



A ROYAL CHRISTMAS ROMCOM

JUST A
Mr **Holiday**
HANGOUT



Mr **KATIE NELSON** *Mr*

Just a Holiday Hangout

A Royal Christmas Romcom

Katie Nelson

Copyright © 2023 by Katie Nelson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and situations are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any actual person—living or dead—is entirely coincidental. Certain locations and institutions are mentioned but the story and characters are fictitious.

Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Epilogue

UP NEXT

THANK YOU

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ALSO BY KATIE NELSON

Chapter 1



Ada - 5 days until Christmas

ALTHOUGH MOST PEOPLE WOULD be humming “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” with the holiday just a few days away, Ada James sang “Miss Independent” quietly to herself.

She often thought of Kelly Clarkson as an older sister. Someone she looked up to for her strength, perseverance, and the ability to overcome obstacles. Kelly’s knack for writing a catchy empowering hook didn’t hurt either.

Ada paused her unpacking when the glistening white mountains of Big Bear, California caught her eye. *I feel like I stepped into a snow globe. It’s so different from the palm trees of Los Angeles.*

Maggie, her best friend, had invited her and a couple others to stay at a woodsy Airbnb for the holidays. Ada didn’t have much for family other than her grandmother, and it was their tradition to celebrate Christmas early in December. Most of

the time, she filled the week of Christmas with work and Chinese take-out.

After hanging up her last outfit, Ada let herself fall onto the plush bed. *This might be the coziest Christmas I've ever had.* She closed her eyes, picturing herself sipping hot cocoa, shopping, and napping in front of a warm fire.

Commotion in the living room interrupted her tranquility.

Ada moved to the hallway to scope out what was happening. *As far as I know, everyone who was invited has already arrived.*

Her pulse quickened as she slinked down the corridor. A male voice she didn't recognize piqued her curiosity.

"Guys, come meet Chase's friend," she heard Maggie say.

Ada peered around the corner, eyes landing on the new arrival.

Arlo Silva.

He was just as striking as she remembered, and she hated that. Her stomach tightened into a tangled knot.

"This is my sister, Liza and her boyfriend, Miller," Maggie continued as the group exchanged handshakes.

"Hey, nice to meet you. I'm Arlo."

His deep gravelly voice sent chills up Ada's spine.

"Arlo's a DJ and has been on tour in Europe for the last year or so. And this is his niece, Brooklyn."

"Hi Brooklyn," Liza said. "How old are you?"

“I’m ten,” a small brunette girl replied.

“Ah, excuse me.” Arlo cut in. “You’re still nine. Your birthday isn’t for another month.”

“Ugh.” Brooklyn rolled her eyes and put a hand on her hip. “Uncle Arlo, you’re killing me. I’m basically ten, and I’m practicing my new age.”

Ada bit back a smile.

“Thanks for letting us come,” Arlo said, as he took off his coat. “I wasn’t planning to return to the states yet, but my sister is having twins and has to be in the hospital on bed rest. So Brooklyn gets to chill with her dope Uncle Arlo for a while.” He nudged Brooklyn, who again rolled her eyes.

“Who’s that?” Brooklyn pointed to the back of the room where Ada was standing in the doorway.

“Oh that’s Ada,” Maggie replied. “Ada, come meet Brooklyn. And you remember Arlo.”

Ada mustered all the I-don’t-give-a-crap she could and confidently walked toward them. She refused to acknowledge Arlo, but bent down to shake Brooklyn’s hand. “Love your shoes,” Ada told her, pointing to the sparkly platform kicks Brooklyn was wearing.

“Thanks! I love your nails. Can you show me how to do that?”

Ada chuckled. “These are couture.” She held up her fingernails that were painted white with rhinestone accents.

“But I did bring along a few bottles of nail polish. I can give you a cute manicure.”

“Cool!” Brooklyn replied, dropping her coat on the floor. “Can we do it now?”

Ada shrugged. “If your uncle says it’s okay.” Once again, she kept her eyes glued to Brooklyn.

“Go for it,” Arlo answered.

Ada shot Arlo a death stare as she turned to walk away. She forced herself to ignore his piercing green eyes. *He’s really going to act like everything is fine between us?*

As she walked away, she heard Chase ask Arlo, “Whoa, what’s that about?” When she and Brooklyn rounded the corner, she paused slightly so that she could listen in.

Arlo responded, “Ah... I sort of stood her up last year.”

“What?” Maggie objected. “I thought you said you texted her, but she never replied back.”

Arlo defended himself. “That part is true. We hit it off at The Break’s homeless benefit where Chase proposed to you. We planned to go out to dinner the next night, but that afternoon I found out I got the gig in London. I was tied up on the phone for hours and totally lost track of time. When I texted to apologize for not making it, she never responded.”

Chase mumbled, “And that’s how the grinch’s heart became three sizes too small.”

Ada closed her eyes. The night she and Arlo met one year ago came crashing back to her mind...

“Excuse me!” Ada elbowed her way through the crowd at The Break, a Santa Monica music venue and bar.

“Ada!” Maggie reached out to hug her. “You came!”

“Of course I came. Can’t let you leave for Minnesota without one last look at me.” She twirled in a circle while her bright pink cocktail dress flared.

Immediately, a guy standing next to Maggie reached over with his hand outstretched. “Hey.”

Ada lifted an eyebrow. “And you are?”

Maggie grinned, “Ada, this is Chase’s roommate, Arlo. He organized the performers and is emceeding the fundraiser tonight.”

She slowly extended her hand. Then she whispered to Maggie. “So, he’s *nice*?” Ada had a hard time believing such guys existed in Los Angeles.

“I don’t know him that well, but he seems decent. Maybe you should give him a shot.”

Arlo cut in. “Can I get you a drink, Ada?”

Ada gave Maggie a side-eyed smirk. “I’d love a drink.”

After chatting briefly, Arlo asked her to dance—as if he wasn’t attractive enough with his flowing sun streaked hair and impressive physique. But, it wasn’t just Arlo’s light, easy smile and broad shoulders that had drawn her to him. It was

the way he leaned in when she spoke. The way he had taken her aside and asked about her interests. He had made her feel seen. Most of all, when they parted that night, he had kissed her hand—like she was a freaking princess who deserved the world. That kiss lit a spark in Ada, which had made her hopeful for the first time in forever.

Maggie’s voice snapped her back to the present moment, back to her reality of eavesdropping. “This week was supposed to be fun and low key... just a holiday hangout with a group of friends.” After a brief pause, Maggie continued, “It’ll be fine, Arlo. I’ll talk to Ada. And then, I’m sure if you explain what happened, she’ll understand.”

Ada opened her eyes and threw her shoulders back. *Shake it off, girl. It was his loss.*



“Ah! My nails are fire!! Thank you!” Brooklyn took a photo of her manicured hand. Then she leaned in to Ada and said, “Hold up your gorg nails and smile!”

After clicking a few times, Brooklyn tapped on her phone. “Gotta send these pics to my BFFs!”

“Your nails look great!” Maggie appeared, leaning against the door frame. “Ada, could I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.” Ada internally cringed. *I bet I can guess what this is about...* She stood and followed Maggie into her bedroom.

After closing the door behind them, Maggie sat on the bed and peered up at Ada. “That was really sweet of you to paint Brooklyn’s nails, but don’t you think your reaction to Arlo’s arrival was a little harsh?”

Ada sat down next to her. “When the guy who ghosted you shows up at your Airbnb, what *is* the proper reaction?”

Maggie bumped Ada’s shoulder gently. “Why didn’t you tell me what happened?”

“You and Chase had just gotten engaged. I didn’t want to bring you down with my depressing love life.”

“I still would have wanted to know.” Putting her arm around Ada’s shoulders, Maggie continued. “You have every right to be upset at him, but I do think Arlo is a decent guy who made a mistake. Maybe a little bit of a ladies man, but Chase trusts him.”

Maggie and Chase had recently tied the knot, so Maggie was immersed in newlywed bliss. But, she had a point. Chase seemed to be a good judge of character. After all, he chose to marry Maggie—the best person she knew.

“I’ve never seen you so upset about a guy before anyway. Normally you just buy a new outfit and move on.”

“You’re right. I don’t know why it’s bothering me so much. But, it *is* awkward to now have Arlo staying here... with his nine-year-old niece... and being forced to spend time with him for the holidays.”

“I know.” Maggie pulled her legs close and wrapped her arms around them. “Could you try to give him a fresh start? Pretend this is the first time you’ve ever met him. Like it’s the beginning of a Hallmark movie and a cute, new stranger just arrived.”

Shaking her head, Ada let a smirk slip. “I’m officially banning you from watching the Hallmark channel. You’ve seen too many of those sappy love stories.”

“Maybe.” Maggie shrugged. “But, I’d rather focus on the happy moments in life rather than dwell on the bad. Besides, I can tell Arlo’s niece, Brooklyn, really likes you. I’m sure it’s hard being away from her parents for the holidays. Do it for the kid, Ada... Please?” Maggie flashed puppy dog eyes in her direction.

Ada tried to massage out the tension in her forehead. “Alright, geez. Guilt trip me a little more.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! I know it’s been a bit of a rocky start, but I think we’re gonna have a great time this week.”

Sighing, Ada replied, “I hope you’re right.”



Ada returned to find Brooklyn taking selfies while flashing different facial expressions.

“Hey, you’re back! Let’s go show Uncle Arlo how amazing I look!”

Ada couldn’t help but smile. She loved Brooklyn’s confidence and enthusiasm. *If only girls could hold on to their self-assuredness all the way through adolescence.*

Brooklyn skipped past her out the door. Looking back she said, “C’mon slowpoke!”

Ada hesitated, but managed to rally her inner maturity. “Coming!”

As they entered the hallway, it was Brooklyn who held up a finger signaling “shh.”

Ada gave her a quizzical look.

Leaning her ear toward the kitchen, Brooklyn strained to listen in on the conversation. *Hopefully she isn’t imitating my earlier eavesdropping, I thought I had been subtle.* Before Ada could overthink it, she began picking up on the conversation in the kitchen...

“Dude, everything good? Who called?” Chase asked.

“Just a ... job offer.” Arlo sighed.

“That sounds like a good thing, right?” Maggie responded.

After a moment, Arlo finally spoke. “A client wants me to DJ their New Year’s Eve party.”

“Sounds amazing! What’s the problem?” Maggie raised her eyebrows.

“The party is in Brazil.”

“Oh...” Maggie resigned.

“What are you gonna do?” Chase asked.

“I turned it down. I can’t take Brooklyn to Brazil.”

“Yes you can!” Brooklyn stormed into the room like a tsunami.

Arlo turned, clearly surprised by her presence. “Hey, I thought you were getting your nails done.”

“And I thought I got to choose what we do during Uncle Arlo and Brooklyn hang out time.”

Arlo shook his head at her sassy attitude. “Yes... you do get to choose... but I was thinking things like where we go for ice cream and what movies we watch. Not if we leave the country.”

“But... you can’t turn it down. I know how much you wanted to—”

Arlo cut her off. “There will be other opportunities.”

“Opportunities for what?” Ada had waited an extra moment before using her most casual gait entering the room.

Brooklyn piped up, “Uncle Arlo got offered a job DJing a New Year’s Eve party in Brazil... and he’s gotta take it, right Ada?”

Ada’s initial reaction was to say, “Great! Superb! Yes! Take it. Leave. Be gone so I can actually relax and enjoy being in Big Bear for the holidays.” But, she held her tongue. Instead, she remembered Maggie’s words encouraging her to leave the

past in the past. So, she painted on a smile and mustered all the polite resolve she could. “Yeah, that sounds...really cool. Visiting Rio is on my bucket list.”

There. That was a very amicable response. Ada glanced at Maggie for approval. Maggie gave her a sly grin and a nod in return signaling she knew how much restraint Ada was showing.

“So there we go! We’re going to Brazil!” Brooklyn jumped up and down, clapping.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...No. We’re not,” Arlo said with his hands up.

“If you’re worried about who will take care of me, you don’t have to. I’ll just hang out with you in the DJ booth.”

“A New Year’s Eve party isn’t exactly a place for kids. Besides, there’s so much fun stuff to do in Big Bear—like *shopping.*”

Ada watched Brooklyn cross her arms over her chest. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to distract me with shopping. This is *sooo* not over.”

Shaking his head, Arlo stood. “How are you not even a teenager yet?”

Ada tried to hold back a smile. Seeing the way Arlo cared for Brooklyn was cute. Most of all, seeing the way Brooklyn so clearly loved Arlo was heart-stoppingly adorable.

Maybe Maggie was right... Maybe I shouldn’t write Arlo off based on that one time he stood me up.... Or, that’s exactly

what I should do. People show you who they are by their actions.

Chapter 2



Ada - 4 days until Christmas

TO HER OWN DEMISE, Ada stayed up too late scrolling on social media which meant she slept in late. When she awoke, the house was eerily quiet considering there were seven people now staying there.

Walking into the living room, she saw Brooklyn snuggled on the couch. Noticing Ada, she looked up from her phone. “Hey! Bout time you woke up!”

“I know,” Ada cringed. Stifling a yawn, she asked, “Where is everyone?”

“I guess there’s a couples Gingerbread Man Hunt downtown that Liza and Miller and Chase and Maggie decided to do. Oh and uncle Arlo’s in a meeting.”

Grabbing a box of cereal off the counter, Ada poured some into a bowl. “Since when do DJs have meetings?” she murmured to herself.

“Uncle Arlo and I are gonna head into town in about an hour. There’s a snowman building contest this afternoon that I really want to do. If you help us, I know ours would be the best!”

Ada hesitated. “Oh that sounds fun, but I don’t want to interrupt time with your uncle.”

“Psh,” Brooklyn waved away Ada’s concern. “You won’t! I like spending time with Uncle Arlo, but... it’s been nice to feel like... I don’t know... I have a girl friend.”

Ada peered over at Brooklyn who was staring at her hands.

Shoot. Ada usually had zero trouble saying no... but apparently her strong will melted near sweet kids who called her “friend.”

Ada smiled at Brooklyn. “Alright, but in order to be ready in an hour I’m gonna have to prep at olympic speed.”

Brooklyn straightened. “Don’t worry, I know a million ways to stall my uncle if I need to! Girls gotta stick together, right?”

Ada laughed. “Right!”



The Uber ride to downtown Big Bear was awkward to say the least. Brooklyn insisted that Arlo squish into the middle seat. Ada kept her arms as close to her side as possible and her gaze straight ahead. If she turned away from the window, she’d be nose-to-nose with Arlo.

As the black compact car sped down the mountain road, Ada tried to take subtle deep breaths. The close quarters and winding roads were making her feel claustrophobic and anxious... not to mention the fact that Arlo smelled like he had freshly applied a manly cologne.

Breathe, Ada. Just breathe. She closed her eyes trying not to think about her current situation. *Find your happy place.* Sephora came to mind.

“You doing okay?” Arlo gently whispered into her ear.

“Uh huh,” Ada managed.

“Nice and cozy in here, huh?” Arlo continued.

“Yep.” Ada exhaled, hoping he would get the picture that she didn’t feel like chatting at the moment. All her energy was being channeled into keeping her cereal from reappearing.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Your face looks a little... pukey.”

Ada blew out a breath. “What every girl wants to hear.” She pinched the bridge of her nose willing the nausea away.

“No... I just meant...” Arlo fumbled.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” Brooklyn asked.

“Ada feels a little carsick. Let’s try to get her mind off it. Got any good car games?”

“How about Hot Topic? My friends and I play it. Basically, you just get to ask each other random questions.”

“Okay, great,” Arlo agreed.

Ada moaned. She wanted to argue against any talking, but she couldn't muster the words.

“I'll go first.” Brooklyn straightened. “What's the deal with you two? Why are you so weird around each other?”

Silence filled the car like a giant elephant.

Finally, Arlo cleared his throat. “I made a stupid mistake.”

“Uncle A... WHAT did you do?” Brooklyn asked.

Ada focused on her breathing. *Arlo can handle this one. He's the uncle after all. I have zero kid experience other than painting Brooklyn's nails.*

After a moment, he spoke. “We were supposed to meet for dinner and... I forgot.”

Brooklyn leaned forward so she could see Ada. “That's sus. Did you drag him on your socials?”

Ada felt her lips tugging into a smile. “No. For some reason I didn't... still could though.”

Then Brooklyn hit Arlo on the arm. “You owe her big time.”

“I tried to apologize,” Arlo defended.

“When? I sat at that restaurant for over an hour waiting for you. And I haven't heard a word from you at all in the last year.” Ada crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“I texted you, I swear... and I can't believe you waited at the restaurant that long.” Arlo cringed.

“Neither can I,” Ada chided.

For some reason she had really wanted him to come. Although they only chatted and danced briefly, something about their time together felt like more than a random spark. But maybe she was just caught up in the lingering romance dust from Maggie & Chase. How can someone witness a grand proposal and not feel a little hopeful? It had impacted Ada who was usually immune to all things fanciful.

“Well this is awkward...” Brooklyn commented.

Ada and Arlo just nodded.

“Would you rather sneeze out cheeseburgers or eat cheeseburgers that someone else sneezed out?”

Ada burst out laughing.

Arlo chuckled. “What?”

“We’re playing Hot Topic, remember? That’s my next question,” Brooklyn said matter of fact.

Chapter 3



Ada

THANKFULLY, THE REST OF the ride into town was light-hearted and surprisingly, fun. They were still discussing if it would be worse to have to lick the bottom of someone's shoe or take a bite of a ghost pepper when their Uber rolled to a stop.

“Well, I'm sufficiently grossed out,” Ada said, stepping out of the car.

“At least you stopped feeling carsick,” Brooklyn interjected.

“Oh, weirdly you're right. Who knew talking about something disgusting could actually take away nausea?” Ada smiled at the nine-year-old that was beginning to feel more like a younger sister.

Suddenly, Brooklyn shrieked.

“What's wrong?!” Arlo snapped his head toward her.

“Shoes!!!”

“We really need to discuss what’s scream worthy.” Running a hand through his hair, he motioned for Ada to go first as Brooklyn skipped into a shoe store. Ada pursed her lips together, holding back a smile.

After entering, Brooklyn headed toward the girls section but then abruptly stopped. “Uncle A, I saw some sick Jordans over there.”

Arlo narrowed his eyes at her. “I sense that I’m not wanted.”

Brooklyn looked at him innocently. “I just want you to be able to look at your shoes.”

Arlo shrugged and headed to the men’s department.

Ada followed Brooklyn to a display with a variety of boots.

“Those are cute,” Ada commented as Brooklyn picked up ones that were somehow furry and sparkly.

“Good, we got rid of him,” Brooklyn said quietly. “I need your help.”

“Everything okay?”

“Can I tell you a secret?” Brooklyn whispered.

“Umm... yeah, of course.”

She motioned for Ada to sit next to her on a nearby bench. “I think Arlo really wants to take that job in Brazil. He only turned it down because of me. I don’t want to hold him back.”

Ada shifted her weight. “I don’t think you have to worry about it. I can tell he really likes being here with you.”

Brooklyn let out a breath. “I know, but... he left his tour thing early to take care of me. I don’t want him to miss out on something else because of me. I have to think of a way to get him to go. I can tell you’re super smart, can you help me?”

The look of sincerity and desperation on Brooklyn’s face hit Ada like a truck. “Oh boy,” she said finally. “I’ll try to think of something.”

“So you’ll help?”

“I don’t know how, but if there’s anything I can do, then of course I’ll help you.”

“Oh thank you. Meeting you has been the best Christmas gift ever.” Brooklyn wrapped her arms around Ada’s waist.

The speed and ferocity of a child’s love is amazing. Less than twenty-four hours together and we’re already BFFs...



After perusing the shoes for thirty more minutes, Arlo joined them. “We should head out if we’re gonna do the Snowman Building Contest.”

“Sounds good, I’m ready,” Brooklyn replied.

“You don’t want to buy anything?” Arlo asked.

“No, I just like looking.”

“Wow, I’m shocked.”

Brooklyn rolled her eyes at her uncle before pulling him toward the door.

As they approached the town square, Arlo pointed toward a table that said “registration” above it. “I’ll sign us up if you guys want to wait here.”

Ada nodded, then asked Brooklyn, “So, what exactly do we do in a Snowman Building Contest?”

“Well, I read online that each team has twenty minutes. First, we run to the clothing station to pick out the snowman’s outfit. Then, we have to build and dress the snowman. When the time is up, the judges decide which one is the most creative. I think you should choose the outfit since you know fashion the best.”

“Well, you definitely have good taste so I’m going to need your help.”

Ada had always avoided kids because she wasn’t sure how to act around them. They seemed unpredictable. But, she was beginning to see their unpredictability wasn’t always a bad thing. *Brooklyn keeps surprising me in so many sweet ways.*

At that moment, Arlo walked over. “Are you guys ready for this?”

“Yeah!” Brooklyn clapped.

Rubbing her mittens together, Ada nodded. The temperature was around thirty degrees, which was much colder than she was used to in Los Angeles.

“We’re supposed to go stand by the number 5 sign.” Arlo pointed up ahead as they walked toward their area.

“Hello everyone!” A man’s voice rang out of a mega phone. “When I say go, you’ll have twenty minutes to create your snowman. I’ll let you know when you have five minutes remaining. On your mark, get set, go!”

At that moment, ten teams raced toward tables with clothing and other random items strewn about.

“What should we be looking for?” Arlo yelled, in order to be heard among the music and the chaos.

“What do you think about doing a summer snowwoman? I found this grass skirt,” Ada hollered back.

“I love it! Look, here’s a swimsuit!” Brooklyn held up a bright pink triangle bikini top.

“That’s perfect! Now we just need some items to make the face.” Ada looked around for smaller pieces.

“I’ll look for sunglasses,” Brooklyn chimed in.

Arlo straightened, watching teams running to a snow pile. “I’m gonna start making our snowwoman.”

“Good idea.” Brooklyn agreed.

“I’ll search for some supplies over here.” Ada pointed to an area filled with rocks, buttons, beads, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. Upon spotting a bag of seashells, she snatched them up just as Brooklyn ran over showing her the yellow sunglasses she found.

“Those are perfect! I think we have everything, let’s go beautify this snowwoman!” She and Brooklyn took off toward

the area where Arlo was hoisting a second snowball.

“I just have to make her head,” Arlo said, kneeling in the snow.

Ada was setting down the supplies when she felt a cold wet ball crash into the top of her hair. She looked over to Brooklyn who had one hand covering her mouth and the other pointing to Arlo.

“It wasn’t me, I promise!” Arlo said with his hands up.

Ada narrowed her eyes on him, trying to determine if he was innocent or guilty. Balling up some snow, she chucked it toward Arlo—just to be safe, not because it felt good to let out some pent-up frustration.

The snowball hit him square on the chest. He looked down at where he’d been hit, stunned. Clearly, he wasn’t expecting her to retaliate.

Brooklyn suddenly burst out laughing—an admission of guilt.

“Oh you better watch it missy!” Arlo grabbed a fistful of powder and threw it at the instigating culprit.

“Payback girly!” Ada said, doing the same.

After pelting a few Brooklyn’s way, they were all laughing and covered in snow.

Suddenly, the mega phone man hollered, “Five minutes remain!”

“Oh no, we gotta finish!” Brooklyn yelled.

“You put the clothes on, Brooklyn. When Arlo finishes her head, I’ll make her face.” Ada grabbed the seashells and began designing a smile.

She was adjusting the sunglasses one last time when the buzzer rang.

“We did it!” Brooklyn pulled Arlo and Ada into an embrace.

“She looks great,” Arlo said. “They’ll announce the winner in thirty minutes. Should we size up our competition?”

Brooklyn nodded, so the three of them walked through the park admiring the other nine snow creations.

When thirty minutes had passed, everyone gathered in front of the park gazebo.

“Thank you all for participating. We hope you had as much fun as we did! Now on to the winners. Third place goes to...” He looked down at a notecard, “Silly Snow Gnome!” Everyone clapped politely. He continued, “Second place goes to: Wish-it-Was-Summer Snowwoman!”

“Yeah! We got second!” Brooklyn beamed. The man continued, but Ada was caught up in the joy she felt. She couldn’t remember a time when she had so much fun.

“Here’s our prize!” Brooklyn held up an envelope. “Twenty dollars to The Sweet Tooth candy store! Can we go right now?”

Arlo gazed at his watch. “We should probably grab dinner first. Then we can stop by the candy place on our way to Chase’s concert.”

“Okay,” Brooklyn resigned, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “One question though.” She turned toward Ada. “Do you forgive Uncle Arlo? It seems like you do because we were all having fun together.”

Ada inhaled sharply, caught off guard by Brooklyn’s directness. Then her mouth turned into a smile. “I might be starting too, but it’ll take a lot more groveling for him to get a clean slate.”

Brooklyn grinned back before elbowing Arlo. “Did you hear that? You gotta grovel.”

“I heard it loud and clear. Groveling you will get, Miss Ada James.” He winked in her direction and she felt her chest tighten.

Dang this man and the effect he has on me. I need to put some distance between us so that I can regain my grip on reality. And the reality is—Arlo is just another guy who says the right things but disappoints you in the end.



That night, Ada climbed into bed exhausted. Who knew snowman building was the equivalent of a full contact sport? On top of that, she spent the rest of the night constantly positioning herself away from Arlo.

At Chase’s Christmas concert, she intentionally stood on the edge of the group—always on the opposite end of him. It was

mentally draining, but she had to do it. A neon sign seemed to live above his head blinking, “Hottie!”

On top of that, his exquisite eyes drilled into whoever he was talking to, and his smirk drew you in with its warmth. His good looks plus his sweet demeanor around Brooklyn was messing with her resolve.

Get some sleep. You're just tired.

She was about to put in her AirPods when someone knocked.

From outside the door she heard, “Hey...It’s Arlo, can we talk?”

Ada smoothed a few wispy strands from her face and sat up straight before responding. “Um... sure, come on in. What’s up?”

Arlo peered in. “Hey, so...” When his eyes landed on Ada, he hesitated.

Do I have toothpaste on my face? Did some of my eye cream dry on?

Ada tried to discreetly feel around her face for a possible culprit. *Why else would he be staring?* He’d obviously never seen her without makeup before, so maybe he was taken aback by her lackluster appearance.

“Do I... have something on my face?”

“Oh, no... no, you look... comfy.”

Comfy!? Ugh... guys. This is why girls are self-conscious.

Ada furrowed her eyebrows.

“I mean... you look nice. I just... Um... anyway...” Arlo cleared his throat, rubbed the scruff emerging on his jawline, and then leaned against the door frame. Staring at the floor, he slowly lifted his eyes to Ada before saying, “I wanted to tell you that it’s super sweet of you to offer, but please don’t feel obligated to come to Brazil. I know Brooklyn can be very persuasive.”

Ada choked on the spit she was trying to swallow. “What?”

“Brooklyn told me you offered to come to Brazil to watch her while I work. She said you wanted to do anything you could to help.”

Ada let out a nervous laugh and rubbed her forehead.

“Oh no... is that not what happened?”

“Um, not exactly. Brooklyn said she felt bad you had to leave Europe to come take care of her. I told her I’m sure you wanted to, but she insisted she didn’t want you to miss out on something else because of her. I said if there was anything I could do to help, I would.”

Arlo’s eyes went wide. He ran his hand through his hair. “Ohhh... gotcha. A nine year old’s interpretation of events.... That makes more sense. I’m sorry you got dragged into all this.”

“It’s fine,” Ada chuckled. “It’s been fun getting to hang out with Brooklyn. She’s really sweet.”

“Yeah, she’s really taken to you...I think she might like you more than me.”

“Nah. It’s just the girl connection,” Ada reassured him.

“Well, thanks for hanging out. I know it’s been hard being away from her parents. Plus, having twin sisters is going to be a big change for her. She’s been an only child for the last nine years. Just a lot happening in her life right now.”

Ada looked down at her hands. “I’m glad she has you.”

“Thanks.” Arlo turned to leave and then paused. “I’ll talk to Brooklyn and tell her that she shouldn’t assume you want to go on an all-expense-paid trip to Brazil.” Then, he stepped out, closing the door behind him.

“Whoa whoa whoa...did you just casually drop in the fact that it would be all expenses paid?”

“Oh, did I?” Arlo smirked, peeking in. “Does that change anything?”

“Have you two been scheming this whole time?”

He opened the door a little wider. “No. It’s scary to admit, but Brooklyn devised this all on her own. But... I think she would have fun with you there and you’d get to see Rio... and I’d get to play a New Year’s Eve party for a very... wealthy client.”

Ada shook her head. “You’re not seriously considering having me fly to Brazil with you guys...”

“Not if you think it’s completely crazy.”

“It is crazy! I barely know you. What would her parents think?”

“I’d have to ask, but if they know Brooklyn will have a responsible supervisor the entire time I think they’d go for it. Besides, I know Chase and Maggie well. They can be your references. Would you... maybe think about it? You won’t have to pay for anything...”

Ada shook her head. “Good night Arlo.”

“Sleep on it... good idea,” Arlo smiled while shutting the door.

“Wait...”

Arlo stilled.

“Why do you want to do this so badly? Do you need the money?”

Arlo placed his hand over the top of the door—like she needed a reminder that he fully encompassed the tall, dark, and handsome stereotype to a T.

Looking down, he said, “No.” Then his gaze found her. “Although, the money would be nice. This one’s not just a job... It’s personal. The client... is a good friend. But... no pressure. Honestly, just think about it and if it sounds fun, come with. If not, don’t worry about it.”

Ada gulped as she nodded. “Thanks. Can you turn the light off on your way out?”

Tapping the switch, Arlo said, “Good night, Ada James.”

She pulled the blanket over her head and squeezed her eyes shut. *It would be insane to go, right? But when will I ever get*

another chance to go to Brazil... for free... on New Year's Eve... with Brooklyn... and Arlo? Never of course. All of those things made her want to consider it. One of them made her more nervous than the others.

Chapter 4



Ada - 3 days until Christmas

A KNOCK ON THE door startled Ada awake. “Who is it?” she asked groggily.

“Maggie.”

“Come in.” Ada sat up and grabbed her hairbrush from beside her table and tried to smooth out her tangled locks.

Maggie gently opened the door. “Good morning sleepy head.”

Ada moaned. “What time is it?”

“Ten. I let you sleep in, but I couldn’t wait any longer.” Maggie strode into the room in bright-red flannel pajamas with Christmas trees all over them. She sat down on the end of Ada’s bed and looked at her eagerly.

“What are you so excited about?” Ada asked, stifling a yawn.

Maggie lowered her voice to a shouty whisper. “Brooklyn told us that you might go to Brazil so Arlo can DJ the New Year’s Eve Party!”

Clearly, Arlo’s chat with Brooklyn had failed to dampen her belief that Ada would accompany them.

Rubbing her temple, Ada fell back onto her pillow.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Maggie asked.

“I didn’t even know about it until last night. And I definitely don’t know if I’m going to go.” She propped herself up to a 90-degree angle. “I can’t go, right? That would be ludicrous.”

“It would be spontaneous, but the real question is: do you want to go?”

Ada blew out a breath. “Yes... and no. I mean Rio would be amazing and... I can tell it would make Brooklyn happy. And Arlo. It just all happened really fast. And... I didn’t even think about the fact that I’d have to find someone to cover for me at work.”

“I’ll cover for you,” Maggie said as she shrugged. Ada was Maggie’s manager at the clothing store, Urban Wear LA. Maggie hadn’t worked in a couple of months due to her and Chase traveling and getting married. “I was hoping to start working again. Especially because we could really use the money while Chase records his album.”

“Are you sure?” Ada scrunched up her nose at Maggie.

“I mean, if you’re okay with it.”

“You were my best worker... And it is only for a few days...”

A huge smile spread across Maggie’s face. “Good! It’s settled. You’re going to Brazil!”

“Alright... out with it. What’s going on? Why do you want me to do this so badly?” Ada narrowed her eyes on the woman who had become her first ever best friend.

“I just think trying something new like this could be a really cool experience.” Maggie averted her eyes to the floor. “And, maybe it will give you an opportunity to see if there is still a spark between you and Arlo.”

Ada chucked her pillow at Maggie. “Stop... That’s what this is? Your attempt at getting me to live out one of your cheesy romance movies?”

“No... well, maybe, but would that be so bad?” Maggie threw the pillow back at Ada. “When I met you, you were convinced that happily ever afters didn’t exist. But, you were the one who encouraged me to not give up on Chase. And, you were the one who helped Liza see that she and Miller could make it work even if it meant doing long distance.” Maggie scooted next to Ada and put her arm around her. “I don’t know if you see it, but you’ve changed. In a good way.”

“You mean I’ve gotten *soft*.” Ada nudged Maggie with her shoulder.

“No,” Maggie chuckled. “You definitely still have your Ada edge—don’t worry about that. But, I think you’ve grown.

You're starting to let people in, and I think so far you've seen that not all people are bad."

Ada scrunched her nose. "You and Chase and Liza are *not* normal people. You're all aliens that landed here from a freaky planet where people are genuinely nice and trustworthy."

"Well, maybe a few more of us landed here on Earth. But, you won't find the others of our kind unless you give people a chance. Remember how you were so skeptical of me at first? And look at how much you love me now?" Maggie squeezed Ada and they both fell back onto the pillows. Maggie proceeded to kiss Ada on the cheek repeatedly while Ada protested.

"Ewww!" Ada laughed. "Okay, okay... ugh, I will take what you said into consideration."

"Good because Arlo needs an answer by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, he has to arrange flights as soon as possible if it's a go. I think he might be more excited than he wants to let on..."

"Crap." Ada buried her face into a blanket.

"Chase and I made Christmas tree pancakes! Come down soon so you can decorate and eat one before they're all gone!"

"Seriously? Please tell me he's not wearing matching pajamas with you too?"

“Oh he definitely is! And we have a different pair for each night until Christmas!”

Ada groaned. “It’s like a holiday Pinterest board exploded in this Airbnb.”

“Isn’t it awesome?” Maggie beamed. “The rest of the day involves Christmas Minute to Win It games. Get excited!”

Ada just shook her head. She’d never experienced a Christmas like this before, and although Maggie was making it completely over the top, there was something nice about getting in the Christmas spirit.

Chapter 5



Ada - 2 days until Christmas

THE NEXT DAY, THE group was gathered at the kitchen table, finishing up breakfast.

“Chase and I are planning to head into town around noon. Anyone else want to come?” Maggie asked, chipper as always.

“I want to go!” Brooklyn replied. “Can we go?” She looked at Arlo.

“Yeah that’s fine.” Arlo ran his fingers through his shiny brown hair.

Then Brooklyn eyed Ada. “You should come too.”

Ada tried to think of an excuse—still anxious about being around Arlo. On top of that, she needed to make a decision about whether or not to go to Brazil. But, shopping was one of her favorite pastimes. She wasn’t about to let him ruin the thing she was looking forward to most about Christmas

vacation. “Yeah, I’ll go,” she finally said. “Liza, what are you and Miller going to do?”

“We’re gonna take Randall for a walk.” Liza pulled her five-pound Chihuahua up to her face and he licked her cheek. “Then we might try skiing!”

Miller stared at Liza adoringly.

Surrounded by lovestruck couples at Christmas—it’s like a Hallmark horror film. At least she had Brooklyn to be a buffer between her and Arlo. Her presence gave the group an odd number, making it feel less like a forced set up.

As Ada put her plate in the sink, Arlo slid in next to her. Quietly he whispered, “Hey, can you help me with something in town?”

“Now what?” Ada raised an eyebrow.

“I need to get Brooklyn a Christmas gift. Do you think you could help me pick something out?”

I can’t say no to that... “Sure, I can try.”

“Thanks,” Arlo said looking relieved. “I’ll see if Maggie and Chase will distract her while we shop.”

Ada nodded and then headed to her room, trying to ignore the way Arlo smelled like Old Spice—her favorite men’s deodorant. Yes, she had a favorite. In the process of picking out the perfect scent for herself, she’d always smell a few of the men’s. There was just something so manly and delicious about most of them. A little boost of serotonin on her shopping trips.

Remain focused, Ada. You're helping him out with Brooklyn's gift. That's all this is.



When they pulled into a parking spot downtown, Maggie asked Brooklyn to help her and Chase pick out a gift for the toy drive.

That left Ada with Arlo surrounded by jovial lights, music, and decorations. People bustled all around them with their hands full of shopping bags. *This town is like a freaking movie set.* Ada warily scanned for mistletoe. *That's the last thing I need.*

“Hey, everything okay?” Arlo asked, breaking her inner dialogue.

“Oh yep, I’m good.”

“So...what do you think Brooklyn would like?”

Ada bit her lip. “I could show you the boots she was eyeing up yesterday. I think she really liked them.”

“Perfect, let’s head to the shoe store.” Arlo pointed down the street and they began walking together. Ada purposely left a gap between them.

When they made it to the store, Ada grabbed the fuzzy, sparkly boots Brooklyn was studying the day before. As they waited in line to pay, Arlo asked, “Wanna get some coffee after this? I found a place I think you’d like.”

Ada crossed her arms in front of her chest. “You do owe me. You know, for standing me up.”

“Oh I know,” he said as the corner of his mouth lifted. “This is part of the groveling. Coffee and anything else you want, my treat.”

Ada smiled at the way he took her chastisement in stride. “I’m in.”

The cashier rang up the boots and handed Arlo the bag.

“Thanks for your help. I probably would have ended up getting her an Amazon gift card.”

“I’m sure she would have liked that too.”

“Yeah, but it’s not as much fun to open, and it’s not as thoughtful.”

Arlo held the door for her as she stepped out of the store and onto the sidewalk.

“The coffee shop is this way,” he said.

She noticed that he put his hand on the small of her back to guide her.

As they neared the end of the block, Arlo stopped in front of an arch leading to a small alley between the buildings. “Down here.”

“This seems a little sketchy.”

“That’s the charm. It’s off the beaten path. More of a local’s spot.”

After taking ten steps, they came to a small brown door that simply said “Coffee” in white letters.

Arlo grabbed the handle and pushed it open, but Ada didn’t move. “I’ll let you go first.”

Arlo grinned. “Alright.”

As they ascended the stairs, she heard soft music. At the landing, they stepped into a modern minimalist coffee shop. A chunky wooden bar adorned the back wall with steel black bar stools.

“This is pleasant,” Ada noted.

“Order anything you want.”

Ada scanned the menu and decided on a gingerbread latte, while Arlo ordered a peppermint mocha.

“What else do you want? I mean, you gotta pick something out of here. These look delicious.” Arlo was staring at a glass case filled with desserts.

All of the pastries are so perfect they almost look fake. “I’ll try a peppermint meringue cookie,” Ada finally decided.

“Make that two,” Arlo said. “And could we also get two of the hot chocolate brownie bites... ya know what? Why don’t you just give us two of everything.”

“Oh my gosh, what? That’s too much.”

“I owe you, remember?” Arlo arched his eyebrows. “I hope you accept cookies as payment.”

The barista boxed up their desserts and Arlo flipped open the lid for Ada to take one.

She didn't normally binge sweets, but it was Christmas and she'd never seen so many adorable desserts in one place. After biting into the minty, soft dough, she murmured, "I think cookies might be the only type of payment I'm going to accept from now on."

Arlo shot her a full grin, flashing his sparkling white teeth. Ada suddenly felt like she was melting like the cookie on her tongue.

"Let's sit." Arlo walked toward the back of the shop. Soon they were face-to-face with more stairs.

"Where are we going?"

"Just a little further up."

Being careful not to spill her drink, she climbed the steep steps.

"Made it," Arlo said, swinging open another door.

String lights were the first thing Ada noticed. They ran across the entire rooftop lounge, giving everything a twinkling glow. There were café tables among outdoor couches filled with people. Apparently this was a popular spot, which made sense considering the ambiance was out of this world. Beautiful outdoor rugs made the space boho cozy. Candles twinkled on every surface. Thankfully, there was a plethora of space heaters too.

Arlo walked over to a café table near the edge of the rooftop. As Ada approached, her breath caught in her throat. It was late afternoon, so the sun glistened off the snowy mountains. The view was unlike anything she'd ever seen. When she turned to tell Arlo he did well, she found him down on one knee—proposal style.

Her heart galloped clumsily. “What the—”

“I’m sorry for missing our date last year. I thought I had texted you but it must not have gone through. I should have followed up, but since you didn’t respond I thought it meant you were mad. I figured I should just leave you alone since I wasn’t even in the States... Ada James, is there any way you’ll forgive me?” Arlo held up a Santa cookie with a red hat, red nose, and swirly white beard as if he were presenting a ring.

Ada chuckled at the ridiculousness of it all.

Pressing his lips together, Arlo tried to keep a solemn facial expression, but a smirk was starting to slip through.

Ada shook her head in disbelief at his antics. She was about to grab the cookie and take a giant bite when she noticed the rooftop was oddly quiet.

Swiveling her head, she realized everyone was staring in their direction. There was shushing.

Arlo peered out the corner of his eye. “The people are waiting,” he said quietly, a laugh about to burst through.

The sudden spotlight made her pulse skyrocket. Glancing around and then back at Arlo, she nodded. “You’re absolutely

ridiculous... but yes, I forgive you. Now will you please stand up?”

Arlo got to his feet and pumped his fist proclaiming, “She said yes!”

The rooftop patrons cheered.

Arlo came in for a hug.

Ada kept her hands to her side while he enveloped her in an awkward embrace. Whispering in his ear, she told him, “You know they all think we’re engaged, right?”

A chuckle rumbled through his chest. “Oh I know. Kind of fun, isn’t it?”

Before she could respond an older couple came over. The woman, who resembled Betty White said, “Congratulations! It’s so sweet to see a young couple in love. Especially on Christmas!”

Arlo nodded. “It’s the best!” Then he pulled Ada into his side, squeezing her tight.

After a few more people walked by with well wishes, Ada finally sat down.

“So, how was that for groveling?”

“That...” Ada was almost speechless for once. “That was something.” She took a sip of her mildly warm latte.

“Just to be clear, you forgive me though?”

“If everything you said in your little speech was true...”

Arlo nodded solemnly, “Scout’s honor.” He held up three fingers.

Ada exhaled. “I forgive you.”

Pumping his fist again, it was clear he was proud of his grand gesture. “Now that we got that cleared up... there’s one more thing.” He cupped his hands around his drink and stared into the liquid. “Is there any way you might want to come to Brazil with Brooklyn and I?” Slowly, he lifted his eyes to hers. “It’s okay if not, but I just had to ask one final time in case it does sound like something you’d want to do. We’ll be back on January third.”

Gripping her latte, Ada took a slow sip. *Going to Brazil would be a huge leap of faith. Exciting, full of adventure. Best of all, I could check off a bucket list item for free. But... are there any buts? Brooklyn is adorable, but... Arlo. He’s a wildcard.*

“You know what? I’m sorry, this is crazy. I’m crazy.” Arlo rubbed a hand across his face. “Forget it. It was just a party for a friend I haven’t seen in a while. I can’t ask you to upend your holiday plans—”

Ada set her drink down and cut him off. “*If I can have my own room... and I can go see the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue, I’m in.*”

“Seriously?” Arlo looked at her wide-eyed. “Those are your only two requirements and you’ll come?”

Ada inhaled, surprised by her own answer. “Yes.”

Living her meticulously curated life had given her stability, but it didn't fill her up. She craved something more, but had no idea what was missing. *Maybe getting out of my comfort zone will give me a new perspective. That's what the travel influencers claim....*

Chapter 6



Ada - Christmas Eve

ADA WALKED INTO THE kitchen to find Maggie in a bright red apron. It featured white antlers and read “Oh deer!” Pans and baking ingredients covered the large island.

“Nice apron Mrs. Clause.”

“Good morning.” Maggie smirked and then whispered. “I heard the news! You’re going to Brazil!”

“Why are you whispering? Where is everyone?”

Maggie pulled a tray out of the oven. “I’m actually not sure why I whispered that. Just excited for you!”

Ada shook her head. It took a while but she’d gotten used to Maggie’s perkiness and positivity.

“Liza and Miller went on a breakfast date. Chase and Arlo took Brooklyn sledding.”

“I see.” Ada slid onto a barstool. “What are you making? It smells like Disneyland in here.”

Maggie brought the tray over using an oven mitt. “It’s a raspberry cream cheese crescent danish.”

Ada’s eyes went wide and her mouth began to water. “In the shape of a candy cane?”

“Yep!” Maggie beamed.

As a child Ada always dreamed of a Christmas like this—full of love, decorations, activities, baking, and presents—but around the age of twelve she shoved those whimsical wishes in the trash. It was strange to be experiencing it now as a twenty-eight-year-old for the first time. It was an adjustment to say the least.

Ada pushed those depressing thoughts aside. “So, Momma Maggie... What’s our Christmas Eve plan?”

“Well, I thought we could go to a Christmas tree farm that’s having a festival. There’s going to be games, hot cocoa, real reindeer, and of course, Santa. I was hoping Brooklyn might like it.”

“So, basically we’re going to the North Pole?” Ada reached for a piece of the candy cane danish.

“Exactly. Are you in the Christmas spirit yet?”

Ada closed her eyes, savoring the gooey raspberry filling. “More than ever before.”

At that moment, the front door swung open. Chase, Arlo, and Brooklyn trudged inside still wearing their winter gear.

“You guys hungry?” Maggie asked, holding up two plates filled with slices of the danish—one in each hand.

“I’m starving,” Arlo said, throwing down his mittens and taking a step toward the kitchen.

“Oh no ya don’t.” Ada stood, blocking his path. “This is too good to share.”

Brooklyn popped her head up, trying to see around her. “It smells amazing.”

As Arlo finished taking off his boots, he narrowed his eyes in Ada’s direction. “That attitude seems like it might get you on the naughty list.”

“Then I guess my name will go right below yours.” Ada steeled herself in position.

Arlo cocked his head. “So, that’s how you’re gonna play it?”

Then, he whispered something in Brooklyn’s ear. Suddenly, he yelled, “One, two, three, GO!”

Arlo and Brooklyn barreled toward Ada. Her eyes darted back and forth between them. She put her arms wide, holding her ground.

When they were just a step away, Arlo reached out, pulling Ada into him. “I got her, grab the food Brooklyn!”

Giggles erupted from Brooklyn who dodged Ada’s attempt to stop her. “Hey, I thought we were besties!” she yelled to

Brooklyn, who now held both plates as well as a giddy look.

“Geez, you’re squirmy. You might as well give up. We won.” Arlo was so close to Ada that she felt the chill from his rosy cheeks. His arms were wrapped around her waist with her back toward him.

She turned to face him. “You might have won this battle, but I always win the war. Watch your back.”

Amusement flashed in Arlo’s eyes. “Don’t tempt me. I like a challenge.”

Heat rushed to Ada’s cheeks and elves did a jig in her stomach, but she refused to be the first one to look away. *Why does this guy have to be so frustratingly attractive!?*

“Are you still talking about baked goods?”

They both looked down to see Brooklyn pointing between them. “Because it’s getting a little weird.”

Everyone burst out laughing. Arlo dropped his arms from Ada’s waist and ruffled his niece’s hair. “You’re too cute, Brookie Cookie. Now, give me my piece.”

Ada had to stop herself from becoming the heart-eyes emoji hearing Arlo use a cute nickname for Brooklyn. *Get it together Ada.*

“You mean, the piece that I just ate?” She held up two empty plates and flashed a mischievous grin.

“What? I help you and you backstab me?” Arlo took off chasing Brooklyn who shrieked in delight.



“Brooklyn, want to feed the reindeer with us?” Maggie asked. They were all gathered around a small fire pit, drinking hot chocolate at the Christmas Tree Festival.

“What? We can do that?!”

“Yep, they like carrots.”

“Are they gonna slobber on me?”

Maggie laughed. “I’m not sure, but if it looks like they will—we’ll just make Chase hold the carrot for us.”

“I’m in then.”

The three of them got up, leaving Ada and Arlo alone. Ada had intentionally sat in a chair a few down from Arlo. He closed the gap, moving into the seat next to hers.

Feeling nervous, she made small talk. “Where did Liza and Miller run off too?”

“Who knows. They’re in their own little lovey-dovey world.”

Ada stared down at her hot chocolate. “Yeah, there’s something about this season that seems to put a spell on people. I blame it on all those cheesy Christmas movies.”

She felt Arlo’s eyes on her. “You seem a little cynical about the holidays. What’s up with that?”

Ada hated revealing personal information. She felt stiff and uncomfortable. She tried to skate past his question. “I guess I’ve just never understood all the hype.”

“Did you enjoy the holidays growing up?”

Ada took a deep breath. Her childhood was her least favorite subject. The image of her mom’s empty bed on Christmas morning rushed to her mind.

“Not really.” She tried to stuff down the unwelcome emotions that were surfacing. Ada ran her emotional survival strategy through her mind. *Change the subject. Deflect. You be the one to ask the questions.*

“How... how about you?”

Arlo looked at her a second longer, seeming to sense that her lack of words held much more weight than she was trying to let on.

Gazing into the fire, his lips curled up. “Yeah.” He let out a tiny chuckle. “Christmas was the best. Secret Santa is a big deal in our family. The gift at the end isn’t even what makes it fun. It’s all the little clues we’d leave each other leading up to Christmas.”

He turned toward her. “One year, I got a thermometer, then a heat lamp, some artificial plants, and then the day before Christmas... I got a terrarium. My mom was freaking out because she realized my secret santa had gotten me some sort of pet. She almost had a heart attack when I opened my gift—which turned out to be a bearded dragon from my uncle.” Arlo

shook his head, locked into the memory. “Beardie. He lived for seven years. I loved that guy.”

Ada relished just watching Arlo reminisce, picking up some of the crumbs of his happiness.

“What about you? What was the best Christmas gift you ever got?”

Gulping down a lump in her throat, Ada searched her memories—desperate to recall something that didn’t sound pathetic. “A doll. One year my mom got me a doll that had this cute little swimsuit that I could take in the bathtub and pretend we were at the beach.” Ada’s chest was tightening and tears were just below the surface. She willed them to soak down deeper, far far into the deep recesses of her heart.

Silence stretched between them. They both watched the flames dancing. Talking about her mom and Christmas was threatening to unlock her emotional safe. *Just breathe.* She leaned her head back onto the Adirondack chair and closed her eyes.

“You good?”

With her eyes still closed, she said, “I feel like you’re always asking me that.”

“I feel like you’re always working really hard to keep it all together. But if you ever want to talk, I’m a good listener.”

Ada exhaled and let her head fall to the side so that she was looking at him, assessing the sincerity of his statement.

He looked back at her, eyes roaming her face. It felt like he could see past her wall. Maybe he was trying to scale it. Trying to rescue her from the tower she locked herself into. But, little did he know... no one had ever succeeded. Not even Maggie. And honestly, there were parts of her story she didn't even want to acknowledge herself.

Arlo reached out and put his hand on top of hers. Ada felt herself cracking at his touch. It was warm and comforting, unlike anything she'd felt before. Like a hug or a soft pillow that would let her relax into it. Like it could put her to sleep on nights when trauma and worries nagged her mind. Like it could be her anchor, keeping her safe in the eye of a storm.

It was just a touch, but for reasons that Ada couldn't understand or explain, it was so much more. Add on top of that the way Arlo's eyes glistened in the faint light, trying to dive into her soul... she felt herself wanting to walk down that stone staircase, open the door and let him in.

"Are you guys having a staring contest?" Brooklyn's voice shot Ada back into reality. "Who's winning?"

Ada blinked, shook her head and smirked. "Me, of course."

"I disagree. We'll have to have a rematch later." Arlo winked at her, and Ada wanted him to whisk her away then and there.

So much for staying rooted in reality, she scolded herself. If you don't get it together, you're gonna completely lose it on this Brazil trip. Remember, people come and go. You can only truly rely on yourself.

“Sad we missed this staring contest,” Maggie said while wiggling her brows coyly.

Ada rolled her eyes, trying to convey: *whatever you think is happening, isn't*. Even if there was, she wasn't about to admit it.

Maggie moved on by clapping her hands together. “Since you guys are leaving us on Christmas morning, what do you say we go back and open some presents?”

“Really?” Brooklyn beamed.

Arlo stood. “I don't know... I was thinking about keeping what I got you.”

Brooklyn hit Arlo playfully on the arm. He bent down and she jumped on his back.

As they walked to the car, Maggie wrapped her arm around Ada's shoulder. “I'm gonna miss you, but I'm also *so* excited to hear about your trip. Let yourself have fun, okay? And just see what happens.”

Ada blew out a breath and leaned her head against Maggie's. “I'll try my best.”

There was a part of her that wanted to take Maggie's advice and just see what happened, but the other part of her was terrified of finding out.



That night, Ada was packing her suitcase for Brazil when she heard a knock. She immediately recognized the tapping pattern as Arlo's.

“Come in,” she said.

Arlo slowly cracked open the door. “Hey, you forgot your Christmas socks from Maggie.” Arlo handed her the green socks with pink flamingos dressed as Santa.

“Oh no, can't forget those,” Ada said sarcastically.

Arlo leaned against the door frame. “I also wanted to say thanks again for coming to Brazil with us.”

“Thanks for paying.” Ada shot him a coy smirk.

He opened the door wider, revealing a small brown bag with white gift wrap peeking out the top. “I didn't get a chance to give you your present earlier.”

“Oh... I didn't get you anything.”

Arlo shrugged and handed it to her. “I saw it at the Christmas Tree Festival and thought of you.”

Ada raised an eyebrow. Setting the bag on her bed, she pulled out white tissue revealing a bright red coffee mug. Raising it up, she read the words in white, “I elfin love Christmas.”

“I know you're not a big Christmas person...” Arlo looked down at his hands.

Ada smiled. “I love it. Thank you.”

“Who knows, maybe you’ll fall in love with the holiday season this year.”

“Maybe.” Ada bit her lip.

Arlo moved toward the door and then paused. “Merry Christmas, Ada James.”

Setting the mug on her dresser, Ada let herself fall onto the bed. Her mind was filled with nine Arlo Silvas dancing in her head. The fact that she didn’t immediately make them disappear, scared her.

Chapter 7



Ada - Christmas Day

A DRIVER IN A black Escalade arrived at the cabin at the crack of dawn. After a brief stop at Ada’s apartment in LA so she could grab her passport, they made their way to the airport. Within fifteen minutes, they were through security and escorted onto the runway—not to a gate like one would normally.

“What’s happening?” Ada quietly asked Arlo.

“We’re boarding the plane.”

Ada looked over her shoulder. “Where are the other passengers?”

Arlo just shrugged and motioned for Ada and Brooklyn to ascend the steps onto the plane.

“Is this how you always fly?” Ada asked Brooklyn.

“No! This is awesome! Christmas just keeps gettin better...”
Brooklyn stomped up the stairs in her shiny, new boots.

Arlo smiled at her excitement.

“Clearly, there is something I’m missing. Are you guys kidnapping me?” Ada’s stomach tightened.

“Would I really book a private jet to kidnap you and use my niece as an accomplice?”

“Yes! That’s actually the perfect plan. Wait—this is a *private* jet?”

Ada took one last step before entering the cabin. It was exactly like the fancy planes she’d seen in the movies. Luxurious leather recliners and shiny wooden tables dotted the interior. There were no more than ten chairs.

Brooklyn and Arlo found seats, while Ada remained standing.

“Are you in the mafia?” she asked.

Arlo had taken a sip of water and almost spit it out at her question. “No.”

“Are you... in a boy band?”

“No.” Arlo deadpanned.

“Who else travels like this?”

A flight attendant decked out in a navy pencil skirt, matching blazer, and a scarf around her neck approached.

“Welcome Sir.” She did a subtle curtsy toward Arlo.
“Please secure your seatbelts. We will be departing shortly.”

“Obrigado, Maria,” Arlo replied. Then he turned to Ada.
“Pick a seat, any seat.”

Stunned, baffled, awestruck, confused... take your pick. Ada was all of them. She methodically made her way next to Brooklyn with her mouth still ajar.

“Who are you people?”

“Can we tell her yet?” Brooklyn asked while scrolling on her phone.

“Tell me what?”

Brooklyn peeked up to look at Arlo who exhaled. He rubbed a hand across his face before speaking. “We’re not *exactly* going to Brazil.”

“WHAT?” Ada’s eyes went wide. “You *are* kidnapping me!”

“No.” Arlo sat up straighter. “I promise this is the opposite of that.”

“What’s the opposite of kidnapping?!” Ada leaned forward, anger beginning to course through her body.

Arlo sighed. “I’m not sure... But here’s the truth.”

“It’s about time. Spill.”

“We’re going to an island off the coast of Brazil called Ilha de Segredos... in English it’s Island of Secrets.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Ada rubbed her forehead.
“Sounds super safe.”

“It’s called that because of its hidden beauty, not because of something nefarious.”

“Uh huh. So why are we going there? And why did you not tell me this before?”

Brooklyn kept her eyes on her phone with a smirk creeping across her face. “Because Arlo is—”

“Working for a very wealthy client,” Arlo finished for her. “The island is small and very close to Brazil, but most people have never heard of it.” He shrugged.

Ada exhaled and relaxed back into her seat. *His answer, although somewhat evasive, seems legit. Why do I still feel like something is weird? Maybe because I've never even flown first class, let alone on a private jet. And the fact that I barely know Arlo...* Panic rose in her chest again. *What am I doing? Major lapse of judgment getting on a plane with a guy I've known for less than a week! But he's friends with Chase and Maggie, who I trust...* Calm seeped back into her mind slowly. She rubbed her temples trying to focus on the fact that she'd be going to a beautiful island off the coast of Brazil. *It's going to be incredible, right?*

Her usual confident demeanor was slipping away like the tide going out to sea. *Fake it til you make it. Don't let them see you're nervous.* That was her daily life game plan. Being strong wasn't always easy, but she found playing the part was essential. She was alone, but no one had to know about the way that made her feel insecure and afraid at times. Especially when she was in such a vulnerable position on the plane.

Over the speaker system a voice came on. “Hello, my name is Antonio and I will be your captain today. We are prepared

for takeoff. Please let our flight attendants know if you need anything. For now, sit back, relax, and enjoy your flight.”

Enjoy my flight... just enjoy my flight. Ada leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She wasn't exactly scared of flying. She just hated takeoff and landing and any hint of turbulence. *Just breathe, in and out. In and out...*

Ada must have dozed off because she was suddenly jolted awake with a jerk.

Over the speaker, the captain said, “We are experiencing some moderate turbulence. Please remain seated with your seatbelts fastened.”

Ada clutched the armrests. Her throat felt like it was closing. She pressed her eyes shut, willing the turbulence to disappear.

“Ada, you okay?” She heard Arlo's voice next to her. “Actually, forget that question. You'll probably say you're fine, but you look a little pukey again.”

Ada blew out a breath, keeping her eyes shut tight. “Thank you for those helpful words again.”

She heard him click the seatbelt in a seat next to her. “My therapist taught me to do guided imagery when I feel anxious. Just keep your eyes closed and picture a white sandy beach with turquoise water.”

She felt his hand on her wrist, which was distractingly warm. *Does this guy just radiate heat?* She forced herself to follow his instructions. The picture of the beach relaxed her immediately. She exhaled the breath she had been holding.

“Good. Now feel the soft, smooth sand beneath your feet. A light breeze blows through your hair. Next to you, a handsome model-like man stretches out on a towel. His emerald eyes and dark brown hair accentuate his golden skin. And his abs... at least a twelve pack—”

Ada opened one eye and peered over at him. Clearly, he was describing himself in embellished terms. But, truly... he wasn't that far off. The truth of the ab situation was to be determined still, but she hoped that part was false. He had enough going for him. It wasn't fair.

“What?” He flashed his signature dazzling smile.

“You *know* what.” Ada said, attempting to hold back a grin. She closed her eyes again.

“Just trying to help. Is it working?”

“Maybe a little. But probably only because the image is clearly fantasy. A nice escape from reality. Just make believe.”

The fasten seatbelt signs dinged off. The captain spoke again. “We are in the clear. You are now free to roam about the cabin.”

Arlo unbuckled, leaned in and whispered near her ear. “Keep telling yourself that, Ada James.”



It was almost midnight when they finally touched down at the small island airport. The twelve hour flight felt long—even on

a luxurious private jet.

Ada draped her arm over Brooklyn's shoulders as they groggily made their way outside, where a black SUV was waiting for them.

The sky was dark except for a crescent moon shining bright. Ada struggled to keep her eyes open. Brooklyn's head was resting on her shoulder. After ten minutes or so, the vehicle rolled to a stop.

Arlo helped the driver unload. They each grabbed their suitcases and guided them up a short concrete driveway. From what Ada could tell, the house was a reddish brick with black modern trim. It looked like a cute, quaint home with a sleek black front door.

After taking a step inside, she realized the house was bigger than it originally appeared. Dark gray walls were covered in bright floral and abstract artwork. Oversized, gray tile floors spread throughout the home. They walked into a kitchen with white sparkling quartz countertops and contrasting dark wooden cabinets. She noticed a sliding glass door and peered out to the patio where she spotted a pool.

"Let's get you to bed," Arlo told Brooklyn as she rubbed her eyes. He pulled her suitcase as he led her to a room off the entryway.

Looking at Ada he said, "You should take the room to the left. It's got a balcony so you can enjoy the view."

She took her suitcase into the room he seemed to be referring to. Peeking beyond the curtains, she tried to see out. Clouds had begun rolling in, so the moonlight was now gone. It was pitch black. Giving up, she turned to examine her room.

A queen bed with a light green bedspread took up most of the space. There were two small bedside tables, a dresser with a TV on it, and another door for an ensuite. The bathroom had a similar design to the kitchen and seemed pretty standard—other than a huge rain shower head and picture window.

Ada wanted to explore more, but her body felt heavy. Rifling through her suitcase, she found shorts and a tanktop and climbed into bed.

Chapter 8



Ada - 5 Days until New Year's Eve

THE NEXT MORNING, ADA rolled over only to be blinded by the sun.

Throwing the covers back over her head, she tried again. This time squinting in order to ease her eyeballs into the searing light.

Searching for her phone on the bedside table, she reeled it in. The screen showed it was 11:27 a.m. Suddenly she shot out of bed. *Brooklyn, my job is to watch Brooklyn so Arlo can work. That's the whole reason I'm here.*

Throwing on some actual clothes and maneuvering her hair into a messy bun, she hustled to the bathroom. She quickly washed her face, brushed her teeth, and applied a light layer of makeup.

With her fingers on the door handle, she took a deep breath. *You'd think I'd be used to waking up in a house with Brooklyn*

and Arlo after spending a few days with them in Big Bear, but this feels different. It's only us... in Brazil—or rather a secret island near Brazil.

Turning the knob, she stepped out. She was stopped in her tracks immediately. *The view.* It was absolutely breathtaking. She'd never seen anything like it. Their house was perched above a golden sand beach with bright blue water glistening along the shore. The ocean stretched out endlessly. The sky was clear, and not a cloud could be seen.

“Do you like the house? It's called Casinha com Vista. It means House with a View.”

Ada jumped at Arlo's voice, not realizing anyone else was in the room.

“Sorry, didn't mean to scare you.” He walked over next to her and handed her a white mug. “Coffee?”

Ada took him in. He was wearing a black sleeveless shirt that said “Muscle Beach” in white font and black athletic shorts. His shaggy hair looked wet as it was slicked back. Ada had always found him good looking, but here against this beautiful backdrop, she realized he looked like a surfer that occasionally grazed the front covers of magazines.

“Thanks,” Ada said, taking the cup but paralyzed by wonder—and not just of the gorgeous seascape. Refocusing she managed to say, “This is... incredible. Where are we again?”

“Ilha de Segredos.” Arlo opened the sliding glass door that led to the pool.

“And you’ve been here before?” Ada asked, following him out.

He leaned against a black steel railing and stared out at the ocean. “Yeah, I... actually grew up here.”

Ada stood next to him and took a sip of her coffee. “And you moved to Los Angeles, why?”

Arlo looked down and then slowly up again. “Island life is great, but it can feel... cramped. This is actually my first time back in almost ten years.”

“Wow, so does your family live here?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Ada waited for him to expand, but he didn’t. Instead, he leaned his back against the railing and looked at her.

“Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah, I crashed.”

“Brooklyn too. She must be feeling the jet lag because she’s still sleeping. I should probably go check on her.”

Ada followed him back inside to the kitchen. As he disappeared down the hallway, she heard a knock at the front door.

Thankfully, Arlo walked back into the kitchen. “Is someone here?”

“I think so,” Ada replied.

“It’s probably Luiz.” Arlo strode toward the entryway.

Finding only bottled water in the fridge, she grabbed one and headed toward the front door. Rounding the corner, she saw a man that was a few inches shorter than Arlo giving him a hug.

“Oi! Henrique! Tudo bem?” Luiz asked.

The men continued exchanging greetings in Portuguese.

Spotting her, Arlo said, “Luiz, I want you to meet Ada.”

Luiz’s hair was perfectly coiffed and his beard was neatly trimmed. Dark jeans and a white button up with palm trees completed his tailored look. It seemed safe to assume he was Arlo’s wealthy client and friend.

“Hi,” Ada said, shaking his hand which was baby smooth.

He leaned in for a cheek kiss. “So, you’re the one who saved the New Year’s Eve party? Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for having me.” Ada felt like she should curtsy, but held back.

“Are you hungry? I brought lunch.” Luiz turned and picked up two brown bags. “Arroz e feijão and chicken.”

“That’s rice and beans... and chicken.” Arlo translated for her.

Ada smiled. “Sounds amazing.” Truly she would eat leaves off a tree at this point. Her stomach grumbled angrily.

Setting the bags on the counter, Luiz turned and said, “I’m sorry the kitchen isn’t already stocked. Groceries should be delivered soon.”

“Thank you again for letting us stay here. You know I love this place.” Arlo began dishing up two plates.

“Of course! I love having my oldest friend back on the island.” Luiz nudged him with his elbow. “But, the person I really want to see is Brooklyn! I can’t wait to find out if she is just like your sister.”

“She is,” Arlo said with a mouth full of rice. “It’s a little freaky. Who knew sass was genetic? But, she’s currently sleeping. I should wake her soon.”

Luiz chuckled. “I can’t wait to meet her tonight.”

“Tonight? What’s tonight?” Arlo asked.

“I’m throwing a dinner party for you. To welcome you home.”

Arlo stilled. “I thought we were going to keep everything low key until the New Year’s Eve party...”

“It’s a small dinner party. Just a few friends.”

Arlo shook his head. “Small?”

“Of course. You guys settle in and I will see you tonight. We have business to discuss, but first we have to celebrate the prodigal son’s return!” Luiz threw his hands in the air as he backed away toward the door. “See you tonight. Nice to meet you Ada!”

Luiz’s charisma and personality seemed to fill up the whole room. Ada couldn’t help but feel happy in the midst of his boisterous confidence.

Arlo walked with Luiz to the door. Ada could hear them speaking in Portuguese. The tone seemed more serious, but she couldn't be sure. She turned her attention to scarfing down her delicious meal. A small rice mountain was about to enter her mouth when Arlo walked in. Reluctantly, she set the spoon down.

“Luiz seems nice.”

Arlo blew out a breath. “He’s a character.” He leaned on the counter and took another bite. “Dinner is at seven pm, so we’ll have to leave around six thirty. Does that sound okay?”

“I’m at your service. I will go where you tell me.” Ada signaled yes sir by putting two fingers to her brow.

Arlo chuckled. “Well, aren’t you just agreeable this morning?” Turning his attention to the hallway, he stood. “Now, it’s time to try to get Brooklyn up. Maybe I can bribe her with ice cream.”

Ada smiled, but inwardly felt anxious for reasons she couldn't pinpoint. Maybe it was the fact that she *was* at his service. Arlo seemed to be in a social class of high society and wealth. Ada had seen it in LA, even gone to a few parties here and there but she'd never been *in* with the high rollers. *What have I gotten myself into? Hopefully they won't be able to tell that I don't belong.*

Chapter 9



Ada

ADA HAD TO PICK her jaw up off the floor as they entered Luiz's mansion. The stucco was smooth white like a house on the Greek coast. And it was huge. Inside the theme of brilliant white continued. Vases with beautiful, bright flowers were the only colors visible. The clean backdrop made them seem even more magnificent.

And then there was the view. Ada had been impressed with their house's view, but this... this was something other worldly. The infinity pool did its job and made it seem like you could spill into the ocean over the ledge. The patio was spacious to say the least and had lush greenery.

“Henrique, you made it!”

The three of them spun around.

Luiz approached in a clean white suit. “And this must be Brooklyn.” He reached out to shake her hand. Brooklyn tried

her best to reciprocate the formal greeting. “You do look just like your mom. And thank goodness you look nothing like your uncle.” He winked at her.

“Oh she wishes she looked more like her cool uncle.” Arlo nudged his niece.

This activated the Brooklyn they all knew and loved. “Saying that just confirms how lame you are.”

“OH!” Luiz laughed at her comeback. “Quick like her mom too.”

“Annoying is more like it.” Arlo tickled Brooklyn’s side.

Looking over their shoulders, Luiz nodded. “Ah, the fun continues! Your parents just arrived!”

Ada’s heartbeat increased as she turned to face the door. “You didn’t tell me your parents were coming,” she whispered to Arlo.

The color seemed to have drained from his face.

It was Ada’s turn to ask, “Hey, are you okay?”

Before he could answer, an elegant woman in a stunning emerald, floor length dress spotted them. Next to her a tall, dark, and strikingly handsome man with salt and pepper facial hair floated alongside. His resemblance to Arlo was undeniable.

“Henrique, Brooklyn!” The woman threw her arms around her granddaughter and son at the same time, firing off what seemed to be Portuguese greetings.

After giving them both an adsorbent amount of kisses, she finally stepped back allowing her husband a chance to greet them. Arlo stuck out his hand and then pulled him in for a quick embrace.

With his hand on the small of her back, Arlo said, “Mom, Dad, this is Ada.”

Ada smiled, waiting for him to clarify their relationship... like, “This Ada, Brooklyn’s *nanny*.” He didn’t.

Arlo continued, “Ada, this is my mom, Francisca and my dad, Paulo.”

“Nice to meet you.” Ada held out her hand.

“Oh nonsense, we hug and kiss in this family.” Francisca put her cheek next to Ada and then wrapped her arms around her tightly. When she was done, Paulo did the same. Ada realized she was stiff and holding her breath. She tried to soften her face into a smile.

“Uncle A, I’m thirsty,” Brooklyn said, tugging his arm.

“Oh, right this way.” Francisca put her arm around Brooklyn’s shoulders. “They have plenty of drink options. What do you like?” She led her toward a magnificent open kitchen with sparkling white countertops and cabinets. “They also have a game room here. Would you like to see it?”

Ada watched Brooklyn nod.

“I bet you two need a drink as well. What do you say we join them?” Paulo held out his hand, signaling them to follow.

There seemed to be a polite formality between Arlo and his dad, which piqued Ada's curiosity.

The three of them stood around a bar, where a man in a tux served them drinks. This was by far the nicest house Ada had ever been in. *LA mansions seem lacking compared to this place*, she decided.

Suddenly, Luiz came in and announced, "Dinner is ready. Let's eat!"

Ada followed their host onto the patio where there was a long table. She hesitated. There had to be at least forty chairs—all filled with people... already sitting... and staring back at them.

Luiz began speaking in Portuguese. Ada made a move to pull out her chair when Arlo whispered, "He's asking that you and I remain standing. He says..." Arlo paused to listen in before continuing to translate, "they have a special surprise for us."

Ada leaned in. "What? Is this normal?"

Soon everyone's head turned toward the patio entrance where Arlo's mom and dad were accompanying a man in a tux, rolling out a cart.

As they got closer, Ada leaned in and said, "Is it your birthday? Why are they bringing out a giant cake?"

Francisca began speaking in Portuguese. When she finished, applause erupted. There was a collective "aww!" Ada scanned

the table only to find heads tilted and eyes staring at them adoringly.

“Arlo,” she said through her teeth. “What does the cake say?” Her cheeks were beginning to ache from obligatory smiling.

He whispered back, “It says, ‘Congratulations! We wish you all the best!’”

“Why are they wishing you the best?”

Out of the corner of his mouth he whispered, “They’re wishing *us* the best.” Arlo let out a subtle exhale while waving, nodding, and mouthing thank you to the guests.

“For the New Year’s Eve party?” Ada’s brow was creased so deeply, the line in her forehead could have been engraved.

Arlo reached a hand to her face, guiding her to turn towards him. Then he leaned down, kissed her on the cheek and whispered, “It appears... they think we’re... engaged.”

Ada gripped the chair in front of her to steady herself.

“Play it cool while I figure out what’s going on.”

Ada wanted to stand on her chair and scream “Abort! You’ve got it wrong! No one is engaged!” But, she didn’t have time to make a move.

Arlo’s parents walked toward them. His mother, Francisca, took Ada’s limp hand in hers. “You two are so sweet together. I remember when Paulo asked me to marry him. Best day of my life.”

Arlo's dad patted him on the back and then leaned forward, touching his cheek to hers. "We're so thankful he finally found someone to help him settle down."

His father turned toward the table of guests and cleared his throat. Everyone went silent. "I'd like to make a toast. Our Henrique has been gone far too long. Son, it is good to have you home. Your friends, family, and island have missed you. We can only hope this is a beautiful new chapter in all of our lives. We are looking forward to getting to know you more, Ada. Welcome to the family." Then he raised his glass. "Saúde!"

Ada struggled to swallow her champagne. *Family? Welcome to the family?* She looked around at the sea of elated faces staring back at her. Her knees felt like jello.

Fingers enveloped her hand. When she looked down, she found Arlo's strong grip grounding her. Her eyes traced their way up his arm, then his broad shoulders, and finally his face.

When he saw her worried look, his expression changed from bewildered amusement to concern in an instant. "Are you okay?"

"No! Why are you not freaking out?"

Arlo patted her hand. "I'll handle it." Then he turned to the table of guests. "Thank you all so much for this amazing welcome. It makes me very happy to be home. Ada and I... have a lot to discuss regarding our future. It's been a lot of traveling and Ada is feeling run down, so please forgive us for

leaving so soon. I look forward to catching up with each of you.”

Arlo squeezed Ada’s hand and then whispered into her ear, “Follow me.”

They found Brooklyn upstairs, playing Mario Kart on a movie theater-sized screen. “Brookie, time to go,” Arlo said.

“Aw, I don’t want to go. We just got here.”

“We can come back another day,” Arlo consoled her. “We just really have to get going.”

As they were about to step out, Arlo’s mom approached. “This was the best surprise, sweetheart. I’m sorry you’re not feeling well, Ada. I wish we could have enjoyed your company a while longer.” Francisca put a hand on Ada’s shoulder.

For once Ada was thankful that her body’s reaction to anxiety was a tension headache. At least they weren’t telling a complete lie to these adorable people.

Arlo lowered his voice. “Mom, we need to talk.”

“Of course we do. It’s been far too long since you’ve been home.”

Running his hand across his forehead, Arlo clarified. “There’s been a misunderstanding. I need you and dad to meet us back at Casinha com Vista. Tonight. Please.”

“Okay, sure,” she said casually. “I’ll let your father know.” Francisca did not seem to pick up on the seriousness of the

situation.

Arlo leaned in to kiss her cheek. “See you soon.” Then, he led Brooklyn and Ada out the door.

Chapter 10



Arlo

“MOM, WHY ON EARTH do you guys think we’re engaged?”

Arlo and Ada sat in the living room across from his parents at their quaint lodging while Brooklyn watched TV in her room.

Francisca held out her hand. “Because we saw the picture.”

“What picture?”

Arlo’s father, Paulo, sat back with his legs crossed—silent and stoic.

“The picture of you proposing,” she explained.

“I’ve never proposed to Ada.”

“Paulo, show him the picture that was sent to you.”

Paulo pulled out his phone and tapped a button.

Holding up the screen, they saw a photo of Arlo down on one knee at the rooftop coffee shop in Big Bear. Ada had her hands covering her mouth, shock on her face.

Ada inhaled sharply. “Arlo...”

“Explain that.” Francisca crossed her arms over her chest.

Arlo muttered, “That’s not... what it looks like.”

Swiping right on the screen his mother said, “Big Bear Coffee posted the photo along with the caption, ‘Congrats to the cute couple that got engaged on our rooftop today!’ That’s the two of you, correct?”

“Yes, that’s us, but I wasn’t proposing. I was... groveling. It wasn’t real.”

Francisca sniffled and held her hand over her mouth. “You mean... it was... just a hoax? I... I thought you wanted to surprise us. That’s why you hadn’t told us you were coming home.”

Arlo ran his hand through his hair. “How *did* you find out I was coming home?”

“After I saw the photo, I spoke with Luiz to see if you’d told him you were engaged. That’s when he mentioned he wasn’t supposed to say anything, but that you were coming home to DJ the New Year’s Eve party. We just assumed...”

“Mom, I’m sorry for the misunderstanding. Ada and I are just friends...” Then he looked at Ada. “We’re friends, right?”

She shrugged.

“I was going to surprise you with a visit. Luiz wasn’t supposed to say anything.” Arlo rubbed his hands together.

Francisca buried her head into Paulo’s shoulder. More sniffles could be heard.

“Mom, what’s going on? What’s wrong?”

His mom began full on sobbing.

Paulo patted his wife’s shoulder. “Your mother... and I... just hoped you getting married meant... good things for you, for the island. Things have been tough the last few years. Everyone at the palace has been abuzz with excitement over a royal wedding and what that could mean... for all of us.”

“Dad...” Arlo hung his head.

Ada closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’m sorry, I’m so lost. Palace, royal wedding...”

“She doesn’t know?” Francisca straightened. Paulo pulled out a handkerchief and she patted below her eyes.

Putting a hand to her chest, Ada tried to steady her breathing. “What don’t I know?”

Arlo turned toward her and blew out a breath. “My parents are...” he paused and rubbed his forehead. “The king and queen of Ilha de Segredos.”

After a moment, Ada burst out laughing. “I’m sorry. I swear you said your parents are... royalty.” She relaxed back on the couch. “That’s a good joke. You almost had me.”

“Henrique, I can’t believe you didn’t tell her.” Francisca shook her head at him.

“It’s not the easiest topic to bring up.”

“Whoa, wait?” Ada sat forward. “What’s not the easiest to bring up? And why does everyone keep calling you Henrique?” Ada felt shaky, she couldn’t tell if it was anxiety or anger. Probably both.

Arlo leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and looked over at her. “My real name is Henrique Inacio Cardoso, but I go by Arlo Silva.”

“Please, tell her why son,” his dad murmured curtly.

Arlo ignored him. “My parents are the king and queen of Ilha de Segredos, which makes me...”

Ada raised her eyebrows. “Noooo...”

“A prince.”

Ada stood. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” She started pacing, then froze and robotically turned toward his parents. She attempted a curtsy. “Your royal highness majesty ma’am sir.”

A smile cracked through Francisca’s face. She waved away her gesture. “I think we’re past formality. After all, we were almost family.”

“Don’t I get a curtsy?” Arlo quipped.

“You’re lucky I haven’t given you a black eye.”

Arlo threw his hands up in surrender.

“How could you not tell me? How is this even happening?” Ada started pacing again. “And on top of that we’re supposedly engaged?”

“Everything *is* a bit complicated,” Arlo admitted.

“It’s devastating,” Francisca said, standing. “A royal wedding was giving us something to look forward to for the first time since the pandemic. Tourists have started slowly coming back, but I’m afraid it’s going to be too little too late for many businesses. Our economy is on the verge of collapsing. A royal wedding would have put us back on the map, brought tourists here in droves. The press team already had a whole social media campaign to feature local businesses that we would be using for the wedding festivities.”

Now, Arlo stood. “Mom, that was incredibly presumptuous.”

Paulo rose to his feet next. “No, it’s predictable. We should have known. You left your island once chasing... who knows what. It’s our own fault for thinking you’d changed, that you’d think of anyone but yourself.” He turned and stormed toward the door.

“Paulo,” Francisca called after him.

Turning toward Arlo, she grabbed his hand. Her eyes were filled with tears. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. Then, pivoted on her heel. A moment later, the door clicked shut.

Ada looked at Arlo and shook her head. Then she strode to her room.

“Ada wait,” he called, but she kept going.

Chapter 11



Ada - 4 Days Until New Year's Eve

THE NEXT MORNING ADA and Brooklyn sat out on the balcony overlooking the ocean. They were sipping homemade Shirley Temples and staring at the gorgeous view.

“Hey bestie,” Ada said, looking over at Brooklyn with a smirk. “How come you didn’t tell me your family is royalty?”

“I just found out about all this a couple days ago. Arlo swore me to secrecy.”

“Wait, you didn’t know?”

Brooklyn shook her head. “Arlo and I FaceTimed my parents the day you agreed to come with us to Brazil. They said they hadn’t told me yet because they wanted me to have a *normal childhood* or something like that. That’s why my mom and Arlo left when they turned eighteen. They wanted to be *normal*.”

“So, why now? Why did they decide to tell you now?”

Brooklyn shrugged. “My mom said she didn’t really know how. They thought this trip could be a good opportunity... I mean, my grandparents come to visit once a year, but we’ve never come here. I guess my mom made them promise that they’d never speak about their titles. She said, ‘royalty comes with a price.’”

Ada pulled her knees to her chest. As a grown woman she was in shock and it wasn’t even her family. She couldn’t imagine having the “Oh, your grandma and grandpa are actually a king and queen of an island” bombshell dropped on you as a nine-year-old. “That’s a lot to process. How are you doing?”

Brooklyn shrugged. “It’s pretty cool, but it doesn’t really change much. To me, they’re just my grandparents.”

Ada wondered how the monarch worked. *If Arlo is a prince... that makes Brooklyn a princess in line too, right? But, maybe her parents haven’t explained all that yet.* Ada wasn’t about to be the one to wade into those waters.

“Yeah, that’s a good way to look at it. But if you do want to talk about it more, I’m here, okay?”

Brooklyn shook her head and stood. “Okay. I’m gonna FaceTime my friend Layla. She got a new cat. She’s convinced that he’s actually a rabbit stuck in a cat’s body.”

“Oh... that’s... interesting. Have fun!” Ada smiled to herself. *I didn’t realize that kids are so random, but also... they*

see life in such a simple, uncluttered way. I envy that. Ada gazed out at the waves gently moving back and forth upon the sand. I have no idea what to think... about anything. After all, I'm supposedly engaged to a prince? A giggle escaped and she cupped her hand over her mouth to stifle it. Mom and grandma would never believe it.

Maggie's voice chimed in her head, *"This is so exciting! You're basically living out a Cinderella story!"*

Ada smiled thinking about Maggie. She really needed to call her. She'd sent a few pictures and basic texts, but not a full update because she didn't know how to even begin to explain the trip so far.

A knock on the sliding glass door leading to her balcony startled her. She turned to find Arlo opening it. He leaned against the door frame.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi back."

"Can I... sit for a second?"

"Wait." Ada sat up straight. "Do I need to stand and bow, or what is the appropriate greeting for royalty?"

"It's actually a curtsy and a dance." Arlo winked.

"Yeah, that's not happening." Ada motioned for Arlo to take the empty chair next to her.

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees looking out at the seascape. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions. And,

rightly so. I actually have to get going right now though. I have meetings with Luiz most of the day to discuss the New Year's Eve set up. I was thinking you might want to take Brooklyn to the beach today?"

"Yeah, that sounds fun. I'm excited to get in the water." Ada was mesmerized by the teal sea in front of her.

"Just one more thing..." Arlo hesitated. "My parents asked that we don't say anything about us not actually being engaged until their press team can figure out a way to spin the mistake. Shouldn't take more than twenty-four hours." He looked over at her for the first time. "Can you handle being engaged to me one more day?"

Ada pursed her lips. "I guess there's worse things than having to pretend to be engaged to a prince."

Arlo's face relaxed and he blew out a breath. She'd never seen his demeanor so heavy.

"Thanks. I promise to find a way to make it up to you. I really owe you." Arlo reached out and put his hand on her knee. She tried to ignore the way her skin tingled at his touch.

"No, you don't owe me." Ada shook her head. "That's how we got into this mess. "

"True." A grin peeked through. "I promise never to grovel again."

Ada sighed. "Thank goodness."

Chapter 12



Arlo - 3 Days Until New Year's Eve

ARLO SAT ON THE patio, planning the playlist for the New Year's Eve party.

His meeting with Luiz the day before had been eye-opening. Since the media had gotten wind of his supposed proposal to Ada, Luiz's hotel had a massive spike in reservations. The amount of tickets for the New Year's Eve party had doubled. He knew relationships, especially among royals, was enticing to the public, but the level of excitement still surprised him.

The patio door slid open and Ada walked out, holding the red "I elfin love Christmas" cup he had gotten her. He swallowed seeing her wearing pink, cloth shorts and an oversized gray T-shirt. The sun glimmered in her eyes. She was usually put together from head to toe, but he loved seeing her comfy—which he made a mental note never to tell her because it went horribly the first time. She seemed to take it

negatively, but he meant it as a compliment. It was like he was getting a glimpse behind the wall she carefully crafted around her.

“Hey,” she said, sitting in the chair next to him.

“Morning,” Arlo replied. “Nice mug.”

“Thanks,” she smirked. “Is Brooklyn still sleeping?”

“Ah, no actually. My mom picked her up about an hour ago. Apparently she arranged for them to have a girls’ day. I don’t know how we’re gonna fit everything they will inevitably buy in her suitcase.”

Ada grinned.

“So, I thought we could go see Christ the Redeemer today.”

Raising her brows, she asked, “Really?”

“Yeah, we’ll need to head out in forty-five minutes or so.”

Ada jumped out of her chair, coffee spilling over. “I gotta go get ready!”

Her giddiness took him by surprise. He chuckled, watching her run inside. Truth be told, he was excited too. *I just hope she isn’t afraid of heights.*



Thirty minutes later, Arlo walked into the kitchen to find Ada standing with a pink purse in hand. He tried not to notice the

way her white tank top and jean shorts perfectly accentuated her curves.

“Whoa, you got ready fast,” he noted. Ada was notoriously *thorough* when prepping for an outing.

Ada ignored his comment. “So, are we taking a boat to Rio? Or do we have to fly?” She bounced on her tiptoes.

“Aw, look at how excited you are. You’re so cute!” Arlo teased.

Ada sunk into her heels and crossed her arms in front of her. “This is a big deal to me. It’s my goal to see all Seven Wonders of the World. I can’t believe I’m actually going to see my first one!”

“The statue is pretty incredible.”

“So, you’ve been before? I mean I figured...”

“I have.” Arlo grabbed a bottle of water and headed toward the front door. “But, it’s been a while.”

“You didn’t answer my question. What’s the transportation plan?”

“You’ll see...”

“I think I’ve had enough surprises this week. Can’t you just tell me?”

“Aren’t surprises more fun though?”

“Not all surprises...” Ada murmured as they got into a black town car waiting for them in the driveway.

“I heard that.” Arlo said, holding the door open for her.



Fifteen minutes later they pulled up to what looked like a parking garage. The driver showed his ID, and then a gate opened letting them inside.

Ada tensed. “Once again, I’m getting kidnappy vibes.”

“Once again, I’m not kidnapping you.”

“I’m not convinced this whole trip isn’t a Truman Show situation. It’s just a matter of time before I find the hidden cameras.”

Arlo just chuckled.

After going up the ramp, the car rolled to a stop at the top floor.

“We’re here.” Arlo opened the door.

“We’re here? If this is a joke, it’s incredibly cruel. And not funny at all.”

“Our transportation is arriving.” Arlo pointed toward the sky. A helicopter barreled their way, slowly lowering onto the cement structure.

Arlo wrapped his arms around Ada to shield her from the wind. He noticed the way her hair swirled, and he swore she leaned into him.

Finally, the helicopter blades stopped rotating.

“After you.” Arlo motioned toward the aircraft.

“No way... We’re seeing Christ the Redeemer by helicopter?”

“Yep.” Arlo smirked.

The pilot handed them headsets as they took their seats.

Ada’s voice rang in his ears. “I can’t believe we’re doing this. I’ve never been in a helicopter before. This week has been a lot of firsts.”

“Hopefully you’re enjoying all of them...”

Ada narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s about fifty-fifty right now.”

He really wanted her to clarify which ones she’d enjoyed.

The helicopter began rising above the ground and then lunged forward. Ada’s hand gripped his leg.

“Sorry,” she said, removing her hand and gazing out the window.

Arlo smiled to himself. He was glad her reaction was to reach for him when she was nervous.

They sat in silence for a few minutes as they flew over the clear blue ocean. Ada spotted what Arlo told her was a pod of dolphins. Ships could be seen dotting the water.

Finally, the helicopter pilot told them they would be approaching Christ the Redeemer shortly.

Ada peered intently out the window. Suddenly, she gasped. “There it is! It’s even bigger than I imagined!”

Although the statue was impressive, Arlo was mesmerized by Ada. Seeing her erupt with happiness made joy flow through his veins like lava cascading down a volcano.

“Are you seeing this?!” Ada tugged his arm to make sure he was looking.

“It’s incredible.”

They continued flying around the statue so that Ada could see it at every angle. She snapped photo after photo. His favorite was the selfie they took with the statue in the background. Their faces were smooshed together and her hair smelled like peaches.

As Ada gazed out again at the outstretched arms of Jesus, Arlo asked, “Did you know that the statue is actually a mosaic made of thousands of triangular soapstone tiles?”

“Seriously? I thought it was made out of concrete.”

“It is predominantly made out of reinforced concrete. But, women intricately placed the triangle soapstone pieces overtop. While they worked, they would write the name of their loved ones on the small pieces.”

Ada shook her head in awe. “That’s amazing.”

Arlo forced himself to focus back on the statue, instead of Ada. She was adorable with her long blonde hair and gigantic headset. More than that—she was beautiful.

Slow down, he reminded himself. *She’s just starting to tolerate you.*



After the helicopter touched down on Ilha de Segredos, Arlo asked their driver, Carlos, to stop at his favorite bakery. It was situated in an unassuming neighborhood, away from the main drag. He put on a baseball hat and sunglasses as a quick and easy disguise that would hopefully keep him from attracting too much attention.

“I’ll be right back,” he told Ada.

A moment later, he returned with a brown paper bag in hand.

“Carlos, please take us to Parque da Ilha Leste, East Island Park.” It was a secluded spot that only the locals knew about. He hoped Ada would like it as much as he did.

After stepping out of the car, Arlo held up two round, bite-sized bread rolls. “This is the best pão de queijo in the world.”

“It looks delicious. But what is pão de queijo?”

“It’s essentially cheese bread. Try one.”

Ada lifted one of the bread rolls to her mouth. Taking a bite, her eyes grew wide. “I could eat fifty of these.”

Arlo held the bag high in the air. “I only bought twenty. And you don’t get them all. I need my fill.”

Ada attempted to grab the bag, but it was no use. Arlo had a good eight inches on her. He was only six foot, but she barely seemed to make 5’3”.

“Might as well give up shorty. You don’t have a chance,” he teased.

Narrowing her eyes at him, she took two steps forward and jumped into his chest. Arms around his neck, legs wrapped around his waist.

“Ugh,” he groaned at the impact.

They stared at each other, eyes meeting.

Then, she planted a kiss right on his lips. Arlo nearly fell over as he tried to process what the heck was happening. He dropped his hands so that they were cradling her back.

She suddenly pushed away, releasing her legs and landing on the ground.

“I’m... so sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” She ran a hand through her hair, clearly flustered. “Apparently, I’ll kiss for baked goods.”

Arlo smirked and held out the bag of pão de queijo. “I’ll take that trade.”

Ada snatched it out of his hand. “It was a one time exchange.” Grabbing another roll, she popped it into her mouth and walked a few steps ahead of him.

“Hey, this way.” Arlo motioned for her to walk back toward him so they could turn down the right path. “I want to show you one of my favorite beaches.”

Ada followed his instructions. “Oh, okay, sure.”

The always confident Ada seemed off-kilter. He watched her hips sway as she walked quickly, a few paces ahead of him. He let her.

Ada stopped abruptly when she reached the end of the boardwalk. The stretch of coast now visible was breathtaking and empty, except for a few kids playing in the ocean a few yards from them.

He pointed to two lounge chairs under the shade of palm trees.

Upon sitting, Arlo said, “I’m not sure if I should be nervous or excited to tell you that there are also churros filled with dulce de leche in the bottom of that bag.”

Ada grinned, pulled out two sugar coated treats and handed one to Arlo. They sat quietly munching away and watching the waves roll in.

Finally, Ada spoke. “So, how does a handsome island prince end up as a DJ in America?”

“Handsome, huh?” Arlo wiggled his eyebrows.

“You’re focusing on the wrong part of that question.”

Leaning back he said, “Well the DJ part is easy to explain. In college I realized I could use my love of music to help people have a good time.”

“And the prince part?”

Arlo sighed. “I hate talking about it because I’m afraid I sound ungrateful. Most people think they would love to be a

prince.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Being royal comes with privilege, but not freedom. If being famous feels like living in a fishbowl, being a part of the royal family on an island feels like... you’re a whale in a cup.”

Ada stared over at him with an understanding nod. The look in her eyes made him want to spill his guts just to hold her gaze longer.

“I’m thankful I had my twin sister, Mariana. Otherwise, I don’t know what I would have done. We didn’t get to see our parents much. They were consumed with royal duties. We couldn’t attend school or hang out with friends. It was lonely.”

“Brooklyn said you left when you were eighteen...”

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “My sister and I applied to colleges in the U.S. without my parents knowing. We both got into UCLA and told them we were going—no matter what. They were upset, to say the least. My dad more than my mom.”

“So you went to college and never came back?”

Arlo nodded. “Pretty much. I knew that stepping foot on the island would bring pressure. I didn’t know if I could walk away again, so it was just easier not to come back.”

“Same with your sister?”

“Our junior year, she met Kevin. They eloped a few months later. Had Brooklyn the next year. Mariana was especially adamant about Brooklyn not growing up under the royal

microscope. It's not fair, but the scrutiny she received as a girl was much worse. Mariana was a tomboy. She loved sports and hated dresses. Brooklyn must have inherited her love of fashion from my mom because it definitely wasn't from my sister."

Ada was quiet for a moment. "So, why come back now? And why did you need me if your parents are here? Couldn't they watch Brooklyn?"

"I came back because Luiz asked me to. He was my only real friend growing up. We met because his dad was a palace groundskeeper. Luiz has worked really hard managing hotels and has done well for himself. He's always been there for me. When he asked if I'd help with the New Year's Eve party, I knew it must be important. "

Arlo rubbed his jaw. "As far as my parents watching Brooklyn... *royal commitments* consume them. I'm honestly shocked my mom took the day off to spend time with Brooklyn. She never did that with us growing up..." Hearing the disappointment in his own voice, he tried to lighten the mood. "Anyway—"

The sound of photos being snapped made them whip their heads around. "Henrique! Ada! Over here!" A man in jeans and a black zip-up hoodie with a camera up to his face called out to them. "When are you tying the knot?"

"Just ignore him." Arlo said as he helped Ada stand.

"Wait!" The man grabbed Ada's arm. "How come there's no pictures of you two together on social media?"

“Let her go,” Arlo warned.

“Give me a break,” the man chided. “You guys need the paparazzi and you know it. We make you.” Ada tried to tug her arm away, but the man tightened his grip.

“Back off,” Arlo growled as he ripped the camera man’s arm down. Then, he guided Ada up the boardwalk.

The man followed closely on their heels. “Ada, is your grandmother coming to the wedding?”

Ada whipped around. “How do you know about my grandmother?”

“So, she’s coming?”

“Leave my grandmother alone.”

Arlo wrapped his arm around her shoulders, willing her to keep walking. They were only a few steps away from the car.

As Ada ducked in, the man yelled, “Do you ever worry that you’ll become an addict like your mom?”

Arlo slammed the door.

When he looked up, he saw tears streaming down Ada’s face.



Arlo said good night to Brooklyn and then made his way to the living room. Ada hadn’t come out of her room since they’d gotten home. The paparazzi had crossed the line. Arlo was

mad at himself for not protecting her. That interaction was a glaring reminder of what you could expect as a royal. No privacy. Invasive questions. Cruel accusations. Anything for a story. Ada didn't sign up for this. And it was his fault she had to endure it.

He immediately pulled out his phone. Hitting his dad's number, he waited for him to answer—although he didn't know why. King Paulo was always busy with an ambassador dinner or a bureaucratic meeting.

He was about to end the call when he heard, “Henrique, what do you need?”

“Hello to you too, dad.”

“I stepped out of a very important meeting about the state of our economy. You know, the livelihood of our fifty thousand residents that depend on us?”

Arlo blew out a breath. “Cut the guilt trip dad. This isn't about me. You need to make an announcement saying there's been a misunderstanding. Ada and I are just friends. If you don't do it by noon tomorrow, I will.”

“Wait now, son. Let's not do anything rash. Your mother and I wanted to invite you and Ada, and of course, Brooklyn, to the palace for lunch tomorrow. We'll discuss our next steps then.”

“Fine. But, this engagement fiasco ends tomorrow. Ada doesn't deserve to be dragged through the mud.”

“I’m impressed by your chivalry. I guess I didn’t do such a bad job raising you after all.”

Arlo shook his head, anger coursing through his body. He gritted out, “Good night, father.”

Setting his phone down, Arlo stared at Ada’s door. He didn’t want to bother her if she needed space, but he had to make sure she was okay.

Walking to her room, he wrapped his knuckles against her door.

Silence.

“Ada, can I come in?”

“Sure,” he heard her say, or so he thought. He decided to go with it.

Turning the knob, he peered in. Ada was sitting with her back resting on a mountain of pillows—hair in a messy bun and a blanket pulled up to her chin. Black smudges streaked down her cheeks.

His heart twisted. “Ada...” He walked over and without thinking, climbed onto the bed so he could sit next to her.

She looked down at her hands and sniffled.

“Ada, I’m so sorry. This is my fault. The paparazzi are ruthless, and you’re only in this crazy situation because of my horrible judgment.”

Shaking her head, Ada wiped her nose with a tissue. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“It’s okay if you’re not fine.”

She met his eyes for the first time. He saw how red and puffy they were. Indisputable evidence that she was the opposite of fine.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Ada let out a sad laugh.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Taking a deep inhale, she blew out a large breath. “I don’t even know where to begin...”

Arlo folded his hands on his lap and crossed his ankles, signaling he wasn’t going anywhere.

“I try not to think about the past, and to have it flung in my face when I didn’t expect it... It threw me.”

Arlo nodded, encouraging her to continue. He was shocked she was sharing anything, let alone some feelings.

Ada leaned forward. “My dad left when I was a baby—the week before Christmas, so holidays were always rough. From Thanksgiving until New Year’s, my mom cried a lot.”

She hesitated, biting back emotions. “One Christmas morning, when I was twelve... I hurried to her room. I was excited to give her the bracelet I made her. But, she wasn’t there. Her bedsheets were messy, but there was no sign of her in the house.”

The pain flashing across Ada’s face stabbed Arlo in the chest. He could tell she was replaying every detail in her mind.

Tears were welling up in her eyes. He reached out and grabbed her hand, trying to ground her in the present. She didn't register his touch. Instead, she kept going.

“My grandma lived with us. I heard her talking to someone on the phone. She was telling them that my mom had been taking pills for back pain, but she suspected she had become addicted. My mom had seemed a bit more on edge for a few weeks, but that wasn't unusual with the holidays approaching. I didn't know...”

Arlo scooted closer and wrapped his arms around her. Ada's fingers moved slowly back and forth across his abs. It seemed like an absent-minded gesture to her, but Arlo noticed. He liked that she felt comfortable enough to sit so close to him. He didn't want her to relive the memories alone.

Ada took in a breath before continuing. “The police found her at a secluded park, in her car... with a bottle of pills next to her. They tried to revive her, but she was already gone.”

Burying her head in his chest, sobs began rolling out. Her body trembled, and he wanted to absorb her pain. He kissed her hair, praying for her to feel comforted.

After a few minutes, her breathing became steadier. She looked up at him, and he found himself swimming in her endless blue eyes.

Ada straightened. “I'm sorry. This is probably so depressing to listen to.”

“Don't apologize. I hate that you had to go through that.”

Ada looked down, noticing that her hand was on his stomach. He thought she'd take it away, but she didn't.

“Honestly, I feel numb when I think about her death. The part that bothers me the most is that I didn't realize sooner that she was struggling. How could I not know? How could I have been so self-absorbed?”

“Ada, you were just a kid...”

She chewed on her lip. “I feel like I failed my mom, but I can't fail my grandma... A few years ago, she started having trouble remembering things. The doctor said it was early-onset dementia. They recommended she move to an assisted living center. It's an okay place... but she needs to be in a memory care facility. I just have to figure out a way to pay for it.”

Arlo leaned his head against hers. Her strong-willed demeanor was starting to make more sense. Ada had experienced the unimaginable at a young age, forcing her to be tenacious.

Suddenly, Ada sat up—putting space between them. Locking eyes, she said, “I can't let anything happen to my grandma. I don't want any paparazzi... or anyone... trying to talk to her. I have to keep her safe.”

Arlo took her hand. “I called my dad. I told him he has to make the announcement tomorrow that we're not actually engaged. If he doesn't, I will. And, I know a private security company in the States. I'll contact them tonight. They'll keep her safe.”

“Thank you,” Ada said, as a yawn slipped out. “I might be able to sleep then.” She rested her head on a pillow.

“Good. I’ll take care of it. Get some rest.” He moved to the doorway. “My dad asked that we meet my parents for lunch tomorrow at the palace. Are you up for that?”

Ada’s eyes widened. “At the *palace*?”

“Yeah, is that okay?”

A smile spread across her face. “Free food? I can rally for that.”

Arlo couldn’t help but grin. Strong and sassy Ada was back. But, he enjoyed raw and real Ada just as much.

“Good night, Ada James,” he said, closing the door.

Chapter 13



Arlo - 2 Days until New Year's Eve

“SO... THIS IS IT.” Arlo felt anxious for Ada to see his childhood home—aka The Palace. It felt grand, ostentatious, over-the-top... because it was. Their driver opened the car door and Arlo allowed Ada to step out first.

“Whoa. Give me the specs on this thing.” Ada’s eyes were almost as big as the chandeliers hanging in every room. “Sorry, is that rude? I’ve just never seen anything like this in person before.”

“Pretty sweet, huh?” Brooklyn chimed. “Grandma gave me a tour yesterday! She said we could have a sleepover and I can choose any one of the twelve bedrooms—except theirs of course.”

“It’s amazing,” Ada murmured as she walked up the opulent stone staircase.

“No sleeping in my room,” Arlo teased.

“Hate to break it to you, but they made your room into a gym. Grandma said it was an easy transition since it was always smelly with all your boy stuff.”

Arlo paused. *I should have known...* Still it caught him off guard. *They really just moved on without me? That’s what I wanted though, wasn’t it?*

Brooklyn raced ahead of them. “Guess how many bathrooms there are?”

“Ten? No, fifteen?” Ada guessed.

“Close. Nineteen.”

“Stahhhp. These arched columns and mosaic tile floors are to die for. It’s so beautiful—it’s making me dizzy trying to take it all in.”

Arlo waited for Ada. She was slowly spinning in a circle, mesmerized by every detail.

“I’m glad you like it. This is the indoor courtyard, which leads to the main entrance.”

“Uh huh...”

Arlo held out his arm for her to grasp. He was worried she might run into something while she was distracted by the grandeur.

“Thank you Carlos.” Their driver now opened the monumental glass doors for them, revealing a double staircase, a magnificent crystal chandelier, and more columned arches. One-of-a-kind art decorated the walls and ceilings.

“It’s like a museum,” Ada said, her mouth agape.

Arlo’s stomach knotted. It was his body’s involuntary response when anyone came to the palace for the first time. There was always the nagging fear that they didn’t really like him as much as being associated with the royal family. It was something he never had to worry about when he was just Arlo Silva, the moderately successful DJ.

I don’t think Ada is one to fake anything though, he encouraged himself.

“My mom said to meet them under the covered patio.” Arlo led Ada and Brooklyn to the back of the palace where sliding glass doors opened to the deck and an infinity pool. Beyond the edge of the pool was a manicured green space. Beyond that was the beach which spilled into the stunning ocean.

“You made it!” Francisca and Paulo stood as they approached an outdoor glass table. They kissed each other on the cheek—a greeting that Arlo noticed seemed more natural for Ada today.

“Thank you for coming,” Paulo said with a nod.

A woman in a professional chef uniform appeared.

“Brooklyn, Ana was just telling me that she was going to make churros for us. Would you like to learn how?” Francisca asked.

Brooklyn shrugged. “Sure.” Then followed the chef to the kitchen.

Arlo furrowed his brow at his mother.

“What?” she asked sharply. “Mariana said to treat her like a normal kid. Kids love to bake, right?”

“I suppose. Most do it *with* their grandmothers rather than a professional chef...”

Francisca ignored him. “Please, have a seat. We’re so glad you could join us today.”

“Thank you for having me,” Ada replied as she and Arlo sat next to each other, facing his parents. “Your palace is lovely.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

Servers in tuxes brought out salads.

“As much as I appreciate pleasantries, we have some pressing business to discuss.”

“I should have known this wasn’t just a nice little lunch invite,” Arlo murmured.

His mother smiled with her eyes at him. “Your father and I have a proposal—pun intended, for the two of you.”

Arlo sat up straighter and put his hand on the back of Ada’s chair, feeling the need to protect her, even though he didn’t know from what yet. “What kind of proposal?”

“A business proposal. One that will benefit all involved.”

“How so?” Arlo eyed Ada who seemed to be nervously picking at her salad.

“Since you are already engaged in the eyes of the public, and said engagement has the potential to save the island from economic ruin—doesn’t it make sense to let it all unfold?”

Tilting his head, Arlo asked skeptically, “Could you be a little more specific?”

“We propose that you and Ada get married at the annual New Year’s Day Ball.”

Arlo blinked at his obviously insane mother. “What?”

Ada’s fork clattered against her plate.

Arlo turned to see her frozen in place.

“I’m not sure anything I said was confusing, but if you’d like further clarification we have all the details right here in this contract.”

She slid a packet of papers toward Ada and Arlo.

“You’ll see that as part of the agreement, you’ll each need to post once a day on social media for the month of January. Our team has prepared a schedule of places for you to visit throughout the island. You’ll also need to make a few royal appearances together.” Francisca took a sip of water.

“And of course it says that you’ll agree to get married at the New Year’s Day Ball, because everyone who is anyone will be there. It will be a ton of free press. You can spend the month of January traveling around the island. Think of it as an extended vacation. We’ll set up a spot for you to honeymoon, you can live at the palace, and in a month you can get an annulment.”

Ada gripped Arlo’s leg.

“Mom, stop. As if it weren’t crazy enough for you to expect us to get married, you’d have us do it at the New Year’s Day

Ball? That's only three days away."

"Oh, I know it's soon, but remember—the entire palace staff has been planning your wedding since the day we thought you got engaged."

Arlo ran his hands through his hair. "I get that the island needs help, but you can't expect Ada to give up her life. It's not a one-and-done thing. Once the media knows about you, there's no going back."

His mom waved away his concern. "Please, in the social media-age, people move on every thirty seconds. Besides, there's financial compensation for her too." She flipped to the second page of the contract and tapped her finger on the bottom line.

Ada gasped when she looked down. "Ten thousand dollars per month for one year."

Paulo spoke for the first time. "We've run the numbers. Based on the boost in tourism that your wedding and media engagements will bring into the country, we believe this is fair."

Arlo rubbed his temple. "This is all so extreme."

"We told you..." Francisca lowered her voice. "The island is in... *dire financial straits*. Loans are due. We cannot wait."

Arlo looked at his father whose eyes were trained on the sea. For the first time, he really took him in. He had more wrinkles and gray hair than Arlo remembered. More than that, there was a heaviness to his countenance.

“If... and this is a big hypothetical if... *If* we do get married and then get an annulment in a month, won't that tip people off that it was all a publicity stunt—which in turn would be negative press?”

His mother waved away his concern. “Let them speculate. Almost all press is good press and, at this point, we have to roll the dice.”

Arlo turned to Ada. “You don't have to consider this. I'm sorry they even asked.”

Ada sat up straighter and looked him in the eye. He thought she might be preparing to run. Instead, she said, “I'll do it.”

Arlo nearly fell off of his chair. Recovering, he took her hands in his. “What? Ada, are you sure? Money comes and goes, but this... this is your life.”

Ada nodded. “With that kind of money, I could get my grandma into a memory care facility.”

Francisca rose. “Then it's settled.” She handed Ada a pen.

“Mom, wait.” Arlo looked over at Ada and lowered his voice. “Don't you want to sleep on it?”

Ada bit her lip. Shaking her head, she said, “No. I don't need to... I want to do it. But, if I don't commit now, I'll freak myself out. No looking back. Unless...” Ada met his eyes. “Unless you don't want to do it.”

Arlo ran his hand along his jaw, considering a million pros and cons. *Ada would be financially compensated, yes... But is it worth it in the long run?*

He wanted to protect her from things she might not anticipate being in the public eye. But, he knew she was serious about helping her grandma. And he wanted to help the island too. He might have left, but he still cherished the place he considered his home.

He exhaled. “Okay, I’m in. But, if I’m gonna do this, I need to do it right.”

Arlo slid off his chair and onto one knee, taking hold of her hand. “Ada James...” He looked into her deep blue eyes. “I still can’t believe you agreed to come to Brazil in the first place. Thanks for doing all this—probably against your better judgment.” His mouth turned up into a grin.

Ada blew out a laugh.

He could feel her hand trembling slightly, so he interlaced his fingers with hers. “Ada, I promise I’ll do everything I can to be the best husband you’ve ever had... I am the only husband you’ve ever had, right? Not that it matters, just out of curiosity...”

Ada nodded. “You’ll be my first...”

He clearly got talkative when nervous. The reality of the situation was setting in.

“Right... We can get to know each other more later. That’s how people normally do it, isn’t it?”

“Arlo, you’re ruining the moment dear...” Francisca whispered.

A smile broke through onto Ada’s face.

Arlo took a deep breath. “Ada, will you marry me?”

With one hand covering her mouth, she nodded. “Yes.”

Arlo pumped his fist in the air, the same way he had at the coffee shop just a week prior. “She said yes!”

Francisca slid Arlo a small black box. Opening it, he recognized the gold ring immediately.

Holding it out to Ada, he said, “It was my grandmother’s.”

Her jaw dropped. “It’s so beautiful... I can’t...”

Francisca said quietly, “It’s temporary, remember? So you can. It’s a princess cut diamond with an art deco floral halo.”

Ada gulped as Arlo slid the ring onto her finger. She stared at her hand.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes!”

Arlo stood. “Good, I’m glad. That would have been awkward if not.”

“Wonderful!” Francisca leaned in pushing the contract toward them. “Don’t forget to sign.”

Ada picked up the pen and wrote her name. Arlo followed suit.

Taking the contract, Francisca said, “Remember, no one can know about our *arrangement*. Not even Brooklyn. You’re happily engaged and soon to be blissfully married. Make sure it *always* appears that way.”

Then, she stepped back and smoothed out her dress. “Let’s get a photo of the happy couple!” Francisca pulled out her phone and started texting.

A moment later, the giant glass doors slid open. A man appeared with a professional camera around his neck. They conversed in Portuguese.

Finally, his mom said, “This is our photographer, Felipe. Smile!”

Arlo put his arm around Ada. He realized she was still staring at the ring. Her shoulders felt stiff and tense.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Hey, are you okay? If you’re having second thoughts just say the word. It’s not too late to back out.”

She looked up at him with her big blue eyes. “I’m fine. This is just gonna take some getting used to.”

The camera began to click.

“Oh this is adorable,” Francisca cooed. “Felipe would like you to turn, facing each other.”

They did as they were told. Then Arlo lifted Ada’s chin, so she could see that he meant his next words. “We’re in this together. I’m here for you. Tell me if you need anything.”

Ada gave a small nod. He could feel her heart pounding, like his.

“Ada, Felipe wants you to wrap your arms around his neck,” Francisca instructed again.

Pushing up onto her tiptoes, Ada attempted to reach him.

“I don’t think you’re gonna make it shorty,” Arlo teased.

Ada squinted up at him. “Don’t make me re-enact my pão de queijo leap.”

“You wouldn’t.” Arlo said, baiting her. He was glad she seemed to be loosening up and acting more like herself.

Ada peered out of the corner of her eye at their audience. Arlo prepared himself.

She jumped, but he caught her legs and swung her around in front of him. Her arms around his neck.

“Oh the quintessential newlywed pose. I love it.” Francisca beamed.

Ada and Arlo kept their eyes glued to one another.

“Can’t take me by surprise twice, Ada James.”

He barely finished her last name when she pulled him close and kissed him square on the lips.

Ada pulled back with a smug look on her face.

Gazing into her sparkling eyes, he said, “I like when you prove me wrong.”

“Felipe is very impressed with you two love birds. Just a few more poses,” his mother said.

Arlo gently set Ada down, his lips tingling. *I think I’m gonna enjoy this... maybe too much.* A sinking feeling came over him. *What happens when the month is over?*

“Camila.” Francisca turned to a woman beside her. “Please send out the press release and alert everyone that we will be having a wedding at the New Year’s Day Ball!” Then she turned toward Ada and said, “I’ve already arranged for dresses to be brought in. Come, dear. Let’s go say yes to a dress! And get it fitted perfectly, of course.” Francisca slipped her arm through Ada’s and led her away.

Ada looked back at Arlo with what he hoped was anxious excitement. That’s what he was feeling at least—and that worried him.

A minute later Brooklyn walked in, announcing, “I’ve got churros!” She carried a tray toward Arlo.

“I better make sure they’re edible.”

She stuck out her tongue. “I’m an amazing cook. Just ask the chef lady.”

Arlo took a bite and thought for a moment. “Brookie, these are delicious!”

“Obviously.” Then, she looked around. “Where is everyone?”

“They had some things to do. Wanna take a walk on the beach with me?” It was time to tell her, but he had no idea how to bring it up.

“Sure, beat ya there!” Brooklyn started running while kicking off her shoes.

Arlo shoved the churro in his mouth and raced after her.

Brooklyn's feet hit the water first. "I win!"

"I let you." Arlo huffed, out of breath.

"You're getting slow in your old age," Brooklyn teased, splashing him with water.

"Hey, you better be nice to me because... I have something to tell you that I think you'll be excited to hear."

"You do? What is it?" Brooklyn's face lit up.

"Well... I asked Ada to marry me."

She stopped dead in her tracks. "You and Ada are engaged?"

Arlo nodded.

"Best news ever!!"

Arlo smiled at her excitement.

"That means she's going to be my aunt, right?"

Arlo inhaled sharply, the reality of all the different facets of marrying Ada—even temporarily—setting in.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Good work, Uncle A. I really thought you'd blown it when we first met Ada in Big Bear, and she told me you stood her up. Impressive comeback."

"Thanks." He laughed, kicking water at her in jest.

She retaliated. As the water hit his face, a sobering realization hit him simultaneously. Brooklyn had the potential to be crushed when January ended... and he might be as well.

Chapter 14



Arlo - 1 Day until New Year's Eve

ARLO AND ADA WERE scheduled to spend the entire day doing wedding prep. So far, they'd sampled cake and picked out flowers. They went over the order of the ceremony and were shown where it would take place on the manicured back lawn.

By noon, Arlo's face hurt from smiling. No one was more surprised than he was that he didn't hate wedding prep. But, it was only because it meant he got to spend so much time with Ada. Normally he loathed trying on clothes, but even the tux fitting was enjoyable. He actually liked modeling different looks for Ada.

"I prefer the blue suede, but what do you think?" Ada asked.

"I like whatever you like," Arlo replied. And truly he did. Ada always looked great, so he trusted her fashion sense.

"Smart man," Joseline, their stylist, replied.

“Shoot...” Ada said, looking at her phone. “Maggie’s FaceTiming me.”

“Joseline, will you give us a minute?” Arlo asked.

“Of course,” she said as she curtsied and left the room.

Ada sighed. “I want to tell her, but I don’t know what to say. You haven’t said anything to Chase, right?”

Arlo ran a hand across his cheek. “No.”

“I don’t know if Maggie will believe me. It’s not exactly my character to jump into a serious relationship.”

“Maybe that’s because you haven’t found the right guy to jump into one with.” Arlo winked at her.

Ada cracked a smile. “Is that so?”

“Seems like it to me.”

Resting her head back on the fancy maroon chaise lounge, she asked, “What are you going to tell Chase?”

“That you threw yourself at me and I tried to resist, but you wore me down.”

Ada tossed a decorative pillow at him. “I’m serious.”

“I’m gonna tell him the truth.” Arlo leaned against a bookcase. “When I met you at The Break last year, I felt a connection. You were beautiful and bold. I couldn’t wait to get to know you more, but then I was a jerk who forgot our date. But I never forgot you... even when I was traveling Europe.”

He sat down on the chaise, lifting her legs and setting them down again on his lap. “I would check your social media from

time to time, praying you didn't have a boyfriend."

"So, it's your fault I've been single." Ada smirked.

"Sorry... not sorry." He took her foot and began gently massaging her heel, then moving up her arch. "I thought about messaging you so many times, but I had no idea when I was coming back."

Ada looked at him wide-eyed.

"I figured I blew my only chance... Then, Mariana needed me to come back to take care of Brooklyn. On a layover, I called Chase and he told me about the Big Bear trip. I wasn't going to come initially, but he said you would be there. And... the rest is history."

Ada sat up and moved so she was next to him. "You came to Big Bear to see me? You didn't forget about me while you were galavanting across Europe?"

He lifted her chin, so their eyes could meet. "Ada James, I could *never* forget about you."

"That's the sweetest story ever."

Suddenly, Ada's phone dinged. "It's a text from Maggie." Clicking on the message, she saw one of the engagement photos that Felipe had taken. Under it were a million question marks. "I better call her."

"Are you ready?"

Ada inhaled. "I'm gonna have to be."

After tapping her screen, the phone began ringing.

She smiled brightly. “Hey Mags!”

“Hello Ada,” Maggie replied coyly. “We have some catching up to do.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Arlo watched her nervously tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “Say hi to Arlo, he’s here too.” Ada turned the camera slightly so he was in view.

“Chase, come say hi.” Maggie waved her husband over. He sat down and waved. Maggie continued. “So... how’s Brazil?”

Ada looked at Arlo before saying, “It’s been nice.”

“And now to the real question: why in the world did TMZ just post pictures of the two of you with the caption, ‘Hot Island Prince Engaged to American Barbie’?! This has to be a joke, right? Or clickbait? I’m freaking out over here!”

“Aw, they called me an American Barbie.” Ada smiled.

“Ada! Focus!” Maggie put the camera closer to her face. “What is going on?”

Ada bit her lip and took in a breath. “It turns out...” She sighed. “A little help here?” She looked at Arlo desperately.

He jumped in. “I’m from a small island near Brazil called Ilha de Segredos. My parents are the king and queen, which makes me a prince.”

Maggie’s eyes went wide as she turned to Chase. “Did you know about this?” He shook his head.

Arlo continued, “Sorry man. It’s a long story. I didn’t know how to tell you, and I didn’t want to be treated any

differently.”

Chase replied, “Don’t worry about it.”

Maggie jumped back in. “I’m worried about it! As if that’s not enough, it says you’re engaged! That’s just a crazy rumor, right?”

Ada scrunched her eyebrows and held up the ring.

Maggie gasped, covering her mouth. Slowly, she brought it down revealing a huge smile. “Oh my goodness, oh my goodness! What?!”

Ada took a deep breath. “Are you sitting because there’s more...”

“I am... What... what else is there?” Maggie appeared out of breath.

“We’re getting married on New Year’s Day.”

“Wha... that’s in two days!” The screen showed a white ceiling, signaling Maggie dropped the phone. When she finally reappeared she mouthed “What?”

Ada nodded. “I know.”

“I love her. I couldn’t wait,” Arlo added with a grin. Although he said it to make their story convincing, he was starting to wonder if it might be true.

Maggie replied, “This is all too much... I mean, I’m happy for you... just surprised... and in shock. How... how did this happen?”

A knock sounded on the door, and a man in a tux entered.
“Dinner is ready.”

They nodded.

Ada looked back at the phone. “I’ll fill you in with all the details later, I promise.”

“Okay...” Maggie conceded. Then she added, “Wait! I need proof that all of this is real. Kiss. Right now. And not like a little peck. A good one.”

Ada looked up at Arlo and swallowed. They’d only kissed twice, and those were hardly the acts of two people madly in love.

“If you don’t, I’m... I don’t know, calling the FBI to tell them my friend is being held against her will in a foreign country and forced to marry a rogue prince.”

Ada laughed.

They heard Chase say, “Alright honey, easy. People fall in love quickly all the time in those movies you watch.”

“True, but Ada is *not* one of those people. I need to *see* a kiss.”

Locking eyes, Arlo ran his fingers through Ada’s hair. Then, he moved closer, touching his lips to hers. He allowed himself to melt into her. She returned the pressure. He felt like his body was fire and ice at the same time. An apt description of Ada’s personality, which he had grown extremely fond of.

“Oh-kayyyy... I believe you. I’m still surprised, but dang—that was a good kiss.” Maggie’s comments forced them apart.

Ada grinned at her friend. “I know... Who would have thought? Me? A sucker for a handsome prince?”

“Ahhh! I’m so happy for you guys!” Maggie beamed.

“Thank you, Mags! I will call you back soon!”

“Okay, love you!” Maggie said before the call ended.

Ada blew out a breath. “I’m so glad that conversation is over. I think they bought it.”

Arlo nodded. “I think so, too.”

“Nice work on that kiss by the way. Not bad.”

Arlo stood and held out his hand, helping her up. He leaned near her ear and whispered, “I was just getting started.”

Chapter 15



Arlo - New Year's Eve

ARLO WAS SHAVING WHEN he heard a knock on his bedroom door. "Come in," he yelled.

"Arlo," he heard Ada's voice.

"In here."

Ada rounded the corner to the bathroom and then stopped abruptly, covering her eyes. "Ah, a little warning that you're only in your underwear would have been nice."

"It's no different than swim trunks."

Ada kept her eyes covered. "But tighter!" she said. Then she turned so she was facing away from him.

"You know we're about to be married right? I can't have you fainting at the sight of me and my ripped abs out in public."

Ada ignored his jokes. "That's what I need to talk to you about."

“My abs?”

“No. I’m freaking out about the wedding ceremony. Your mom just texted me and said they are expecting five hundred guests! What if I pass out? What if I trip on my dress?”

Arlo dried his face with a towel and then threw on shorts and a T-shirt.

Ada continued, “What if I pull a Ross and say someone else’s name? What if I choke on my own spit?”

Arlo chuckled as he stood in front of Ada. He put his hands on her petite shoulders. “I’ll be right there with you the whole time. Just keep your eyes on me.”

Ada exhaled slightly.

“Good. Take a few more deep breaths. Would you like me to share with you another relaxing guided imagery?”

Ada cracked a smile.

As he wrapped her in an embrace, she nuzzled her face into his chest. “I thought you could use a little stress-relief today, so I booked a spa day for you and Brooklyn.”

“Really?”

“Carlos will pick you up whenever you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” Brooklyn appeared in the doorway to Arlo’s room. “Ooooh were you guys making out?”

Arlo laughed. “No, but we can start...”

“Gross!” Brooklyn pretended to throw up.

“Actually, I was just telling Ada that you ladies get to have a spa day.”

“Like where they put cucumbers on your eyes?!”

Ada smiled at the excited preteen. “Oh yeah, those are facials and we’re definitely getting some.”

“Can’t wait! I’m gonna go get ready, Auntie A!” Brooklyn turned and skipped down the hall.

Arlo looked over at Ada whose face was crestfallen. “You okay?”

Ada shook her head. “She called me ‘auntie’... I don’t want her to be upset... you know... at the end.”

Arlo nodded. “I thought of that too.” He was about to add, “*Maybe we don’t have to end it...*” But Brooklyn ran back in.

“Ready!” She had her sunglasses on and a purse in hand. “Can we go now?”

Ada put her arm around Brooklyn’s shoulders. “You know I need at least thirty minutes to glam up, but then we can go.”

They walked out the door and Ada looked back over her shoulder at Arlo with a sad smile. “See you at the party.”

He waved, trying to ignore the tightness in his chest. *Time to shove down whatever you’re feeling and focus on making this the best New Year’s Eve that Ilha de Segredos has ever had. For Luiz. For the island.*



Arlo arrived at the party early to make sure his gear was set up correctly. He felt jittery with anticipation—and not just about the party. He was mostly looking forward to Ada’s arrival.

Tonight would be their first official appearance as an engaged couple. The plan was for Ada and Brooklyn to walk the red carpet. Then, Ada would join him on stage as he greeted the crowd. After that, Ada would take Brooklyn back to the palace for a girls’ night. They didn’t know it, but he had arranged for an ice cream bar and an outdoor movie to be set up for them.

He sighed thinking, *The fact that I’d rather watch Ella Enchanted, than DJ this party tells me I’m in trouble...*

“Arlo, can I get you to look over these notes?” Luiz motioned for him. Suddenly, people began screaming and yelling.

“What’s going on?” Arlo asked.

Luiz spoke into his headset to get more information.

Pulling down the mic, he said, “That would be Ada and Brooklyn arriving.”

“It sounds like fans cheering at a football game.”

Luiz patted his back. “Nope, that’s the sound of hope on the island. I haven’t seen people this excited since... well, ever. You guys are breathing new life into this place.”

He peered out from behind the curtain. All he could glimpse was a sea of people. The crowd noise seemed to be getting closer.

“Here they are,” Luiz said, ushering them in.

Brooklyn looked adorable in a yellow floral, floor-length dress. Arlo hugged her and smiled proudly.

Then, he stepped back and took in Ada. She was radiant in a short pink dress with elegant white high heels. Her long golden hair flowed down her back. He had always been impressed by her beauty, but now, since actually getting to know her, he was enamored by her whole being.

Leaning in, he kissed her on the cheek. “You look incredible. The island is gonna be amazed that they get to have you as their princess.”

Ada grinned. “I hope you’re right.”

Luiz went over his plan for their introduction. Then, he took the stage.

Arlo inhaled. He felt someone grab his hand. Looking down, he saw Ada standing next to him. With a reassuring nod, she said, “You okay?”

He winked. “I am now.”

Luiz began speaking to the crowd. They heard him say, “Welcome to Hotel Paraíso!” Then he switched to Portuguese.

Arlo translated for Ada. “He’s telling the crowd this is going to be the best New Year’s Eve party ever and to get excited

because for the first time, they get to meet the new royal couple of Ilha de Segredos... Okay, it's our turn."

Squeezing her hand, he led her onto the stage. The crowd roared. There were people spread across the beach, seeming to be as endless as the ocean.

He waved and Ada followed suit. Leaning down, he kissed her on the cheek.

Luiz handed Arlo a mic. "Thank you everyone! I'm so happy I get to introduce you to my fiancée, Ada. Isn't she gorgeous?" He held up his hand to give her a spin.

The people cheered.

"We are excited to be getting married here tomorrow. We hope to see you all out and about as we enjoy life on the island... Now, who's ready to party?!" A catchy beat dropped.

Ada waved and Arlo led her off stage. "You did great."

She exhaled. "That wasn't so bad."

"Have a fun night with Brooklyn. I'll see you tomorrow—"

"At our wedding," Ada finished for him.

He grabbed her hand and gave it a soft, slow kiss.

Tilting her head, she smiled. "Happy New Year."

Brooklyn bounced over. "Are you sure we can't stay?"

"You trying to ditch out on our girls' night?" Ada teased. "C'mon girlfriend. You can have Uncle Arlo DJ a party for you and your friends someday."

“Deal,” Brooklyn said as she held out her hand for him to shake.

“Don’t have too much fun without me.” Arlo waved and put on his headphones. He was suddenly jealous of all the party go-ers who would soon get to enjoy a midnight kiss with their significant other.

How am I supposed to be the carefree life of the party when I’m about to get married temporarily?

Chapter 16



Arlo - New Year's Day & Wedding Day

ARLO STARED AT HIS white ceiling. It was past 3 a.m., but he couldn't sleep. *In just a few hours, I'll be preparing for the wedding and then Ada and I will be married... for one month.* His stomach churned.

He must have fallen asleep at some point because his blaring alarm woke him up at nine. Immediately, he texted his dad. "We need to talk."



Glancing in the mirror, Arlo adjusted his tie. Then, he began pacing back and forth in the library. The wedding ceremony would begin in less than an hour and he still hadn't been able to see his father. *What's my plan B?*

A moment later, the big wooden doors opened and King Paulo walked in. Relief flooded Arlo's body.

His father patted him on the back. "You clean up well, son."

"Thanks." Arlo motioned for him to sit in one of the armchairs facing a large stone fireplace. "Dad, we need to talk... I can't marry Ada today."

His father sat back and crossed his legs. "You signed a contract."

"Dad, you might be able to ignore your feelings, but I can't."

"That's enough. You've had your fun being a disc jockey. Now think of someone other than yourself for once."

Arlo stood and leaned his forearm on the mantle above the fireplace. "For once... For once, can't you see things from my perspective? I know you're still mad that I went to America, but I had to go. I had to figure out who I was apart from the island. I had to prove that I could earn something for myself. That I could make my own way. Can't you understand that?"

Silence stretched between them.

"I guess not."

Arlo turned to leave as his mom said, "We do understand. That's why your father wrote the letter."

She strode toward him. He hadn't heard her come in.

Arlo sighed, exasperated. "What are you talking about? What letter?"

"The letter to UCLA admissions."

“What?”

His mom took the seat next to his father. “You and your sister had good grades, but you were practically homeschooled. Yes we had the best tutors in the world, but you wanted to be normal so badly that you didn’t mention any of that on your application.”

“How do you know what was on our application? We sent those without telling you.”

“Honestly, it was always adorable that you and your sister thought you could do anything without us knowing.” Francisca chuckled, then continued. “We knew how badly you wanted to go to college in America and that you’d be devastated that you didn’t get in. So, your dad wrote a letter and then flew to UCLA. He met with the dean of admissions and explained why you both deserved a chance. Not based on your royal status, but because of your character and your grades.”

Arlo felt... He wasn’t sure. Upset? Angry? Shocked.

“We didn’t get in? You helped Mariana and I get into UCLA?”

He looked between his mother and father. “Why? Why did you help us? You were both upset that we wanted to leave the island.”

“We weren’t mad that you wanted to leave. We were scared... of losing you...”

Arlo’s chest tightened.

“We knew you both needed space from the royal spotlight, so as much as we were afraid of what it could mean... we knew you needed to go.”

Arlo looked at his parents. “But then... we made your biggest fear come true.”

Francisca brought her interlaced fingers to her chin. “Letting go of you kids was and is... excruciating. I’ve never been good at it... which is why I’ve probably made everything worse and why you haven’t wanted to come back.” Francisca sniffled. “I didn’t mean to be overbearing. I didn’t know how to just come out and say... I missed you. We missed you—your father too.”

Arlo looked over at his dad for confirmation.

King Paulo gave a slight nod. “It’s been good to have you home.”

Arlo leaned against the wall. “It’s been good to be home.”

Clearing his throat, his father said, “If you love us and the island, then you need to go through with the wedding. You need to marry Ada.”

Arlo cringed. “What?”

His mom nodded. “You signed a contract. The wedding must go on.”

Arlo shook his head and stormed out. His hands were shaking. *For a second, I thought... I thought they were going to put aside their crowns and just be parents.* Arlo let out a sad

laugh as he walked down the hall. *When will I realize that royal duties will always come first to them?*

Approaching Ada's dressing room, he knocked on the door.

His mom came up behind him.

"I need to talk to Ada," he said sternly.

"Nonsense. You'll have plenty of time to chat after you're married. It's bad luck."

The door clicked open a sliver. Joseline, their stylist, peeked out.

"Is Ada in there?" Arlo asked.

"She is." Joseline looked to Francisca for approval to open the door.

She shook her head. "No."

Ada's voice came through the door. "Francisca, could Arlo and I have a moment?"

Francisca sighed. "Very well. Everyone out." Then she looked back. "But, only a moment."

Arlo covered his eyes as he carefully stepped into the room.

Ada spoke first. "I don't believe in luck... And really, in this case... it doesn't matter, right? Since... you know... this is all an arrangement. You can open your eyes."

Arlo's heart sank at her words. *It does matter, not the luck part... but us...*

He slowly dropped his hands and turned to face her.

Breath caught in his throat while a grin spread across his face. “You... look...”

“Like royalty?” Ada laughed and did a small spin. Her dress was white silk, with thin straps giving way to a V-neckline. The fabric hugged her body until it spread out at the bottom.

“Maggie and Liza both agreed that this was the one.”

“Incredible,” was all he could manage to say. Half of her hair was pulled back, while the other half cascaded onto her shoulders—a waterfall of unmatched beauty.

Arlo turned his attention to her face, roaming her features and trying to soak them in.

“Ada...”

“Oh no, are you getting cold feet?”

He reached out and took a lock of her blonde hair between his fingers. Then lifted her chin so he could see into her eyes. She blinked up at him.

“I don’t want to marry you with an expiration date.” He traced her jaw with his finger. “I’m terrified that if we jump into this, you’re going to resent me.” He took a step back and nervously ran his hand through his hair. “I like you... like *really* like you. I don’t want to mess this up. You’re too important to me. I can’t just marry you for some PR campaign if that means it’d ruin an actual future with you.”

“Arlo...”

“I don’t want you to have to do this for the money... I’ll figure out a way to help you pay for your grandma’s care.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“I want to.”

“What about the island?” Ada asked. “The people need this. Your parents need this.”

He reached out and took her hand. “We can find another way.”

Ada looked out the window facing the sea. “What if I told you... I *want* to do this.” She turned her gaze back to him. “Not for the money... but because... I love you.”

Arlo tilted his head and a closed-mouth smile appeared. He took a step closer and wrapped his arms around her waist. “You do?”

Ada nodded. “I think I do.”

“But what happens in a month, when the contract is up?”

“I hope it’ll be the beginning... of our happily ever after.”

“Really?” Arlo arched his brows. “I thought you hated cheesy movies with happily ever afters.”

“I guess I prefer living them rather than watching them.”

Arlo leaned down so his lips were almost touching hers and said, “Me too.” She leaned into him. All the questions and worry about the future faded away. If he could kiss Ada for the rest of his life, he’d be happy.

He wasn't going to marry her because of a contract or because his parents wanted him to. This was his decision. Obviously he needed to establish some better boundaries with them, but in this case... their meddling had worked in his favor.

“It's time!” Francisca burst through the door. “The guests are waiting!”

Arlo lifted Ada's hand to his lips. “See you soon, Princess Ada.”

Her eyes never left him as he backed away. Reaching the door, he pivoted on his heel and walked confidently into the future.

Epilogue



Ada - 3 months later

ADA SET UP A picture frame on her vanity. She gazed at the photo of Brooklyn holding her two newborn baby sisters. *I miss that girl.* She smiled to herself thinking of their time together.

Suddenly, her phone rang. She looked down to see that Maggie was FaceTiming her.

“Hey, Mags! How’s your trip to San Diego going?”

Her best friend appeared on the screen. “Hey! It’s amazing... Just hanging out at the hotel until Chase’s concert tomorrow. How’s your house coming along? What’s it called again?”

“Casinha com Vista.”

“Ooh I love that! I cannot wait to come visit!”

“You need to! The renovations took longer than expected, but I’m so happy with how it turned out.”

After their month at the palace was up, Arlo insisted that they find their own place. He said they needed a space away from royal duties. Luiz was more than happy to sell them Casinha com Vista.

Ada was proud of the way Arlo was taking charge and speaking up for his needs. He had always been good at looking out for others—especially her. But now, he was learning to stand up for himself.

“Give me a tour!” Maggie gushed.

“Well, this is a guest room that I converted into my walk-in closet,” she said as she turned the camera around revealing light pink walls that were visible around shelves of clothing and shoes.

“It’s so you, Ada!”

“Thanks! I still need to finish decorating.”

“What does Arlo think of the pink walls?” Maggie smirked.

“As long as it’s contained to her closet, I love it.” Arlo entered the room and put his arm around Ada.

“Arlo! How’s it going?” Maggie beamed. “Chase, say hi!” She moved the camera so he was in view.

“What’s up man?” Chase said.

Arlo replied, “Not much. When are you guys coming to see us?”

Maggie sat down next to Chase on the couch. “Well, it has to be pretty soon because... I’m pregnant!”

Ada's jaw dropped. "What?! Congrats!"

"Thank you." Maggie beamed, while Chase kissed her forehead. "Can we come for our babymoon?"

"Of course! The guest room is all ready!"

"Hey, don't forget about us!" Ada saw Liza appear behind Maggie.

"Liza! Hey girl!" Ada beamed at her two friends who were more like family. "You are always welcome!"

"Good because Miller and I need a cheap honeymoon destination."

"Wait." Ada hesitated. "Does that mean you're engaged?"

Liza held up her hand to show off a stunning silver ring with a princess-cut diamond. "Actually... we eloped!"

"You did?!"

"Yep, just a few days ago!"

"Congrats! Oh my gosh..." Ada blew out a breath and smiled. "I gotta say, I'm starting to be a big fan of surprises."

Arlo interlaced his fingers into hers. "That's good because I have one more for you. Sorry guys, I gotta steal Ada away."

"Aw, bye!" Maggie and Liza said in sync.

"Bye! Love you!" Ada hit the end button and cocked her head. "What? What kind of surprise?" Her mind was swirling with a sudden influx of major life events for herself and her friends.

“Just wait...” Arlo took her phone and set it down. Then he led her outside onto the patio, overlooking the beach.

Leaning against the railing, he pulled her into his arms. “I just spoke with the project manager. He said the new memory care center is complete. I can take you there tonight. If you give the approval, we can move your grandmother here next week.”

“Really?” Ada felt tears in her eyes. She had spent the last three months working with contractors and designers to bring a state of the art facility to the island for her grandma—but also for anyone else in need.

It turns out that their royal social media campaign brought in even more tourists than expected. Business on the island wasn’t just surviving, the economy was now thriving.

“You really are the best wife a guy could ask for. And the best princess.”

“You’re not such a bad husband and prince, either,” Ada said, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“There’s one more thing.” Arlo brushed a lock of hair from her face.

“I don’t know if I can take much more.” She peered out at the setting sun and thought back to her life just a few months prior. Living in LA and working as a retail manager... It was a nice, stable life. She had always craved that. But, if she was honest, it was lonely. Since meeting Arlo and Brooklyn, her life had never felt so full.

People walking along the beach waved up at them. Ada smiled and waved back. Then, she heard them yelling her name.

“Surprise.” Arlo nestled in behind her.

“Is that...”

“Yep. They’re all here.”

Maggie, Chase, Liza, and Miller were cheering wildly on the sand below.

Ada looked up at Arlo, spun around, and shook her head in awe. “Remember when we were all together last time in Big Bear, and I was mad at you for ghosting me?”

Arlo shook his head. “No, I don’t recall that...”

“Yeah, me either.” Then, Ada kissed her husband with all the passion and joy that being loved by him had unlocked.

UP NEXT

There's one more story to be told in the Gotta Be Something More series. Stay tuned... You can sign up for my newsletter to be the first to know about upcoming books! Just head to my website: Katies-Journal.org.

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading *Just a Holiday Hangout*! Did you know reviews help amazing readers like you find my books? If you enjoyed *Just a Holiday Hangout*, please consider leaving a review! Thank you again!

[Amazon](#)

[Goodreads](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katie Nelson writes books with humor, heart and Hallmark vibes. When she isn't chasing after her energetic family, you can find her reading, watching adorable dog videos, or drinking a chai latte. All of Katie's books are available on Amazon and you can connect with her on Instagram @authorkatienelson.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No book is ever produced by the author alone. The more I write, the more I know this is true! I write the words, but so many others help the story come together.

Thank you Tracy, you are my constant encourager and prayer partner. Laura, you give me the best feedback and make me a better writer. Tiffany, Heather, and Brit – thank you for being my BETA readers. Your eyes on my story gave me the confidence to keep moving forward. ARC Team – thank you for being excited about my books and sharing them with others!

Kristyn – you are the best editor. Thank you for taking the time to make my story polished and grammatically correct. I appreciate your knowledge and insight! Jessie, you rock at book blurbs and I'm so thankful! Stephanie and Melissa, thank you for making my covers come to life. I throw a million ideas at you and you make it happen!

To all my friends, family and readers... thank you for cheering me on and reading my books!

Kelvin, Eve and Rocky – I love you! I’m so grateful for your unending encouragement and support. Most of all, thank you for reminding me what life is truly about...

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” -1 Corinthians 13:13

Speaking of love... Christmas is ultimately about God loving us so much that He sent His Son into the world.

Luke 2:11

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

Titus 3:4-5

“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”

Merry Christmas, sweet readers!

ALSO BY KATIE NELSON

JUST A THING WE DO: BOOK 1 (GOTTA BE
SOMETHING MORE SERIES)

JUST A WRONG TURN: BOOK 2 (GOTTA BE
SOMETHING MORE SERIES)

JUST A HOLIDAY HANGOUT: BOOK 3 (GOTTA BE
SOMETHING MORE SERIES)

LOVE LIKE DANDELION ROOTS

SEEKING REAL LIFE IRISH ROMCOM