was the one that kept me in line, that helped me grow, and the one that was there for me through anything. Belle was the sun that rose in the morning and the moon that rose at night, the light in my life. I would do anything for her, including but certainly not limited to throwing a punch at a



jerk who thought for one second that she was worth less than the world.

The fact that those thoughts were in my head told me everything I needed to know. But I supposed I had never fully admitted those things to myself.

I picked up my phone, intent on calling Tiffany. It wasn't fair to her that I let this relationship draw out for a single second longer. Tiffany deserved someone who thought about her the way I thought about Belle. Guilt swam in my gut as I wondered if I had hurt Tiffany unknowingly with how I acted around Belle.

When I unlocked my phone to call Tiffany, I saw the message that she'd sent me.

Tiffany: This isn't going to work out between us anymore. I don't want to be around when you finally realize that you have feelings for Belle. I won't play second fiddle to her, ever. I'm sorry that I sent this in a text message, but honestly, you didn't deserve anything more.

I sent back a quick text, apologizing that I let this relationship go on for so long without realizing what I was doing. I wished her well and told her that if she wanted to continue being friends, she knew where to find me.

But I couldn't help the relief I felt. I wouldn't have to argue with her about being together, and I wouldn't have to try anymore to be someone that I wasn't for her. I had been forcing myself into a mold of the perfect man for Tiffany, when in reality, that wasn't me. I didn't like the things that she

liked, we had no overlapping hobbies. But I had tried so hard to participate in whatever she asked of me, not realizing that that was no way to be in a relationship.

With Belle, everything was easy. We agreed on so much and liked all of the same things. She was the yin to my yang, in every way. My compliment. And even if she didn't love me in the way that I loved her, she would always be my person.

But that didn't mean I could continue not telling her how I felt.

When I finally made it home, I breathed a sigh of relief that Zach's car wasn't in the driveway. Parking quickly, I got out in the rain and ran inside.

"Belle!" I yelled out for her, ready to apologize. When I got no response, I worried that she'd locked herself in her room again, refusing to talk to me. So I walked down the hallway to her room, intent on talking to her through the locked door. But it was wide open, and Belle wasn't inside.

I searched the house, seeing no sign that Belle had come home yet. Which was weird. I wouldn't imagine that she would let Zach take her anywhere else tonight.

I called her, but her phone went straight to voicemail. Five times.

Knowing it was probably not going to work if her phone was dead, I decided to look up her location anyway. Maybe it would give me her last location before it died?

Our entire friend group had each other's locations, but honestly, we never used them. However, I was so incredibly thankful that we did; otherwise, I would have no way of knowing where Belle was right now. When it pulled up, her location showed her on the southern part of the island, well away from home. I zoomed in, seeing that she was in a little town that would take me twenty minutes to get to. But I figured, if I left now, I could drive around the area and hope to figure out where she was. There was still the possibility that she was somewhere with Zach, but for some reason, I just knew that wasn't the case. I knew she wouldn't have gone home with him, especially after how he treated her tonight. She might have allowed him to speak to her that way, but I knew that she wouldn't have let it go on much longer. And certainly not after they left.

So I got in my car and set my GPS to her last known location, which showed to be five minutes ago. Once I got close, I slowed down, watching for her familiar frame.

I drove down the street that had little shops around, but no one was out. It was still raining, so everyone must have gone indoors, the lights in the restaurants on. But then I saw someone walking in the rain with no hurry at all. I sped up to get closer and realized that it was Belle.

I pulled the car over into a parking spot and jumped out, jogging towards her. "Belle!" I yelled over the sound of the rain on the concrete. She looked up, surprise in her eyes, when they landed on me.

“What are you doing here?” She asked me, confusion in her voice.

“Apparently, coming to prevent you from getting pneumonia! What are you doing out in the rain like this?” I asked her, pulling her into my body as if it would warm her up. It wasn’t cold outside at all, but I could see her shivering from being completely soaked.

“I ended things with Zach, and he was trying to take me back to his house, and I made him pull over and let me out.” She said it all so quickly, I barely had time to process her words.

“What?”



Isabella

Landon looked at me like I had grown a second head, so I quickly explained to him everything that happened in the car, but I could barely get the words out. Not that I was upset over what happened, but because I couldn't understand or comprehend how Landon was here right now, how he knew to come to get me.

It warmed me from the inside that he drove all the way out here just to see if I was okay. He was always so concerned about me, so considerate and thoughtful. And man, was I glad that I wouldn't have to walk all the way home. My phone had died only two minutes after I pulled up the GPS to go home, and I thought I was going to have to follow road signs or go into a gas station and beg someone to charge my phone just to find my way back.

But that was what Landon always was to me. A hero.

So I struggled to hold the tears back that were threatening to give my emotions away. Would he even be able to tell in the rain?

“You mean to tell me that he let you get out in the pouring rain to walk home from here? Belle, do you know how far this is from our house?” I heard the immediate anger Landon had, and watched as he threw his hands up and looked over my shoulder as if Zach was right there for him to punch again. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

“I made him, technically,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“No man would let a woman out in the rain to walk home.”

I nodded, grinning up at him for how upset he was. All it told me was that he truly cared about my wellbeing. And despite being in the chilly rain, I didn't care. All I cared about was that Landon was here. He found me.

"Come on, let's go home," Landon said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. He pulled me down the sidewalk to his car, opened the door to his car for me and helped me in.

"Your seats," I said, pointing out the fact that they weren't leather and would get completely soaked.

"It's not a problem, Belle. Just get in," he said with a low chuckle, holding the top of my head as I ducked into the car. It was an incredibly sweet gesture that he'd made every time he helped me into the car to prevent me from hitting my head. Only now was I internalizing how precious and loving the small action was.

He closed the door behind me and ran around to the other side to get in and start the car. The cold air hit me immediately and made me shiver, but Landon quickly turned the heat in the car on. I wrapped my arms around myself as he pulled out and began driving us both home.

It was silent for a while, and I wondered what was going through his head. He'd witnessed the worst part of my relationship with Zach today, and picked me up from being across the island in the rain. It was something no one else would do for me without judging, but I knew Landon must be itching to know what happened.



And I worried about Tiffany. During the whole encounter at the party, she just stood off to the side, looking annoyed and concerned all at once, her eyes darting between Landon and me the entire time.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Landon said, his voice barely above a whisper. I barely heard him over the soft music coming from the car’s radio.

I considered that, and knew the answer immediately. But where was I supposed to start?

“He wasn’t always like that. I obviously wouldn’t have given him a second date if he opened with the fact that he was a controlling jerk,” I laughed, looking over at Landon uncomfortably. Even with him, it was odd to talk about the fact that I’d let someone treat me poorly.

But that wasn’t how abuse worked. The victim never allowed the abuser to hurt them. It started slow in ways that could be brushed off and excused for some reason. And the more it happened, the worse it got.

So I told Landon about the slow fade of my relationship with Zach. How it started with him being a great gentleman, a great encourager, a perfect date. And then it slowly became something else. Something that I was attached to because I hadn’t realized early enough what was happening.

Landon listened the entire time, not a hint of judgment in his eyes or on his face. Anger, though, was present.

“I should turn this car around right now and go find him,” Landon growled, gripping the steering wheel tight.

I just laughed. “I don’t even know where he lives.”

“It’s a small enough area. I’m sure we could find him with that obnoxious sports car.” Landon gave me a sideways glance, a smirk on his face. I rested back into the seat, glad that I could talk about this with Landon now instead of holding it all in.

“I feel stupid for letting it go on as long as I did. That was why I forced him to pull the car over. I also knew he would never turn it around and actually take me home. That would hurt his ego too much,” I added, rolling my eyes at the absurdity that was my relationship with Zach.

“I’m glad you’re done with him. He could never be good enough for you,” He said seriously, giving me a look that had me blushing.

A silence that was nearly awkward passed between us. I didn’t know what to say. Because that look could only be interpreted in one way and I was trying to tell myself that I was still interpreting it wrong. That there was no way the look he gave me, coupled with his words and actions, could mean what I thought it meant.

“Tiffany and I broke up tonight, too,” Landon finally said. And the air was pulled straight out of my lungs.

“What? Why?” I tried to keep the hope out of my voice because there was no way...

“I think tonight was just the tip of the iceberg for her.” He loosened his grip on the wheel and pulled one hand off, resting his arm on the console between us. “She was furious that I stood up for you at the party and caused a scene. And before you say that’s ridiculous, I see why it made her mad.”

I let some time pass. “Why?”

“Because she knew that I wasn’t just defending you because you’re my friend. She’s seen it longer than I have, but I think today I finally realized that she was right.”

“Right about what?” I asked, my heart racing. Because as much as I wanted this to be about what I thought it was about, there was no way that it was. No way that Landon could be feeling the same way that I was.

For what felt like hours, the car was silent. Nothing but the radio played between us, and I was going to lose my mind over it.

“Right about how I feel... about you,” Landon finally answered, but the answer was still lacking. Still incomplete.

“And how is that?” My voice was shaky, and I was sure that if my arms weren’t wrapped around me and my hands grasping my body tightly, they would be trembling.

Landon took a deep breath, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I dared to get hopeful for the words that could come out of his mouth next. The words I needed and realized I’d needed for a long, long time.

“That I’m in love with you. I’ve loved you as a friend for so long, and at some point, that love turned into something else. Something more. But I was too dumb to realize that it had morphed into love. Love love.” He looked away from the road for the last part, making eye contact with me to prove the truth.

Tears sprung to my eyes, and suddenly I had nothing to say. All of the ways I’d realized the same thing about Landon were gone from my mind because all I could think about was how he’d just admitted his love for me.

“I’m sorry if that’s too much for us. Too much for our friendship. I guess I kept it pushed down for so long because I was afraid of ruining this beautiful friendship that we have, but I would rather tell you and make things weird than continue pining after you knowing that I was never man enough to tell you how I feel. I love you, Belle, and I think I always have. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize and admit it to you. And if you don’t feel the same way, that’s okay.”

I was still stunned into silence, completely shocked and jarred. Landon finally pulled the car into the driveway, remaining silent.

Hopefully, he wouldn’t interpret my silence as a rejection, because that wasn’t at all what it was.

He jumped out of the car, running around to grab my door and help me out. Together, we ran to the front porch and stood underneath the overhang.

Landon stood close to me but dropped my hand. I could see every emotion he was feeling on his face so clearly. Guilt, worry, anticipation, fear. But more than those, I saw the love he had for me.

I couldn't keep him hanging in the balance anymore.

“Landon, I... I love you, too.”



Landon

It sounded so tacky and cliché, but I could have sworn my heart stopped beating. There was no way that this perfect, beautiful woman could love me like I loved her. That we had allowed each other to date people, set each other up on dates, when we both were in love with each other.

I stared at Belle, my mouth open like a fish out of water, gulping for life-saving air.

“You do?” I just had to hear her say it again. And again. And again and again and again. Forever. I needed to hear those words from her mouth.

She nodded fervently. “Yes, Landon. I love you.”

I couldn't help what I did next. Arms wrapping around her waist, I swept her up into an embrace and planted my lips on hers.

We had done everything together in our eight years of close friendship. But never had we done this. Never had I felt her perfect lips on mine, reciprocating an emotion that I couldn't put into words. I loved this girl more than I'd ever loved anyone, and I knew that would never end. No one would ever be able to come after her.

Belle kissed me back with the same desperation to feel the bond between us. To ensure that this was real, that we were real. That the feelings we'd developed were as intense as we thought they were. And they were.

“I love you,” I whispered against her lips between kisses, pulling her body tighter to mine.



I felt her grin against my mouth, accompanied by a giggle. But I didn't stop kissing her. I moved to her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead. There wasn't an inch of her face that I didn't press kisses to, all while she laughed at me. "I love you, I love you, I love you," I said repeatedly while I kissed her.

Through her laughter, she replied, "I love you, Landon."

"Why did it take us so long?" I asked her, moving kisses down her neck.

She just laughed some more. "Because we needed to see that there was no one better for us than each other."

Her words struck me in the chest and I stood straighter, looking into her eyes. There was something so perfectly poetic about her words, about this, about us. And I couldn't get enough.

Shaking my head, it was my turn to laugh.

"What?" She asked, her hands still holding onto my biceps.

"I just can't believe we played a game... to try to match each other with the perfect date. But the perfect date was right in front of us the entire time," I said, pushing a wet strand of her hair behind her ear. We were both rain-soaked and shivering, but I barely felt the chill. All I could feel was the blazing love I felt for my best friend.

Belle joined in my laughter, and I finally pushed open our front door so that we could get dried off.

"Go shower and get warm. I'll be ready with a movie and snacks when you get done," I told her, walking with her to the

hallway with our rooms.

She turned, jumping up and wrapping her delicate arms around my neck and planting another kiss on my lips. I groaned, pulling her further into the embrace and enjoying every second of it. When she pulled away, it was too soon. Honestly, I don't think any amount of kissing her would ever be enough because I'd wasted so much time with her that I'll have to make up for.

Then, Belle pranced to her room, and I went to mine to shower as well.

When I was done and wearing sweats and a t-shirt, I moved to the kitchen to get chips and salsa ready. This was the last jar of Belle's favorite salsa, and I knew I'd be going into town to buy ten more tomorrow. I wanted to. I had to for Belle. I would do anything for her, including driving great distances for her favorite salsa.

I pulled up one of our all-time favorite movies because it felt appropriate.

Still, I couldn't believe that any of this was real. I couldn't comprehend that this whole time, we'd avoided each other and yet had feelings for each other. I shook my head at myself, wondering if I could have made my truth known sooner.

No, this was the perfect time for us. Which was why it happened when it did. This was our moment that we would remember forever, and every relationship before this had prepared us for this.

When Belle finally emerged, she was in fuzzy pajama pants, and my sweatshirt. My sweatshirt. Which I am fairly certain was only just in my closet ten minutes ago.

“I helped myself,” she explained when she caught me staring. But I wasn’t staring because I was upset that she was wearing it. I was staring because there was nothing better than seeing her in my clothes. It made me feral.

I patted the spot on the couch next to me, and she approached tentatively.

“Landon,” she said in a tone that I knew to be nothing other than worry. Reservation. My heart sank.

“Belle,” I said warily, hoping that she wasn’t about to crush everything I’d ever wanted.

“What are we going to do now?” She asked in a small voice, sitting next to me but not leaning into me.

“We’re going to date if that’s what you want.” It was an easy answer, a simple conclusion. There were no other options in my mind, unless she just wanted to skip straight to marriage. Which I wouldn’t really be opposed to.

“And what if it doesn’t work out? It would ruin our friendship,” She explained her worries, and I just smiled. “Stop smiling like that, I’m serious!”

“I know you’re serious, baby. But do you really think that it won’t work out between us? You know me better than I know myself. You know every little issue I have, and it hasn’t run you off so far. What are you worried about?” I was fully

confident that this would be a forever thing with her. Actually, there wasn't even a sliver of doubt in my mind that Belle was going to be my wife that I got to grow old with.

“Well, I know. But what if...I don't know, you decide you don't like me anymore? What if I'm not enough for you?”

I clamped my hand over her mouth, rising on the couch to tower over her. “That is absolutely the most ridiculous thing that has ever come from your mouth, Belle. You are enough for me, and you've always been enough. There's nothing that you could ever do that would make me love you less or stop liking you. Don't let your fear of something different with us prevent us from going all in on this. Please.”

Tears filled her eyes and I feared that I'd said something wrong, that I'd gone too far. I immediately removed my hand from her mouth and sat back.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—”

“No, don't apologize. I'm not upset. I'm just...so happy.”

The tears were falling down her face then, and I couldn't stop myself from wrapping her up in my arms, pulling her into my lap. I buried my nose in her damp hair, smelling her familiar scent that had driven me mad for years.

“I can't believe you feel that way about me. I never...I never thought you would,” she finished her previous thought, and I sat back to look at her.

I laughed, shaking my head in incredulity. “Me? I can't believe that you feel this way about me. I thought I would

always be searching for a woman that made me feel the way you do. I didn't think you would ever be in love with me."

"How could I not be in love with you, Landon?"

Those words melted something inside of me. They sent me into outer space and back again. Because I couldn't believe that there was even a chance that I could be with this beautiful girl, and yet here she was, telling me that she loved me. This was a moment that I would never forget and would most likely replay her words every day for the rest of my life.

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face. "So does that mean that you'll give us a try?" I asked, not hiding the swell of hope in my chest.

"Yes!" She said with such excitement, I couldn't help but pull her closer to me and plant my lips on hers again.

I would never have had enough of her. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. This girl was my everything, and I had always known, at least a little bit.

After I finally let her go, she snuggled up to my side, and we watched the movie, snacking on the salsa until it ran out. I promised her that I would restock it tomorrow, and she giggled happily.

Nothing felt better than finally having her in my arms, and we fell asleep like that, completely content.



Isabella

“You can officially count this as a date,” Landon said as he sat down my iced coffee and a plate of macarons in front of me.

I hadn't stopped smiling since Landon and I decided to start dating. It was like the missing piece of the puzzle had slid into place, and now there was nothing I would rather do than be with him. It was like I finally understood something that had been lacking in my life this entire time. And it was so easy. There was no rejection like I expected, no awkward moment where Landon told me he didn't feel the same. In fact, he confessed his feelings first, which made me feel like I was in a romance book.

Leaning in, he pressed his lips against my cheek in a warm kiss that gave me goosebumps and butterflies all in one.

Another thing I couldn't get enough of. Kissing him. He was the best kisser ever, and I could kiss him all day long. It was so tender and meaningful to me and just reminded me how amazing it was that we were together finally.

After all of this time.

It had only been a few days, but I knew that this was a forever thing. There would be hills and valleys in our relationship, I knew, but the love between us was stronger than any obstacle that we would have to overcome. We'd had eight years to get to know each other on such a deep level, and dating felt the same as our relationship always had been, just with more kissing and romance.



And man, it was like Landon flipped a switch overnight. He'd gone from polite and a perfect friend to the most amazing boyfriend in the world so fast. He was always affirming me, complimenting me, serving me, hugging me. He wanted to make sure that I never wondered if he still liked me and told me every time he had the chance that he—

“I love you, Belle.” That. He loved me. And he told me constantly.

“I love you, Landon,” I said back, unable to prevent myself from looking like a lovesick lunatic. Which I was. And I never wanted that to change.

We'd decided to wait to tell our friends for a few more days, just so we could spend time enjoying each other without anyone asking questions yet. But still, I couldn't wait to tell everyone.

I wanted to shout from the mountains that Landon and I had finally realized we were perfect for each other and wouldn't be spending another day without being together.

We sat in the back of the coffee shop, spending the morning before work chatting about things going on at work, with our families, and everything else. It was our normal, but so much different.

The bell to the coffee shop rang multiple times while we were there, but I never turned to see who was walking in, and Landon never looked either. But I noticed the second Landon's body went stiff when his eyes caught someone who walked in.

“Belle,” He whispered to me a second before standing up. I turned, seeing a furious-looking Tiffany marching over to us. Of course, she would come here, because she knew we were always here.

“Landon,” Tiffany growled at him, crossing her arms over her chest. “I knew it! I knew you had feelings for her!” Her voice was inappropriately loud, and people were starting to look at us. I stood as well, not wanting to let Tiffany continue doing this. But Landon stepped in front of me defensively.

“Yes, Tiffany. You helped me realize that I did have feelings for her, but I promise I didn’t know. Not really. Not before the party on Saturday,” Landon explained gently, and I could hear the guilt in his voice. The way he hated that this hurt her. He was such a good guy that he still cared about how she felt in all of this, and it only made me love him more. I didn’t feel any jealousy or anger towards Tiffany because I could understand her hurt. And I was sure that I would be the same way. But she didn’t understand the situation fully. And that wasn’t her fault.

“Did you even wait for us to break up before you started seeing her? I bet you didn’t! You were probably sneaking into her bedroom every night a long time ago! Cheating on me! I should have known better!” Tiffany was crying, and I wanted to comfort her, which was something that shocked me. Her words were meant to hurt me and Landon, but all they did was make me feel bad.

“Tiff, I never cheated on you. Not once. I was fully dedicated to you the entire time that we were together. In fact, I saw Belle less than I have since we became friends while I was dating you. But you were right when you said that I needed to think about my feelings for Belle. And you broke up with me. Let’s remember that, okay? I didn’t cheat on you, and I would never have done that. But you ended things, and now we’re both free to do whatever with our lives, okay?” Landon’s voice was nothing other than comforting and calm, and I visibly saw Tiffany relax.

Huffing, she turned and flipped her hair over her shoulder, leaving the coffee shop without another word.



Isabella

“Do you want to tell them today?” I asked, walking up to the rental house that Liam and Emma had been living in for a few months. Today was their wedding shower, but it was more like a wedding celebration. Or pre-celebration, I guessed. Emma didn’t want anyone bringing gifts or anything because they already had everything that they needed.

I’d come over last night to help her decorate since I was technically the one throwing the party. I had sent out invites to all of Emma’s friends and family, and Liam’s. There were RSVPs for over two hundred people, and I was glad they decided that the party should be at their house—which was quite large—rather than at the bakery or coffee shop.

“I don’t think I could hide it from them if I wanted to. But I don’t even want to. I can’t wait for them to know. They’re the ones who always said we’d be perfect together anyway,” he explained, leaning over to press a kiss to my cheek. I grinned, unable to hold in my excitement. I would also be telling my sister today, who’d made the same comments about Landon and me.

When we walked in, I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold back from telling Emma immediately.

I followed the sound of conversation, hearing voices that I wasn’t expecting. I was supposed to be here earlier than any guest, but the sound of the extra voice had me dropping Landon’s hand and walking faster.

When I turned the corner into the kitchen of the house, I stopped, tears filling my eyes immediately.

“Scarlette!” I screamed, running towards my baby sister and flinging my arms around her. She hugged me back tightly, giggling as we swayed back and forth in our hug. I pulled Emma, who had been standing right next to Scar, into the hug, and we all three squealed in delight. I pulled away from her, seeing how beautiful she looked. Wearing a simple blue dress, her brunette hair was pulled up into a slicked-back ponytail, making her look like a model. Except I wasn’t sure if they let girls her height walk the runway. She was the shortest one out of all of us, and she loved it. “I didn’t know you were coming! I thought your jerk boss wasn’t going to let you off work!”

“Jerk?” A deep voice came from behind the kitchen island. Scarlette froze, and I turned to look at who was speaking. A tall, muscular man wearing clothes that looked as expensive as my last paycheck was standing next to Liam, his arms crossed over his chest as he looked at Scarlette questioningly. “Is that what you told her I am?”

Quickly, I put the pieces together that this man must be Scar’s boss, and though I had no earthly idea of how or why he was here, I hurried to fix my words.

“No, that’s not what she said about you. Just what I said.” I kept my voice firm, ready to stand up to this guy if he thought he would intimidate my little sister.

“Ah,” he mused, shaking his head at Scarlette even though it seemed to have something buried beneath the jerk facial expression he was definitely wearing.

In reality, Scarlett never outright said that he was a jerk. Just that he was an overbearing, controlling, and grumpy man that she was forced to work for every day since starting her new job. What she failed to mention was that he was a handsome man who any woman would find attractive.

“Belle, this is Nikolas Taylor. Obviously, he’s my boss.” Scarlett told me his full name, and I racked my brain to remember the guest list and who this guy was. Then I realized that he was one of Landon’s long-time business friends. And that Nikolas was a multi-millionaire and CEO of Taylor Industries, a parent company to many successful businesses.

“Nice to meet you,” I said softly, hoping to pull my foot out of my mouth at some point.

“Anyway, we can let the men stay in here and talk. You two come with me,” Emma said, pulling us by our hands to follow her into a small sitting room decorated with a pink couch and cute decor. It was tasteful and elegant, and still Emma’s favorite color.

“Scarlette, I swear if you don’t date him—” Emma started to say under her breath.

“Em!” Scarlett hissed, pulling Emma down onto the couch, who pulled me down as well. “You can’t say that! He’s my boss! And he’s fifteen years older than me!”

“So? He’s hot, and he hasn’t taken his eyes off of you since you two got here!” Emma argued, and I gasped.



“Wait, you two came together?” I asked in a low voice, not having realized that it was like that between them.

“He saw the invite on my desk! Then he asked me how I knew you and said that you were my sister. When he told me he was going, he told me he would find someone to do my work scheduled for the weekend so that I could go,” Scar explained, and my mouth dropped.

“So he really wasn’t going to let you come!” I said, already wary of this guy.

“I had a lot to do...which he reassigned so that I could come! Then, he insisted that we share the rental car he was buying, and then he bought my plane ticket so that I couldn’t argue about coming!”

“He’s in love with you!” Emma said lowly, but in a suggestive tone.

“He does not!” Scarlette responded in an exasperated whisper, her eyes flickering toward Nikolas. “He actually doesn’t even know my real last name!”

“What?” I asked, not sure how that was even possible.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, are you and Landon finally dating?” She asked the same question she asked every time she saw me, and though I knew she did it to get attention off of herself, she’d still asked the right question.

I stayed quiet instead of giving my usual immediate no. This made both of my sisters look at me with shock on their faces.

“Belle!” Emma yelled, grabbing my hand and pulling me closer. “Are you and Landon dating?” Her voice was loud enough that I was sure anyone could hear from any part of the large house.

I grinned, biting my lip, and nodded.

Then both of my sisters were squealing, jumping up from the couch and pulling me with them.

“No way! I can’t believe you two finally got together! This is the best news ever!” Scar screamed, pulling me into a hug with Emma yet again.

“Everything okay in here, ladies?” Liam asked, popping his head around the corner. Nikolas and Landon were right behind him.

“Landon and Belle are finally dating!” Emma screamed, running across the room to throw herself at Landon, looping her arms around his neck to squeeze the life out of him in the form of a hug. She was just like that. Landon was laughing, looking over her shoulder at me in a distress signal, but I just laughed, too happy that everyone knew now.

Scarlette walked to Landon, much calmer, to give him a hug, and I watched as Nikolas’s eyes trailed after my little sister the entire time. In fact, he couldn’t stop looking at her, no matter what she did. There was an air of possessiveness to his stare as well, and I wondered if there was something Scarlette wasn’t telling us.

But I would ask another time. When he was more ready to talk about it.

“They’ve been best friends for eight years. Lived together for three,” Landon said to Nikolas, catching him up on what he missed in the last episode so to speak.

Nikolas nodded, his eyes still on Scarlett as she backed away from Landon and moved to Emma’s side.

“This calls for a drink!” Emma exclaimed, grabbing Landon’s hand and pulling him back to the kitchen. Liam just chuckled, following after his fiancée with hearty eyes. It was so obvious how much he loved her and all of her silliness. Which was so opposed to his serious demeanor.

I grabbed Scarlett’s hand and pulled her with me but didn’t miss how her eyes flicked to Nikolas as we passed him.

Yeah, something was going on there.

Once Emma poured champagne for all of us in beautiful pink crystal glasses, she made a toast to Landon and me, claiming our engagement party was next. And I wasn’t embarrassed by that statement at all. In fact, she was probably right. Because I would be growing old with Landon.

About an hour later, guests started to arrive. And I was overjoyed with the fact that we were going to get to tell our friends tonight. We’d managed to keep it quiet this Wednesday at the coffee shop, only because we wanted a little bit more time. I’d made sure the guests knew where to go, where to get food, and where to put the presents they brought anyway.

Finally, our friends came, but we wanted to wait for all of them to be with us before we said anything.

“Hey you two,” Cooper said as he approached where Landon and I stood at the edge of the room, just watching all of the guests interact. Mandy was right behind him.

“What’s going on?” Cooper asked, just as Andrew and Leslie approached as well.

“What do you mean?” Landon asked, acting like nothing was out of the ordinary. I couldn’t stop the small laugh that escaped my lips. Mandy eyed me warily.

“What are you two hiding?” She asked suspiciously. I would have figured she would have jumped to the correct conclusion almost instantly.

“Hey guys, what’s up?” Andrew asked. “Why is Landon smiling like that? It’s kind of creepy.”

“He hasn’t told us yet. But you’re right, it is creepy. So fess up, Landon.”

“We actually both have something to tell you,” Landon said, throwing an arm around my shoulders. Which was something sort of normal for him to do, except this time, he pulled me in closer. Affectionately.

Immediately, Mandy and Leslie’s facial expressions changed to shocked, slightly confused ones.

“Are you…” Mandy started, pointing between the two of us.

“There’s no way,” Leslie added, shaking her head in disbelief.

“What are you two talking about?” Andrew asked, looking at them with more confusion.

“We’re dating!” Landon finally said, breaking the suspense that was even building in me.

“What?” Cooper said loudly, garnering the attention of everyone in the room. He grabbed Landon’s hand and hauled him into a bear hug, his excitement for us immense.

“No way!” Andrew added, doing the same thing to me. When he pulled away from the hug, Leslie and Mandy were there to pull me into a group hug.

“It’s about time!” Mandy said, giggling in her happiness.

“I was wondering if we would have to force you two on a blind date.” Leslie grinned at me like this was the best news ever. I couldn’t help the laugh that tumbled from my lips.

The rest of the night was Landon and I enjoying time with our friends and celebrating Liam and Emma. It was so much fun, and more than I ever could have imagined because everyone I loved was here, and I’d finally realized that there was no one on this planet that I would rather spend my life with than Landon.



# Epilogue - Landon

Everything had to be absolutely perfect.

And this Trader Joe's was not helping me accomplish that.

I pulled up my GPS, seeing that there was another location for the store just forty-five minutes away. That meant it would probably take two hours for me to get home, but it was worth it.

I made the drive, finding the salsa that had been out of stock at the usual location where I bought it. And since I knew it was rude to take all of their stock of salsa, I took all but one jar, leaving that for the next person who thought it was the best salsa on the entire planet. Which it was. At least to Belle, and that was all that really mattered to me.

It had been eight months since we started dating, and those eight months had truly been the happiest I'd ever been. And I thought that Belle would say the same. Every day was a new adventure for us, and we made the most of every second that we had together. But I wanted more.

I wanted her for the rest of my life. I wanted her through the ups and downs that life would bring and every phase in between. She was the one person in this world that I wanted that with – she was my everything.

Which is why tonight had to be just right. I wanted to show her that there was nothing in this world for me if it didn't include her. That I would need her until the day that I took my last breath. Hence the long trip just for salsa.

She was worth it. And so much more.



I'd taken off work today just for this. A movie that we'd wanted to watch finally came out, and I had already bought it to watch at home so that we could snuggle up, eat our favorite snacks, and enjoy it together. We always preferred movies at home to movies in the theater, and even when I'd offered to take her, she said she'd rather watch at home where we could snuggle. I didn't disagree, but immediately started planning this day.

When I finally got home, I started to get dinner ready. She would be home in about two hours, and this recipe was a little bit more complex than normal, so I would need the entirety of the two hours. It was a Tuscan chicken recipe I'd seen on the internet called "Marry-Me Chicken" ... which seemed fitting for tonight.

Once I put the Dutch oven into the oven to finish cooking for thirty minutes, I got to work preparing all of the snacks. I even hid a special dessert in the refrigerator, hoping that it was going to stay hidden until the right time.

"Baby!" Belle called out to me, the front door closing. My nerves had my hands shaking, so I grabbed a towel and pretended I was drying them as I walked out of the kitchen.

"Hey, Belle," I said, grinning at her as she sat her bag down next to the entrance and ran to me to give me a hug. Even after eight months, we still did this every day. It kept our relationship so precious, and I couldn't get enough of it.

I wrapped her up in my arms and spun her around, burying my nose in her hair that smelled like home. Nothing ever

smelled as good as Belle. Nothing ever felt as good as holding her in my arms like this, which made it hard for me to let go. But eventually, I did so that we could move on with the night's plans.

“Are you cooking?” She asked, trying to peer around me into the kitchen, but I stepped in front of her, grabbing her by her arms.

“Ah-ah. Go sit down in there, and I'll bring it to you when it's ready.” I pushed her towards the dining table.

“How long have you been home?” She asked, still walking to the table but staring at me over her shoulder.

“Not too long,” I grinned, knowing how much she would love that I'd made her dinner.

The timer on my watch went off, and I knew everything was ready. I pulled the salads I'd already made from the fridge and took them to the table, where the places were already set. Then I grabbed our two plates and told her I'd be right back. Pulling out the Dutch oven, I spooned out servings of the chicken and rice for each of us, adding the vegetables to the plates as well before returning to her.

“What's all of this?” She asked me, smiling as I placed the plate in front of her. “You've been cooking for a while!”

“I just wanted to do something special for you, baby,” I told her the partial truth. But even if I wasn't planning what I was, I would still gladly make her this meal and spend the same

amount of time or more on it. Just for her. Always for her. “It’s a new recipe.”

We both cut into the chicken that was covered in a creamy sauce. I watched as she lifted the bite to her mouth, taking it between her lips.

Her eyes went wide as she chewed, locked on me. I didn’t even have to try the food to know it was good.

“Landon! This is amazing! What is it?” She asked, and I couldn’t help but snicker to myself.

“It’s just Tuscan chicken.” I shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal.

We ate and talked as normal, and I was getting more anxious by the second. I wanted so badly for us to move to the living room for the movie that I thought I might throw up.

Finally, we both finished dinner, and I took all of the dishes back to the kitchen and set them in the sink before grabbing the snack tray from the fridge and taking it to the living room.

“Come here, baby,” I called to her, and she rounded the couch to sit by me. Belle didn’t waste a second reaching for the chips and salsa. I didn’t blame her.

“I’m so excited for this movie,” she said, grinning at me as she pulled the salsa closer to her.

“Me too,” I said, though I knew I wasn’t concerned about the movie in the slightest.

I started the movie, planning on waiting for the ending. But ten minutes in, I realized that I couldn't. I paused the movie, pushing the blanket off of me and getting off of the couch.

“What are you—” Belle stopped when she saw me reach into my pocket and pull out a ring box, lowering myself to a knee in front of her. Her breath caught in her throat, and already, I saw tears in her eyes.

“Isabella Sterling, I can't wait another day, not even another second, to ask you. I have loved you for so long and have had the pleasure of knowing you, living with you, and being your best friend. These past eight months, I've had the privilege of calling myself your boyfriend, but that isn't enough for me. I need more. I need you to be by my side for the rest of my life, through whatever may come our way. I promise to love you always and drive two hours to get your favorite salsa, to watch every space movie with you from now until we die. Please, do me the honor and be my wife. Nothing could make me happier. I love you more than words could ever describe. Will you marry me?” I opened the box, revealing a beautiful solitaire diamond ring. One that I'd had for a month now.

My heart was beating like a drum in my chest as I watched Belle's face transform into pure bliss, tears rolling down her cheeks. Then she flung herself on me, knocking me backward as she embraced me.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! I love you so much!”

The End.

Thank You For Reading

“There is no friend as loyal as a book”

- Ernest Hemingway

Want more of Nova Avery?



Join my Newsletter and Download a FREE copy of my novella ” **The Bully Next Door**” A Sweet Contemporary Romance.

**My brother’s best friend bullied me when I was younger and now he wants a second chance.**

I thought my brother’s infuriating best friend, Hunter Reed and his annoying jokes were a part of my past.

That’s why I had no problem returning to Alaska to visit my ill grandmother.

You can imagine the shock on my face when I found out he lives next door.

Not only that but he’s got the contact to renovate my Gran’s house!

Now I’m stuck watching him as he charms it up with my grandma—which is kinda cute.

But I’m NOT that girl who falls for her childhood bully like it’s a movie. At least that’s what I keep telling myself.

Even though Hunter is hot, charming in a devilish way, I don’t know if I could still trust him since he’s known as the Casanova in town.

Besides, I’m not a small town girl, I have a whole life and career in the city.

I thought hating him was going to be easy, well I was very wrong.

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