

THE
FIRST

A SWEET
ROMANTIC
COMEDY

Taste



ANNAH CONWELL

The First Taste

ANNAH CONWELL

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To all the girls who dream of marrying their best friend.

*In the wake of every heartache, in the depth of every fear, there
were diamonds, diamonds, waiting to break out of here.*

-Diamonds, Johnnyswim

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Content Warnings

This book is a closed door romance with all the sizzle, none of the spice. There are some makeout scenes, but no implied intimacy.

There are mentions of death of parents and examples of toxic relationships. There is a small scene in which a character is grabbed without her permission, but it is deescalated quickly.

CHAPTER 1

Sophie Cunningham

Being heartbroken should be a sport. It's exhausting enough, what with all the crying and scream-singing Taylor Swift songs. Oh, and don't forget the fake smiling in public. Can't forget that. Especially now, when one of my best friends, Grace, is being kissed by her country star fiancé. My face is going to be sore after all this aggressive smiling.

Grace's birthday falls on New Year's Day, so *of course* her incredibly thoughtful fiancé Wyatt has thrown her a fantastic birthday party. If I sound bitter it's because I am, just not toward her. It's not Grace's fault that her dreams came true the same day mine died. She got proposed to on Christmas Eve, and I broke up with my boyfriend that same night.

I thought I was next in line to get proposed to. Instead, my boyfriend informed me that I wasn't marriage material, and we were just having *fun* all this time. If you call constantly compromising my own needs and desires *fun*, then yes, we had tons of it. Unfortunately for me, hindsight is 20/20 and I saw his true colors too late.

“Aren’t they just sickeningly adorable?” MJ—one of my other best friends and roommate—sighs as she drops into the seat next to me. I look up from my half-eaten cake at her. She resembles a mystical character from one of the books on the shelves behind her with her long black hair and arms covered in braided hemp bracelets.

Wyatt rented out Grace’s favorite bookshop, The Secret Door, for the party. Every wall of this place is covered in books of all genres and sizes. I purposefully chose to sit in the section furthest from the romance novels to avoid any painful reminders. But Grace and Wyatt’s love parade found us anyway, right as the clock struck midnight. He dipped her back and kissed her like they weren’t going to live till tomorrow.

“Yep,” I say, dropping my fork down and huffing. “I wish I could be fully happy tonight. But I’ve run out of energy to fake it,” I admit and MJ nods in understanding.

“It’s okay to be sad. You and Michael were together for a while. You thought he was going to propose and instead he showed his true self and you broke up. Now, that part of your life feels wasted.” MJ has this wonderfully dry way of speaking that makes you love her but also want to throw something at her.

“Thanks,” I deadpan and she rolls her eyes.

“I’m telling you like it is because you deserve to address it and move on! It’s okay to be sad and upset and mourn that part of your life. We both know about mourning.” She pauses and

looks down at her ring-covered fingers. I reach out and grasp one of her hands, the cool metal of the rings pressing against my palm. MJ's mom died during her senior year of high school and it's a pain point that has always brought us together. My dad died while I was in middle school. So I know exactly why she's pausing.

“MJ, it's okay, you don't have to—”

She cuts me off with a wave of her other hand. Gemstones sparkle as they catch the light. “I'm fine. You know I'm not good with emotional things or sentimental stuff, but I do know that you deserve so much more than what he was to you, Soph. You deserve someone who loves your weird questions and your passion for food and your giant heart. The man your dad would have wanted for you. Michael wasn't that person, which I know hurts. But now you can move on.”

Like alcohol in a wound, her words sting but I know I need to hear them. The thing is, while I know Michael wasn't good for me, I'm not sure what I deserve. Maybe he was right. All this time I thought we were getting married, but he saw me as a way to pass the time. What does that say about me? Am I just *fun girlfriend* material or am I *wife* material? My life isn't totally together, maybe that's it. I can spend some time getting myself together before I try dating again.

“I don't think I want to move on. Maybe I need to be single for a while.”

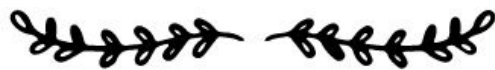
MJ shrugs and sits back in her chair in response. “Sounds good to me. I feel the same way. I'm tired of dealing with

relationships.” MJ’s last boyfriend broke up with her over the phone at 2 AM, saying he found the love of his life in the garden department of Home Depot. So I can see why she’d be on board with my singleness mindset. An idea sparks to life inside me, making me straighten in my seat.

“Let’s make a New Year’s resolution, then,” I say and MJ raises a brow. “No guys this year. We stay single and focus on ourselves. I bet by the end of the year we’ll feel refreshed and ready to get back into the dating world.”

MJ purses her lips as she mulls over my suggestion. “It couldn’t hurt.” She shrugs then sits up and holds out a hand. “No men until January first of next year.”

I place my hand in hers and give it a firm shake. “Deal.”



“Happy New Year!” Bennett’s voice booms through the townhouse. I lift my head from where it was laying on my folded arms.

“Too loud,” I tell him when he walks into the kitchen where I’m letting our kitchen island hold me up. Bennett has been my best friend since we were kids, which is how I know he’s a morning person through and through. Usually, I love that about him, but not today. Not when I haven’t slept more than an hour in total.

“Agreed,” Grace grumbles from behind her giant coffee mug that says *Bride to be*—Lottie’s birthday gift to her. Lottie is our newly married best friend, and the sister to Grace’s fiancé, Wyatt.

“I thought I’d be walking into a happy house this morning. It’s your birthday, Grace! I brought donuts. Everything is great,” Bennett beams. He sets several boxes of donuts on the counter with a flourish. His green eyes are bright and lively like grass in the springtime.

“My fiancé is leaving the state for the entire month. And I’m not a morning person, you know that. But thank you for the donuts,” Grace says and musters a smile for him before going into the living room to nurse her coffee. Wyatt has to finish recording an album this month and promised his record label he’d spend the month in Nashville instead of here in Atlanta. Grace doesn’t want to abandon her students as a teacher, so they’re forced to do long distance, which she’s not very enthused about.

Bennett turns to me, concern etched in his expression. “What about you? What’s wrong?”

“I couldn’t sleep last night after the party,” I tell him. “Michael posted a photo with another girl.” I let my head flop back down on my arms as I recall the pain from seeing him move on so quickly. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything different with how little he seemed to care about me by the end.

Normally I wouldn't share any of this with Bennett, since he and I have a strict no-relationship-talk rule within our friendship, but after breaking up with Michael that boundary has blurred. Bennett was there to comfort me when it happened, and now it feels weird to just ignore my heartbreak around my best friend.

"Sophie," he groans. "How many times do I have to tell you that guy is not worth your tears? He's definitely not worth losing sleep over."

"I loved him, Bennett." Silence falls over the kitchen, making me lift my head again. Bennett is looking down at the counter, his expression hidden. "Ben?" I tilt my head, wondering what's on his mind.

When he looks up, he's wearing a tight smile. "So you had bad judgment, no big deal," he says and I roll my eyes. "Now you can learn from that mistake and move on." He opens up the box of donuts and grabs a plain glazed one, taking a big bite.

"Oh, I've definitely learned my lesson. Which is why I've sworn off men for the year." Bennett starts to cough and sputter. "Are you okay?" I scramble to my feet, ready to help, but he waves his hands, indicating that he's fine. He works to swallow and then looks at me with wide eyes.

"You've sworn off men?" There's a tinge of panic in his voice that makes me push my brows together in confusion.

"Just for the year. MJ and I made a pact to focus on ourselves." I shrug and grab a maple bacon donut from the

box. I'm more of a savory food person, but I do love a good mixture of salty and sweet. Plus you can't go wrong with bacon.

"A year is a long time," Bennett says as he grabs a glass water bottle from the fridge. MJ is environmentally conscious along with being health conscious, so we don't keep much plastic in our shared townhouse. Except for all the snacks Grace and I bring in. Lottie used to bring in plenty as well, but now she lives with her husband Callum who she married on Christmas Eve last year.

I sigh when I think about that awful day. One best friend married, the other engaged, all on the same day I had my heart trampled on. That will make you want to curl up in bed and not leave for a few days. Which is what I did until the party last night. Whenever I wasn't working in my food truck, I was using sleep as an escape mechanism. Healthy, I know.

"I think it's the perfect amount of time. I don't want to end up like this again." I take a bite of the donut, the sweet maple glaze coating my tongue before the salt of the bacon comes in and packs a smokey punch. I make a mental note to try adding bacon to my signature spicy-sweet chicken sandwich on my food truck menu.

"You can't close yourself off from dating just because of one guy. There are better guys out there, Soph."

I chew another bite of the donut while studying him. I'm not used to hearing relationship advice from Bennett. We haven't talked about relationships since he punched the guy who asked

me to be his date to the middle school dance in the face and wouldn't give me a reason why. It was probably immature of me to place a ban on all relationship talk forever, but I was pretty upset. I went to my first middle school dance alone, after all. But our ban actually benefited me in high school when he became the city's most eligible bachelor.

The number of girls who wanted to date him was ridiculous. It's hard to judge them though, considering I was one of them. Somewhere rotting in a landfill is a notebook filled with the words *Sophie St. James* over and over again. I can't even blame younger me, the combination of his last name and my first has a nice ring to it even now. I got over my crush when I saw how Bennett was more concerned with his studies and sports than being an actual boyfriend. Two-Date-Ben was his nickname for those four years, and he lived up to the moniker. He still does to this day, as far as I know.

"I feel as though you're not equipped to be giving me relationship advice, Mr. Two-Date-Ben."

He cringes at the old nickname, then sighs. "I'm past that now. I've grown up, you know," he grumbles as he grabs a napkin to clean his hands.

"If you say so," I reply, knowing not to push him. Two small lines are carved between his brows, the look that tells me if I keep going he'll be upset. And the last thing I want to do is get into an argument about relationships with Bennett. It doesn't concern me what he does with his love life.

“Anyway,” I begin to change the subject. “What are you doing with your day off today?” Bennett is an orthopedic surgeon and rarely gets time off. Even his time off is usually on-call, ready to rush back to the hospital.

“I have my interview today, remember? Nice to see I have a best friend who listens,” he teases and I gasp.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry, Ben. I’ve been caught up in my pity party and I forgot. Are you nervous?” He’s interviewing with the Georgia Thrashers today—our local college athletics department. They have their own dedicated medical staff, and Bennett is being considered to be their head orthopedic surgeon for the entire department.

“A little,” he laughs softly and rubs the back of his neck. I smile at him, reaching over to place my hand on his own. He looks down at our hands for a second then back up.

“You’re an amazing surgeon and person, Bennett. They’d be crazy not to hire you.” I pat his hand and then pull away.

“Thanks, Soph, but I know there are probably a ton of other candidates better than me. If my dad wasn’t a booster I wouldn’t be considered. I don’t even meet the experience requirement.”

“Your dad might be the reason your name came up, but you and your accomplishments are how you made it this far. Don’t doubt yourself. I believe in you,” I say and he smiles. His dimples come out when he does and it makes me grin big too, even though that’s the last thing I feel like doing.

“This is why we’ve been friends this long.”

“Because I’m the sweetest?” I flutter my lashes and giggle.

“No, because you boost my ego,” he laughs and I hit his shoulder, but end up laughing too.

As our laughter slowly fades, our eyes lock and my heart warms. I’m so grateful for Ben. He’s the only one who could make me laugh in this state.

“Thanks for cheering me up, Ben,” I say and his eyes crinkle.

“Anything for you, Soph.” Something is different in his gaze. Something I haven’t seen before. And I would know, because I’ve looked into those green eyes often since I was five years old. I can’t place my finger on it though, so I brush it away. No sense in working myself up over a look.

CHAPTER 2

Bennett St. James

**Soph: You deserve to be there. You're going to do great!
Can't wait to celebrate with you when you get the job!**

I smile down at the text from Sophie as I wait outside the Director of Athletics' office. She's the most encouraging person I know. Ever since we were kids she's been cheering me on and pushing me to be better. Whether it was making signs to hold up during my swim meets—much to the dismay of the other attendees—or opening my Harvard acceptance letter because I was too nervous, she's always been there for me.

I've tried to do the same for her as much as I can, but when I got into Harvard I left Georgia for eight years. I visited some, but most of my support was over the phone. Now I make sure I'm at every important event I can be for her because I missed too much being gone. This career change should help free me up even more since I'll be in private practice instead of a slave to the hospital's whim. Sighing, I shift in my seat.

My hope is that having more time will allow me to have a life outside of my career for once. I've never wanted much

besides becoming a surgeon. In high school, I dated because my friends pressured me, but I made sure the girls knew I didn't promise much more than one or two dates. Hence that blasted nickname Sophie mentioned earlier. I *hate* that nickname. It makes me seem like some kind of a heartbreaker.

In reality, I was sort of a nerd in school. I got sucked into the popular group because of my wealthy last name and spot on the swim team. Otherwise, I'd probably be one of those guys who ate lunch in the library while studying color-coded flashcards. Now that I'm older, I see the value in having something outside of my career. I also saw Sophie in a new light for the first time.

Sophie has dated on and off throughout the years but coming back and seeing her on Michael's arm set something off inside of me. Something that made me want more for her and for me, a life together as more than friends. The life I'm imagining is one where I spend all my time off with Sophie, going on dates, or even just snuggling on my couch. Her head on my chest, my hand sifting through her lavender hair—

“Dr. St. James?” I spring to my feet, jumping out of my daydream. I almost hit the secretary who has come to retrieve me. She takes a step back, her eyes wide. I'm about to apologize, but she speaks up again. “Mr. Sanders is ready for you.” She turns on her heel and click-clacks away from me.

I brush my hands over my pants and take a deep breath. Just a life-changing interview, no big deal. I focus on Sophie's

words of encouragement from earlier and the ones in her text as I walk in. It helps bring a smile to my face.

“Mr. Sanders, it’s nice to finally meet you in person,” I greet when I walk in the large, sleek office. There’s a massive black desk in the center of the room and sitting behind it is an older man with a receding hairline and a jovial expression. He pushes to standing and his larger belly comes into view. If you gave him a white beard he’d make a great Santa Claus.

“Bennett St. James! I’ve heard great things about you. It’s nice to meet you, son. Please, call me Paul,” he booms before grabbing my hand in a firm shake.

“I’m excited to be here. Though it isn’t my alma mater, I’m a Georgia Thrasher at heart and love this campus.” I sit down in a suede chair in front of his desk. He plops back down in his seat.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it? And I know you’ve got Thrasher blood in your veins! Your dad is a great friend of mine.” I try not to let my smile falter at his words. I love my family, but I want to stand on my own two feet. Sophie’s words come back to mind again, and I hold back a sigh. I know I’ve worked hard to get to this point but knowing that I could get this position because of my last name isn’t an easy pill to swallow.

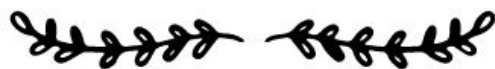
Sophie especially understands that desire. She comes from wealth too, and she threw it all away to follow her own dreams. Now she’s made her own name, and here I am using my father’s to climb the ladder.

“That’s nice to hear, Paul. But I’d really love it if we could leave my father out of this interview. I want to be sure that I’m here according to merit,” I explain and he gives me a nod. He leans back in his chair and props his hands up on his stomach. His jovial look is gone now as he assesses me.

“I appreciate that sentiment. Most boys with your kind of connection would come in here expecting an easy in. I want you to know that while your dad did put your name in the hat, that’s not why you made it here.”

I raise my eyebrows. “It isn’t?”

“Of course not! There are careers at stake here—sometimes even lives, son. I can’t be putting some unqualified trust fund baby on my staff just because his daddy plays golf with me on occasion.” I breathe a quiet sigh of relief at his words. “Now, let’s talk about your experience.”



“Thank you for your time, sir,” I say with a smile that Paul matches. He’s all but handed me the paperwork to sign. *That free time with Sophie is looking more like a real possibility.* The thought makes me pause. Sophie being my first thought isn’t new, but it feels different now that my feelings for her have shifted into something more than friendship.

“Of course, son. I look forward to having you on staff. But there is one more test I have to put you through,” he says with a low voice. We’ve spent over an hour going over my

education and experience, plus my personal life and future goals. I thought I'd been put through the wringer enough. Short of completing surgery in front of him, I'm not sure what more the man could want from me.

“Okay,” I say, not hiding the skepticism in my voice.

Paul chuckles and pushes himself up again. “I'm sure you'll do great. The last thing on our agenda is to go see Coach Bash.” I stand up quickly and resist the urge to wipe my damp palms on my khakis again.

Sebastian Holt—aka Coach Bash—is one of the most revered football coaches and former players of this generation. He played for the Thrashers, then went pro, but retired because of an injury at the height of his career. After that, he quickly worked up the coaching ranks until he got offered the head coaching job here at Georgia State College. In his first year he took the team to the playoffs. His second they won the championship, and he hasn't lost a game since. He's a powerhouse.

“Coach Bash cares about the players a lot, so he likes to know all of the medical staff personally. Since your position is so critical, I want to be sure he thinks you're a good fit. I also trust his judgment over anyone else. Maybe even my wife,” he jokes and nudges me with his elbow as he walks past.

I follow him out the door and focus on my posture so I don't look timid. While I'm a reasonably confident guy, it's hard not to be nervous going to meet Sebastian Holt. I don't know much about him, just that he's young for a head coach with

such a lengthy winning record—younger than forty. And that he was ruthless on the field in his position as a safety.

“You’ll meet all the coaches for the rest of the sports after you’re hired, but I like to get Sebastian’s approval before hiring you.”

It doesn’t take long to reach Coach Bash’s office. Even his door is imposing, with his name in bold, brass letters across it. His secretary nods at us as we approach, and the door swings open with no one to open it. I swallow and follow Paul inside. The door swings shut behind us. It must have some sort of electric closing mechanism.

“Hey Bash, got some fresh meat for ya!” Paul chortles and slaps me on the back. The man stands up behind his desk, looking me over. He’s taller than me, but it’s how broad he is that’s disconcerting. Since I was a swimmer in high school, I’m more lean than bulky. But Sebastian is *built*. Retiring from football didn’t lessen his muscle mass that’s for sure. It makes for an intimidating experience, especially when paired with his piercing gaze.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Coach, I’m a big fan. My name’s Bennett,” I say and hold out my hand over his desk. For a moment I think he’s not going to take it, and I start to pull back. But a smile takes over his face and he yanks my arm into a half-hug, patting me on the back firmly.

“You should have seen your face, man,” he laughs by my ear before pulling back. He gestures for us to sit down. “Paul, did you tell him horror stories about me before you came? He

looked like a deer in headlights.” He sits down across from us and kicks his shoes up on the desk.

“I’m sure your reputation preceded you enough to get him shaking in his boots a little,” Paul says with a smile. I feel more at ease already, and I hope this means we’ll have a good working relationship.

“I’m no big deal, and certainly nothing to be afraid of. As long as you take care of my players, that is,” Sebastian says and shoots me a pointed look. But when I nod enthusiastically, his face transforms into a laid-back smile again.

“I’ll agree to disagree about you being ‘no big deal’,” I say, earning a laugh from both the men. “And I’ll certainly do all that’s in my power to make sure your players are taken care of.”

“Then we’ll be good friends,” Sebastian replies. My eyes land on a picture frame behind his desk. There’s a young girl in the photo, about ten or eleven if I had to guess, standing with her hands on her hips and a big smile on her face. Maybe I can earn brownie points by mentioning it.

“You have a beautiful daughter,” I say and gesture to the picture. “How old is she?” Paul clears his throat and shifts in his seat in my peripheral.

“Thank you,” Sebastian replies. He directs a fond smile over his shoulder at the photo. “She’s going to be eleven this summer. Her first year of middle school is coming up.”

“You and your wife must be so proud,” I say and Sebastian looks down for a second then back up with an expression I can’t decipher. Paul keeps shifting in his seat and when I glance over he has wide eyes. I peek at Sebastian’s hands and notice no ring—not even a tan line of one. My stomach drops.

“Actually,” he clears his throat. “I’m not married. Madeline is my niece, who I adopted after my sister died.” I go still in my seat. I don’t think I could have messed that up more if I tried. Maybe I won’t get to tell Sophie good news after all.

“I’m so sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have assumed—” He cuts me off with a wave of his hand.

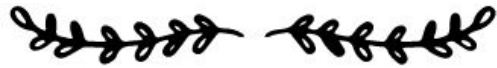
“It’s not a big deal. Many people have made the mistake. Don’t start sweating over it.” He lets out a light laugh. “You’re still going to get the job. I knew I liked you the moment we shook hands. And my instincts are always right, aren’t they, Paul?” Paul sits up in his chair and nods, the nerves dissipating from his face.

“Always, Coach Bash. That’s why we hired you.”

“Well, then, I guess this is congratulations, Bennett,” Sebastian says and I shoot up out of my chair.

“Thank you! Both of you,” I say to them. This is so big. Not just for my career, but for my whole future. Now there’s nothing standing between Sophie and me being together.

Except a broken heart. I brush away the pesky thought. Everything is going to work out. It has to.



The smell of garlic and basil fills my apartment, and I know before I'm fully in the door that Sophie is already here. A long time ago we exchanged keys, but I use the key to her townhouse less since she shares it with the other girls.

Sophie, however, uses my key often. To both my benefit and detriment. Sometimes she'll do sweet things like she is now and make me dinner. But sometimes she sneaks in here and pranks me. I never know which it's going to be. It keeps life interesting, that's for sure.

I hang my keys on the hook and kick off my dress shoes beside Sophie's beat-up converse. My shoes have sat beside Sophie's a million times, but a few months ago it started to feel different. This new feeling happens deep in my stomach. It's like something has come to life and I feel almost sick with want. Butterflies is what some might call the feeling. It struck me as weird the first time it happened, but I've gotten almost used to it lately.

I follow the delicious scent into my kitchen and stop dead in my tracks. Sophie is gently kneading dough on my kitchen island, flour everywhere ... *wearing my sweatshirt*. Those awful butterflies have migrated up to my throat. It's like my future is right in front of me, ready for me to reach out and grab it, but I can't.

She hums softly as her hands work the dough with expert knowledge. As if she feels me staring, her head lifts.

“Bennett! You scared me,” she laughs, but I’m still caught up in the moment. Caught up in documenting this memory in my brain to hold onto forever. Caught up in imagining what it would be like if just a few key details were different. Details like a ring on her finger. Her last name matching mine. “Ben? Are you okay? Oh!” She looks down at my sweatshirt. “Are you mad about the sweatshirt? I got cold and didn’t want to go down to my car to get a sweater. I promise I’ll wash it.”

I snap out of my reverie. It’s ridiculous to think about marrying Sophie. We haven’t even been on a date. But the thing is—I already love Sophie. I’ve loved her since we were kids. Now I’m just falling *in* love with her.

“No, Soph, I was just lost in thought.” I paste on a smile. “Don’t worry about the sweatshirt. You can have it if you want,” I say without thinking. If she’s surprised by my offer, she doesn’t show it. She’s borrowed my clothes before, but never kept them. That always felt over the line for us.

“Were you thinking about your new job? I can’t believe it! My best friend—the new orthopedic surgeon for Georgia State College. I’m so proud of you!” She smiles big, her gray eyes crinkling up at the edges.

“Thanks, Soph. I’m really excited about it. It’s hard to believe. The athletic director even told me point blank it had nothing to do with my dad.”

She gives me an *I told you so* look. “You got the job because you’re the best surgeon on this side of the Mississippi,

and probably the other side too. You've worked hard, now it's time to celebrate!"

"I don't know about the best surgeon in the country," I laugh. "But I am up to celebrate. Is this homemade pizza?" Tomato sauce simmers on the stove, and a series of top-notch ingredients are spread across the countertop. Sophie doesn't do anything halfway, especially not celebrations. So pizza means from scratch sauce and dough, plus all the toppings anyone could ever want.

"Of course, I know how much you love it." She shoots me a knowing smile and those darn butterflies are back again.

I love you, I think, knowing those three little words are starting to mean more. Sophie's brows come together, but her smile is still on her face.

"I love you too, Bennett. You don't normally say that so casually," she says, curiosity coating her voice. *Did I say that out loud?* If time travel was real, I'd go back and take those words out of my mouth.

"It's a big day," I say, and try to laugh it off. I usually reserve the phrase for important moments, or when I know Sophie needs to hear it most. I'd never blurt it out randomly like that.

I've got to get it together.

CHAPTER 3

Sophie Cunningham

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Hayden! Thanks for all your help today,” I say to my sous chef as I step out of my Airstream trailer. Running my food truck—Farm-To-Truck—has been a dream come true, and Hayden has helped the success of that dream significantly. He’s worked with me for a while now and is the best of the best when it comes to efficiency and technical skills. He also doubles as a security guard with all his tattoos and large muscles. I don’t think anyone would try to rob me with him at the window.

“See you tomorrow,” he says in his usual gruff tone. He’s not the most talkative man, but he gets the job done. He swings a leg over his motorcycle while I close the door to the trailer. The engine revs to life and he’s off in a cloud of dust. Silence settles around me, making my nerves come to life in my stomach.

The park where I set up is empty now that it’s past nine o’clock, so the only thing to keep me company are the small animals scurrying around and the wind in the trees. I am,

unfortunately, what one would call a scaredy cat. I had a true crime obsession when I was younger—still do, actually—and all that serial killer knowledge has me on edge every time I'm alone. Which, of course, is a lot since I'm in the food industry.

The overhang creaks as I pull down to shut it. I tuck my keys in between my fingers—knowing deep down that if someone wanted to kidnap me right now my car keys wouldn't be enough to stop them—and start the short trek to where my pickup is parked.

With each crunch of the fallen leaves underfoot, I have to force myself to not whip my head around to see if anyone is behind me. I still end up checking five times before I make it to the parking lot. There's a sleek car parked a few spots down from me, making me gulp. Who would be at the park at this hour? There are parks in town with better views to park your vehicle in after dark than this one. My mind automatically goes to worst case scenario: serial killer. *Maybe it's a couple on a date*, I think to assuage my panicked mind. *Or maybe they're on the phone and didn't want to drive on the road while talking*. I almost start to feel better when that invasive thought comes again: *Or a serial killer*.

With shaking hands, I open my faded red truck door and climb into the cab. I think I hear the sound of gravel crunching, so I quickly slam the door shut and lock it behind me. I whip my head around to make sure no one is hiding in the backseat, and once deemed all clear I scramble to turn on the truck.

Once my lights are on, I feel safer, and I sigh in relief as I back out and turn toward the courtyard where my trailer is parked. My headlights illuminate the trees and park fountain and...

“AHHHH!” I scream as a figure stands motionless in the bright lights. I can’t make out any details, and I don’t want to. I’ll abandon my trailer at this point, I don’t care. The person starts walking toward my pickup and my heart launches into my throat. I’m frozen, wondering how much time I would do if I ran over an innocent bystander because they scared me.

As the perpetrator gets closer, the startling idea of being kidnapped fades away and a different kind of dread settles into my bones. Waltzing up to my old beat-up truck is none other than Whitney Cunningham—*my mother*. I roll my window down halfway and meet her glaring blue eyes. They’re colder than the wind blowing through the city right now.

“Sophie Amelia Cunningham, what on earth are you doing? Did you intend on running me over? Your own mother,” she scolds. Other moms might be joking, but she is not. I briefly consider telling her I was going to run her over but think better of it on account of enjoying being in the land of the living.

“It’s nice to see you too, Mom,” I say, sarcasm lacing my words. Her eyes narrow into tiny blue knives.

“Do *not* get a tone with me, young lady. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you, but you won’t return my calls. So I had to track you down to this awful park.” She scrunches her nose

in distaste. “Using your *food truck* schedule.” She says *food truck* like it’s a disease rather than a business.

“I’ve been busy, Mom. And it’s not like I haven’t responded. I sent text messages.”

“*Text messages* are no way to communicate with your mother. Now, get out of this monstrous vehicle so we can talk.”

“Why don’t you just get inside? It’s warm in here,” I say and she curls her lip up. Her ‘disgusted’ facial expressions could win an award for most dramatic.

“My Mercedes is quite warm, thank you. I’d prefer to speak there. Since you won’t come home.” *Home* is two blocks away, where my best friends are gearing up for a movie night that I’m probably going to miss now. Home is not a place where a piece of furniture costs more than my current townhouse and I have to constantly walk on eggshells.

I sigh. “Okay, fine, let me park again,” I relent. Satisfied, she steps back. After I park, I walk over to the silver car that my mother is currently occupying. I slide in and the smell of leather and Chanel No. 9 clouds the enclosed space, bringing back unpleasant memories of silent car rides and disappointed glares. *Ah, childhood.*

“I need to get my Airstream out of the park before it gets too late.”

“This won’t take long.” She gives me a tight smile. “But if it did, it would be your fault since you refused to speak with

me about this at an ideal time. I drove all the way from Savannah just to see you.” I’d feel bad—if I didn’t know this was a lie. My mother has business in Atlanta often, and I’m certain she did today but wants to manipulate me into thinking otherwise.

“What do you need to talk about, Mom?” I try to get our conversation back on track. If I gave her enough opportunity, she’d use up the rest of my night going on a rant about how I’m throwing my life away.

“As I’m sure you know, the annual Charity Extravaganza is approaching,” she begins and I nod. “I would like for you to attend this year, as you haven’t since you were in high school. Your sister will be in Europe for work, and I will have no family with me if you don’t attend. My being alone would bring shame to our family name.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. This is why I ran away from Savannah right out of high school. Southern high society irritates me to no end.

“I can’t take off that many weekends, Mom. I’m sorry,” I say and clench my stomach as I brace for the backlash. Beyond not wanting to go, it is really the truth that I shouldn’t negate that many Saturdays. The Charity Extravaganza is a series of events, during which all the southern socialites gather together for extravagant balls, afternoon tea parties, and antique auctions to raise money for their prospective charities. And of course, to show how amazing they are at hosting. I feel a stress headache coming on just thinking about it.

“Perhaps you would reconsider if I told you that several food industry investors would be there.”

I look down at my hands in my lap to avoid her knowing gaze. It’s my dream to open up another food truck. To turn Farm-To-Truck into a franchise. I stupidly mentioned that to my sister while at a family dinner, and my mom must have been listening.

“That’s tempting, but I can find my own investors,” I say, though I know that’s not completely true. Business is great, but I’m in my twenties and I don’t possess that traditional look that makes investors want to open their wallets. At least not so far. Most old southern men aren’t fond of my purple hair and affection for the color black.

“I was also considering hiring you as the caterer for my event,” she says casually, as if that’s not a career-changing gig. My food would get into the mouths of people with more influence in their pinky fingers than I’ll probably ever have.

“What’s the catch?” I ask and meet her icy gaze head-on. She smiles, looking like the cat who ate the canary.

“No catch, darling. I simply want you to attend three balls and two smaller events. My ball is the last weekend of February and you’ll be able to cater that one so long as you attend the rest.”

I relax slightly into the warm seat. That’s not so bad. “That sounds manageable.”

“Of course it is! Just a few parties, is all. You’ll need a date of course, but that’s no problem since you have Michael,” she says and I tense up.

“Actually, Michael and I broke up.”

“Is that so?” She doesn’t sound the least bit surprised. “Well, I can always match you up with someone if you can’t find a suitable date of your own.”

“You want to be my *matchmaker*?” I ask, a bitter taste filling my mouth at the thought.

“While I would enjoy that very much, it’s not necessary. So long as you can find a man with a good family background to bring you to each event.”

My stomach twists at the thought of spending my weekends with a man my mother has picked out. This might help me achieve my dreams, though...

I sigh. “I’ll do it but let me try to find a guy on my own before you arrange anything.” Maybe I can find an old high school friend whose southern mama hasn’t married him off yet. Chances are he’d be forced into the events anyways, and I’d rather know the guy I’m dating than not.

“Splendid! I knew you’d say yes. This will help us both, and maybe you’ll even end up with a good husband by the end of it.” Her smile is wide and she knows she’s won.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up,” I say and push open the car door. “I’ll see you at the first event.”

“I’ll certainly see you before then, for the dress fittings of course,” she says as I get out. Feeling defeated, I just nod. I’ll gather the energy to argue about dresses later.

“Bye, Mom, I love you.” I shut the door. Her driver-side window rolls down as I walk back to my truck.

“Don’t forget to answer your phone!” she yells before backing out and speeding away, leaving me alone once more.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, then go back to what I was doing before she showed up in my headlights: going home.



“I’m home!” I yell after I shut the front door.

“In the living room,” MJ calls out, though I already knew they’d be there. I kick off my converse then walk into the dimly lit room.

“You won’t believe what just happened—” I gasp. “Lottie!” My blonde best friend giggles at my exclamation from under a blanket on the couch. I tackle her into a hug, laughing at her surprised noise.

“Don’t crush her,” Grace says from where she’s sitting in her recliner.

“I can’t believe you’re here! When did you get back from your honeymoon?” I pull back, then mash myself between her

and MJ on the couch. MJ grumbles something about *personal space* then scoots away from me.

“Yesterday! I just missed y’all so much I had to come over.” Lottie got married on Christmas Eve and left right away for a cozy cabin honeymoon in the mountains. She’s been gone for two weeks now.

“Where’s Callum?”

“He’s at home. I was actually about to leave because I can’t stay long.” She pouts, but her blue eyes are bright and happy. “I need to help unpack. But before I go, what were you about to say when you came in? I have to know!”

I laugh and shake my head at her. “My mom came to the park when I was finished working,” I say and her eyes get big. All of my friends know how bad my relationship with my mom is.

“I’m guessing that went well,” Grace says and I paste on an exaggerated smile.

“It went amazing!” My saccharine tone makes them all laugh. “She told me she’d get me in front of the investors of my dreams if I went to a certain number of charity events.”

“No offense, Soph, but that doesn’t sound that bad.” Lottie is always trying to put a spin on things, but I don’t know if this situation has a positive.

“She also wants to set me up with someone. I have to have a date from a *respectable family* or no deal.” Sympathetic looks come from each of the girls, even MJ. They all know how

little I want to do with men right now. Especially the kinds my mother would set me up with. They'd be like Michael, only worse.

“What are you going to do?” Lottie asks and I shrug.

“I'm going to try to find a guy I don't hate being around, I guess. These investors are my only chance at expanding Farm-To-Truck in the near future.”

“Maybe it won't be so bad,” Lottie says, ever the ray of sunshine in our group. I usually ride the optimism train with her, but not tonight. “Who knows? You could end up finding a guy you like.”

“Doubtful.”

CHAPTER 4

Bennett St. James

My apartment building looks like a five-star resort by the time I pull into the parking lot after work. I've been working with the athletic department for barely two weeks, and I'm already worn out. Dealing with angry coaches and their prized—as well as injured—athletes is no joke. They come in with what they think I should say, but when I'm more human than puppet they're ready to flip the exam table.

I lift one hand off the wheel and rub the back of my neck, trying to ease the tension that's been building since my meeting with the baseball coach. His star pitcher needs Tommy John surgery—a procedure that replaces a tendon in the elbow—and will be out for at least a year in recovery afterward. Needless to say, the coach and player were livid. But I can only do so much.

After parking in my designated spot, I sigh and grab the gray backpack I've carried since my intern days. It's starting to show its years, but I can't part with it. Even though I come from a wealthy family, I've always been one to use a product

until it falls apart. It's more to do with the sentimental value than not wanting to spend the money, though. I could get a new backpack, but it wouldn't have the blue stain in the bottom where my pen burst open and ruined my scrubs on my first day. Something about it keeps me humble, I think.

The January air is harsh on my skin when I exit my car, even with my black beanie pulled down low and my puffer jacket zipped up tight. I make a beeline toward the entrance of the building, but a flash of pale red in my peripheral makes me pause. Looking over my shoulder, I see Sophie's truck parked in a visitor's space.

Whenever Sophie doesn't tell me she's coming to visit, there's *at least* a sixty percent chance she's going to prank me. And that's underestimating. She didn't try to hide her truck this time though, so maybe I'll be safe from her antics. Visible truck or not, anticipation heightens as I make my way to the elevator and then watch it rise to my floor.

Sophie never does anything so dramatic that it would harm me, but the fear of the unknown is real when it comes to her. Will I open my door to the entire living room covered in cling wrap? Or my bedroom furniture swapped out for my living room furniture? It's the kind of thing that will keep a man guessing. And yet, I don't hate the feeling. I'm heading towards almost certain doom, but knowing that at the end of it all, I'll hear her giggling uncontrollably has me smiling already.

My key turns in the lock until it clicks softly, and I slowly open the door. Silence fills the apartment. Sophie is not usually synonymous with silence.

“Soph?” I call out as I step inside. The door falls shut, and still not a sound from Sophie. I keep walking until my foot hits something plastic and it scatters across my hardwood floor. A few feet ahead is a neon green and orange Nerf gun with a white piece of paper taped to it. I snag it off the ground.

Ben, I decided we both need to blow off some steam. I laugh at the truth of that statement but wonder where her stress is coming from at the moment. And what better way than a war and a wager? If you shoot me first, I'll cook. If I shoot you first, you'll order takeout. If you agree, say 'I agree'. After that, you'll have ten seconds to find cover.

My face breaks out into a smile. I remember getting Nerf guns for Christmas and chasing Sophie around my mother's garden. She found foam darts in her rose bushes for *weeks* after.

I look around after reading the paper, but I don't spot Sophie anywhere in plain sight. I load the gun and yell out, “I agree!” Not wasting any time, I run behind my kitchen island. A spray of foam darts follows me. “There's no way that was ten seconds!” I shout while trying to formulate a plan. It's clear she's across the room based on how the darts followed me.

“Time is an illusion!” she shouts back and I snort.

“Have you been watching those conspiracy theory Tiktoks again?” I slowly rise to my knees then onto the balls of my feet to peek over the kitchen island.

“It’s not a conspiracy, it’s just a theory! All theories are unproven,” she responds like it’s obvious. Her lavender-colored bun sticks out right above the back of my couch.

I grin, aim, pull the trigger, and...miss. The dart hits the top of my couch and bounces to the floor. Sophie’s squeal echoes throughout the house. I spray the whole couch with darts, but her head disappears too quickly.

“Stop trying to distract me!” she yells and then I hear movement. I jump to standing as she’s speeding toward my bedroom. I run in after her, shooting and barely missing her shoulder. She flips around, holding out her gun, finger poised on the trigger. I match her stance and stay frozen in place.

“It seems as though we are at an impasse,” I say, trying to hold a serious face.

“It does seem that way.” Her lips twitch, almost breaking my resolve.

“How can we resolve this conundrum?”

“How about a shootout? Turn around, count to three, first to shoot wins.”

“Is time real or an illusion in this scenario?” I raise an eyebrow and her smile breaks free. Her gray eyes are wide with excitement and I can’t help but let my smile loose as well. Everything with Sophie feels lighter.

“For the sake of the war, it’s real.”

“So we’ll turn around then?”

She nods in response and begins to turn. We watch the other over our shoulders to make sure each of us turns. Then we face the opposite direction. “You count,” she says and I nod, though she can’t see me.

I position my feet to be able to turn easily. “One.” I hold my gun out from my body, ready to shoot. “Two.” I take a deep breath. “Three!” I spin on my heel and press the trigger—no darts leave the gun. A bright orange foam dart hits me right in the forehead, then the sound of Sophie’s giggles fills the room.

Clutching my head, I groan dramatically and spin several times until I fall onto my bed. All the while Sophie laughs hysterically.

“You’re such a drama queen.” She falls back on the bed beside me, our arms touching. Warmth fills me even as the heat of our battle subsides. This probably means nothing to her, but each simple touch feels charged with energy to me. I close my eyes and try to shake off the feeling.

“Says the woman who snuck into my apartment to have a Nerf war,” I point out. She huffs out a laugh, but it sounds less than joyful.

“We needed to relieve some stress. Plus, all my free time is about to be gone for the next month and a half.”

I sit up on the bed and look down at her with a frown. “What are you talking about?”

She sighs and sits up as well, crossing her legs underneath herself. “My mom came to visit the other day.” She grimaces. “She told me she’s going to be alone during her Charity Extravaganza and needs someone there with her to *bring honor to the family name*.” Her gray eyes roll.

“And you said yes?” I ask, surprised. She picks fuzz off her socks that are decorated with hedgehogs, which makes me smile even in my confusion.

“Well, she told me she could get me in with investors if I did. I have to go to three balls, and two minor events before *her* ball at the end of February. If I do that, then she’ll let me cater her event, which would be huge.”

“That’s not so bad, I—” I’m about to offer to keep her company when she cuts me off with a bitter laugh.

“It wouldn’t be, except I have to have a date, from a *good family background* at each event. If I can’t find one, she’ll set me up with one. So now I have to find some southern society guy willing to attend a few events as a stand-in boyfriend.”

“That’s crazy! You can’t do that,” I blurt out, making her raise her eyebrows.

“I know it’s crazy, but I don’t have any other choice. I don’t want to actually date anyone. Especially not some golf-loving former frat boy.” She shivers as if the very thought is repulsive. A small amount of relief is awarded to me from the fact that she probably wouldn’t actually like any of the men her mother approves of. But I still don’t want her spending a

bunch of time with a well-dressed man right around Valentine's Day.

You could be her fake boyfriend. The thought springs up unbidden. It might be asking for disaster. I want our future relationship to be real. I don't want her to think of me in an artificial light. At the same time, this could help her see me differently. Maybe the fake boyfriend version of me could make her want the real boyfriend version of me.

"I'll do it," I say before I can talk myself out of it.

She furrows her brows together. "What?"

"I'll be your fake boyfriend." Anticipation fills my veins and I clench my toes in my tennis shoes to keep from bouncing my leg. She'd instantly know I was nervous. It's one of my tells.

She laughs. "Don't be ridiculous, Ben. You're my best friend. I'm not dating you."

Okay, *ouch*.

"It wouldn't be real, Soph. I'd be your *fake* boyfriend. But thanks for letting me know that I'm not dating material," I say and force a laugh.

Her eyes soften. "Ben, no, that's not it," she says with a small smile. "I knew you meant fake, and that's why I feel like I need to say no." She pauses and my hopes soar up to the sun. *Is she—could she be about to admit she likes me?* "It would be too weird to try and change our friendship dynamic. I think

we'd be too awkward together to look real." And like Icarus, my hopes come crashing down.

"Soph, come on." I let out a nervous laugh. "Are you really going to be miserable with a stranger when you could just be a little awkward with your best friend?"

She shrugs, looking unsure. "That's a good point, but I don't know..." She trails off, biting her lip. "My mom doesn't like you. Maybe it would be pushing her buttons too much to bring you as my date."

I resist the urge to groan. She's right. Whitney hates me. All because I always have and always will encourage Sophie to do what's right for her instead of being Whitney's puppet.

"But she loves my last name," I say, and smile as my best point comes to mind. "She knows how many connections my family has and would never say no to us dating. She'd have to be happy, even if it was fake."

She shakes her head. "Maybe in public, but when it's just us she'll be furious that I'm dating you. She still blames you for my hair," she says and gives me a teasing look.

"I had nothing to do with that! It was your choice." I laugh.

"Yes, but all she saw was the green dye on your hands. From then on she hated when we spent time together but couldn't put a stop to it because of your parents' connections."

I still remember that day in seventh grade when we got green box dye after school and did her hair in the bathroom sink. It was right after her dad passed away, and she wanted to

control something, *anything* in her life. She mentioned coloring her hair and I—being a middle school boy—thought it was no big deal and that she should do it to be happy. So we told her driver she needed something from the drugstore.

Green was the only bright color in stock that day, so that's what we got. Then we hopped back in the town car and it took us to her house where she enlisted me to help dye her hair. I ended up with hulk-green hands and her with poorly done, sickly green hair. Whitney's face when she saw Sophie...it was the kind of anger a kid doesn't forget.

She was beyond seething, but she didn't say a word to me. She glared at my hands and asked me to go home so she could talk to Sophie. Sophie was grounded for three months and her hair was back to honey blonde after a trip to the salon the next week. I still have a picture saved on an old thumb drive with her smiling sitting on the edge of the bathtub with wet neon green hair.

“You're forgetting that she couldn't ever, and still can't, be mean to me. And she knows I don't like how she treats you, so there's a good chance she's nice to you so that I'll use my connections for her benefit.”

Sophie tilts her head to the side, thinking. I can only hope she says yes. It would help her, and it would help me show her who I am in a different light. Who I *could be* to her. This might be my way around the man ban.

“Let's say I say yes,” she starts, and I resist the urge to grin. I can't look too eager. “This is going to change everything for

the next month. Both of our families will interrogate us and expect us to go to more than just the events together.”

“It’s not like we don’t go to each other’s family occasions anyways,” I point out. “This time we might just have to hold hands during it.” My cheeks burn at the statement.

“Hold hands?” She questions as if we haven’t hugged a million times and weren’t just laying side by side.

“Yeah, Soph. As your boyfriend, I probably should hold your hand.” I grin and she scrunches her nose.

“*Fake* boyfriend, but I guess you’re right. It just feels weird to think about that. Even weirder that we’re planning it out in this way. It won’t mess with us as friends, right?”

“Do you really think our friendship can’t handle a little hand-holding?” Answering her question with a question is the only way I know how to avoid answering her truthfully. Because the truth is, I hope it messes with our friendship. That it flips it upside down and we can have something bigger and better. It feels ridiculous to think that way after so long of ignoring any romantic feelings toward her, but it’s how I feel now.

She smiles and seems to relax a little. “Of course it can. We can handle anything.”

“Meaning?” My toes are clenched so tight in my shoes that I’m worried they’ll start to cramp.

“Meaning ... I want to do it. Let’s fake date.”

I'm finally able to relax, my muscles releasing the tension.
This is it. My chance at winning over my best friend's heart.

Time to be the fake boyfriend to end all fake—and real—
boyfriends.

CHAPTER 5

Sophie Cunningham

“Have you lost it?” Grace whisper-yells, looking at me with wide green eyes. She’d raise her voice if we weren’t in a dress shop currently. We’re looking through the sale racks for gowns to wear to the first ball. I’m hoping if I find one that looks nice enough I won’t have to wear what my mother picks out.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I say, though I’m beginning to second guess that statement. Fake dating my best friend felt logical a few nights ago but saying it out loud makes it sound ridiculous. Grace is the first person I’m telling because I’m afraid of MJ’s honesty and not ready for Lottie’s enthusiasm. She’d think this was one of her romance movies come to life. I thought Grace would be a balance between the two, but now I’m not so sure.

“It’s a huge deal, Soph. You can’t fake date Bennett. So many things could go wrong.” Worry rises in me at her words, but I push it down. It’s beginning to feel like my worries are an overflowing suitcase and I’m sitting on top trying to keep it from flying open.

“Bennett and I can handle this,” I reassure her—and myself—as I look over a long black gown. I can’t tell if it’s cute or made of old curtains. Sighing, I move it aside to look at another dress. This is the third store I’ve been to this week. I don’t want to spend a ton of money because I’ll need four different gowns. Heaven forbid someone repeats an outfit.

“Pretending to be his girlfriend is asking for heartbreak.” Grace pauses, pulling a different black gown out from the rack across from me. “What about this one?”

“I’ll try it on,” I say and take it from her. “Why would I get heartbroken over something fake?” The gown is heavy in the crook of my arm and I know that I’ll probably only be able to hold one or two more before heading to the dressing room.

“Because you’re going to end up wishing it was real. It’s the classic fake dating dilemma.”

“Grace, that’s ridiculous. I don’t feel that way about Bennett.” *Anymore.* I pull down a royal blue dress. I wouldn’t usually choose the color, but it’s better than anything my mother would choose. And I’m getting desperate considering the first ball is in two days. I told my mom I already had a dress, and I dodged all her questions so that I don’t have to show it to her. She’s already bought several gowns in my size, *just in case.*

She sighs. “As much as I’ve told Lottie not to meddle, I’m about to break my own rule.”

I stop looking and turn to her, my brows knit together. “What are you talking about?”

“We all know you have a crush on Bennett.”

My mouth drops open. “I do not!”

“Soph, come on. You spend most of your free time with him. You’re always happy around him. You look at him like he’s the only one in the room.”

I scoff. “You’re delusional. He’s my *best friend*, Grace. Nothing more.” The shop starts to feel too warm all of a sudden.

“Tell me you’ve never had feelings for him.” Grace’s eyes are like X-rays: they can see right through me.

“I-um-” I sputter, and she raises an eyebrow. “Fine. In high school, I had a *tiny* crush on him, but I got over it whenever he left for college. I dated other guys—including Michael—and now there are no romantic feelings for him.” I avoid her eyes and grab another dress then start toward a dressing room.

“So if he came up to you tomorrow and said he was in love with you, you would say what? Sorry, I don’t have feelings for you?” She throws questions at me from behind as she trails me toward the dressing room.

“It sounds like you’re not going to believe my answer if it’s not what you want to hear,” I grumble as I hang up the gowns.

“I’m sorry, that’s not fair of me. I just think you denied your feelings when he came back because you were with Michael. And now you’re not...”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I say sarcastically, and yank shut the curtain to the room. I look in the mirror at my flushed skin

and huff. I felt fine about doing this with Bennett, but now I'm not so sure after talking to Grace. What if she's right?

"I don't want you to get hurt is all. Not to say Bennett doesn't have feelings for you, but still. Even if you both love each other, fake relationships are too messy."

I listen to her with a frown as I get undressed. "I feel like you're projecting your romance books onto us. Bennett isn't even interested in a serious girlfriend. He's never been in a long-term relationship, hence why he can do this with me."

I pull on the first gown, a solid black number with charcoal floral applique on the bodice and tulle as the skirt material. It's a little frilly for my taste but better than most of what I've found. I hold it to me and open the curtain.

"Help?" I ask, turning around so Grace can see the undone zipper. After she helps I step out and walk to a nearby pedestal with a trifold mirror a few feet away. The dress fits well, and it should please my mother aside from the color. No doubt she'll be upset that I'm wearing *mourning colors* to an event. Never mind the fact that plenty of people wear black to galas all the time.

"It's beautiful on you," Grace says from behind me as I shift my hips from side to side to make the tulle skirt sway. Flashbacks to cotillions as a child come to mind, making me grimace. If I didn't have such horrible memories of these kinds of events, I might be able to muster some amount of excitement at getting to dress up and dance.

“I think it’s the best I’m going to find. I need to get ready for work tonight, so let’s just get this one and go.”

Grace helps me unzip it and I shut the curtain to change back into my regular clothes. As I’m sliding off the gown, she speaks up. “What if Bennett wants a serious relationship with you?”

I laugh at her question, but then I’m drawn back to that moment in the kitchen when Bennett said he’s changed from Two-Date-Ben. I shake my head, tossing the memory aside. “I’m on a man ban, remember? And as amazing as I think Bennett is, I don’t know that I want to be in a real relationship with him. He has no experience. I don’t think I could survive a heartbreak by him,” I say honestly. After pulling my oversized band tee over my head, I walk out with the gown slung over my arm.

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about. I think if either of y’all developed feelings the other couldn’t reciprocate, that it would be devastating.”

My chest tightens at the thought of losing Ben. I’ve spent most of my life with him. It was hard enough when he was gone for college and med school. I couldn’t imagine living life without him in it. I hold back these thoughts, trying to formulate some sort of response.

We walk side by side to the front of the store. I place my dress on the counter and smile at the woman behind the register.

“I’m glad you found what you were looking for,” the woman says with a polite smile.

“Yes, me too. I was worried I wouldn’t find a dress in time.” She rings me up and I reluctantly hand over my debit card. A part of me wishes I would have let my mother dress me. At least I wouldn’t be spending three hundred dollars on a dress I’ll only wear once. It makes me sick to think that this is the *sale* price.

“Have a nice day. Thank you for shopping at Bloom Boutique.”

I thank her and then walk out with Grace trailing behind me.

“You’re right that it would be devastating, but I don’t think anything will happen,” I say on our way to Grace’s Jeep parked down the street. “Bennett has never shown any feelings toward me, and if he had them, I’m sure he’d come right out and tell me. He’s only doing this because he thinks we can handle it as friends. And I feel the same way.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Grace says as she opens her trunk for me. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“You sound like a character from a horror movie warning me not to buy a secretly haunted house.” I heave the ball gown into her trunk and then step back so she can close it.

“And you sound like the girl who doesn’t listen and ends up being chased around by ghosts the whole movie,” she counters, making me laugh.

“Touché.”

We climb into her Jeep and right as she's pulling away from the curb, my phone starts to buzz in my lap. Bennett's contact pops up on my screen. I glance at Grace then back down at my phone. *It's just a call with your best friend, nothing to hide.* I nod at my self-talk then answer it.

"Hey, Ben," I say, and Grace turns her head toward me for a moment before looking back at the road.

"How's my fake girlfriend doing on this fine Wednesday?"

I turn my face toward the window as heat rises to my face. Why am I reacting to a simple question like this? Sure the words *my* and *girlfriend* are in the same sentence. But the most important word in that sentence is *fake*. All of Grace's warnings are messing with my head.

"I'm having flashbacks from all the tulle and florals in the boutiques, but I'm okay. I found a dress."

"That's good! The dress part, not the flashbacks," he says with a laugh that makes me smile. "And hey, not all of the events were bad. Remember that time we stole that cake and ate it under the table at Beatrice's party?"

I laugh as the image comes to mind. Us ten years old, hiding under a table in formal wear, eating cake with our hands because we forgot to steal forks. "I remember how blue your teeth were from all that icing," I giggle. I feel Grace's eyes on me, but I ignore her. "And then afterward my mom not speaking to me for like a week."

Emotion threatens to take over the happy memories. It was one of the last events I had my dad to run to when my mom went overboard. I'd hide in his study, and we'd eat chocolates together while he told me stories of his own childhood mischievous acts. Those stories were better than any bedtime storybook.

"My mom made me brush my teeth no less than five times because of that food coloring." Bennett's chuckle brings me back to the present and saves me from the pain of memory lane.

"So, did you need anything?" I change the subject.

"Hm?" I hear the sound of a door shutting.

"You called me," I remind him.

"Oh, I was just checking on you. I know you hate all this southern high society stuff." Warmth overwhelms me. This is why I love Bennett. *As a friend*, just to clarify. He's one of the most thoughtful and caring men I know.

"Thanks, Ben." I can't hide the affection for him in my voice. "I'm okay though. Now that I've found a dress I can breathe easy until Saturday." Even as I say it, anxiety creeps up and forms a tight knot of worry in my chest. I rub the spot, hoping to ease it.

"I know you, Soph. You're going to be holding your breath until after the last event. I'll be by your side, though. We'll get through this together. Even if we have to hide under a table or two," he jokes, and I smile in spite of my anxiety.

“You’re the best fake boyfriend a girl could ask for,” I joke back in an attempt to lighten my own mood.

“That’s my goal.” His tone should be lighthearted but—and maybe it’s just the distortion over the phone— he sounds almost serious. I grab my reusable water bottle from the cupholder and take a sip, trying to calm down. I must be hearing things. “So what is my fake girlfriend wearing?”

My eyes widen and my water goes down the wrong way, forcing me to cough and sputter. Grace looks at me with wide eyes and takes one hand off the wheel to pat my back. *Are you okay?* she mouths, and I nod, coughing up the last bit of water.

“What?” I wheeze out into the phone.

“What are you wearing to the ball? You know, so I can get the right colors and coordinate. Are you okay?”

My eyes are burning from the whole fiasco.

“I’m okay,” I squeak out. “My drink went down the wrong way. I’m wearing a black ballgown with gray accents,” I tell him and fan my face. Grace eyes me warily at a red light.

“I should have known you’d go for a black dress. It’ll make my job easier, but Whitney is probably going to hate it.”

“Hopefully I’ve lowered her expectations enough that she’ll accept me showing up in something other than a t-shirt.”

Bennett’s laugh filters through the phone. “I’ll be by your side the whole night, so she’ll have to go through me to get to you anyway.”

I smile and look out the window again in an attempt to hide it from Grace. I don't think my smiling so much around Ben means anything, but obviously, it does to her.

"Thanks, Ben." My nerves have lessened over the course of our conversation like they always do. Something about Ben puts me at ease. I won't—I *can't*—trade that feeling for the nervousness that comes with a crush. My friendship with Ben is going to stay the same, fake dating or not.

I'll make sure of it.

CHAPTER 6

Bennett St. James

“Am I on speakerphone?” I ask my mom as I throw a pair of gym shorts in my duffle bag. Cordelia St. James, aka Dee, is known for putting me on speaker with the whole family without disclosing that she’s done so. I usually share something mildly embarrassing before I realize it, too.

“No, sweetheart.”

“Because I’m about to tell you something and I don’t need all the cousins and Nana going crazy before I can explain everything.”

“What is it? Is something wrong? Are you in jail?”

I shake my head. The woman jumps to conclusions like no one I’ve ever met.

“Mom, how could I be using my cell phone if I was in jail? I just wanted you to know that I’m bringing a date to the house tonight.”

“A date?! You’ve never brought a girl home before. Oh, I have to call your nana—this is great news! And I’ll need to call

your sister, she's been saying you'll never settle down—"

"Mom! Breathe," I say with a laugh. "Remember what I said about letting me explain?"

I hear a breath released through the speaker. "Okay, I'm sorry. Who is she? Do I know her? I didn't think you were bringing a date. I thought you'd be going to the gala with Sophie this weekend."

"I am." The line is silent and I grin while folding up a white t-shirt to add to my bag. I'm going to pick up Sophie soon so we can make the trip over to Savannah and stay the weekend. It's a few hours from here, so a day trip isn't really an option.

"Finally!" she shouts into the phone, startling me. I drop the shirt I'm holding. "I've been waiting years for you two to figure this out. Have you bought a ring yet? How did you confess your love? Did she tell you first or did you tell her?"

I blink in surprise. That was unexpected. I knew she'd be happy because she loves Sophie, but not *this* happy. "Mom, we're just going on a few dates. Nothing serious. No love confessions or rings." I pick the t-shirt back up and fold it, placing it in the duffle bag.

"You don't casually date your best friend of over twenty years, Bennett. Now, tell me who said 'I love you' first so that I can tell everyone the story!"

I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. "No one has confessed their love. We're going to these events together

and we're going to see how it feels. Sophie just got out of a relationship, she's not ready for serious."

"And what about you?" Her forward question catches me off guard, but I instantly know my response.

"I'm ready." Even if others don't think so. I've changed and grown. I'm ready for something more, especially when it comes to Sophie.

"I see." She pauses, making me nervous. My mom has always been observant. She's the only one I've been worried about figuring us out. I hold my breath waiting for her response. "You're not telling me something. But that's okay. I'll figure it out eventually. In the meantime, I'll be happy that you two are finally taking a step toward each other."

I release the breath I was holding with a *whoosh*. "I'm glad you're happy. Is it alright if Sophie stays at the estate this weekend? You know how things are with Whitney."

"She's always welcome. But I think she should try to spend time with Whitney this weekend. I know she's lonely up in that big house by herself."

"You can talk to Sophie. I'm never going to tell her to spend more time with her mom, though. She's done too much damage."

"I know." Her sympathetic tone surprises me. Mom has never really been fond of Whitney, only putting up with her for mine and Sophie's sake. "I just feel sorry for her is all. I can't imagine losing your father *and* my kids living far away."

I wouldn't wish losing a spouse on anyone, not even Whitney. But Sophie moved away from Savannah because of how she was treated. Otherwise, she might have stayed there.

“She created that distance with Sophie and Carly, you know that. Sophie committed to attending all of these events, which is a big step.” Of course, that step is only because she needs investors for her restaurant, but I'll keep that detail to myself.

“I suppose one step is better than none,” she says, and I have a feeling she's not just talking about Whitney and Sophie. I zip up my duffle bag and sling it over my shoulder.

“Alright, I need to get going so we don't get in too late. I'll let you know when we get close.”

“Drive safe! Tell Sophie we're looking forward to seeing her again.”

“I will, and you tell everyone not to go overboard about us dating.”

“I will ... try.” There's a smile in her voice that is no doubt indicative of the social torture we're going to endure once we get there. We say our goodbyes and then I send a text to Sophie to let her know I'm on my way.

Bennett: The best fake boyfriend ever is officially on the way.

Soph: Ryan Gosling is picking me up?!?

Soph: I might need to change out of my sweats.

I roll my eyes at her joke. Picking up the garment bag holding my suit, I walk toward my apartment door.

Bennett: Haha, very funny. I was going to grab breakfast from Dale's on my way, but now...

Soph: I was just kidding! On the list of greatest fake boyfriends of all time it goes 1. You 2. Ryan Gosling.

Bennett: I'll see you in fifteen. Bacon, egg, and cheese bagel with extra cheese?

Soph: You know me :) thanks, Ben!

You know me. Those words settle down deep and make a nice and cozy home in my chest. I *do* know her, which makes this whole fake boyfriend thing both necessary and frustrating. I want to skip ahead, but I know we need to take things slow. Risking what could be by pushing it is not an option for me.

It doesn't take long to get to the townhouse, but every single minute of it is spent overthinking this weekend. I'm the one who suggested the idea, but now I have no idea how it's going to go. Fake dating my best friend wasn't something I imagined whenever I found myself having feelings for her.

Just treat her like a girlfriend. I try to give myself a simple pep talk but fail. Because here's the thing: I've never had a girlfriend. That stupid Two-Date-Ben nickname exists for a reason. Even if that reason has nothing to do with being a player and everything to do with being too focused on school and work.

I'm not completely incompetent when it comes to romance though. My best friend is a girl, and I have a sister. I've seen all the rom-coms and cheesy Hallmark movies. I've also heard plenty of dating stories that have shown me what not to do and what to do.

I take a steadying breath as I park in the driveway. *You can do this. It's not like she's a stranger. One step at a time.* This self-talk is slightly more helpful, but my hands are still shaking when I walk up to the door. I shove them in my hoodie pocket after knocking.

The door flings open. "Bennington!" Lottie, one of our recently married friends, shouts. I give her a playfully exaggerated scowl. Her nickname for me is based on my wealthy roots and her own imagination. I don't care for it, but I do care for her, so I—most of the time—let it slide.

"Hey, Lottie, how's married life?" I ask as I walk in, fully aware that all of the girls know by now about our fake dating scheme. Sophie told me there was no way she could keep it from them. So diversion is my best tactic to avoid any drama.

"It's great! Callum is the best. He's at the batting cages with Brad right now, having some guy time." She pauses, spearing me with an investigative look. "So I came over here to visit and guess what I learn?" she asks with a too-sweet smile.

"What's that?" I rub the back of my neck.

"Just that you and Sophie are *fake* dating. What is wrong with you?" She hisses and hits my arm. I grab the spot she hit with a frown.

“Nothing is *wrong with me*. I’m helping Sophie achieve her dreams.”

“You’re in love with her! You don’t fake date someone you’re in love with.” Her voice is low and she looks over her shoulder to make sure no one has joined us in the foyer.

“I am not in love with her. Why does everyone keep saying that?”

She rolls her eyes at me like I’m the ridiculous one. “I know you have feelings for her, Bennett. Callum told me about the bachelor party.”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. “Of course he did. He’s weak when it comes to you. I’m never telling him anything ever again.” I pause. “I do have romantic feelings for her, yes. But I’m not in love with her.”

“Either way, this is a terrible idea. You need to tell her how you feel! I know Sophie, and I know she’d want to know.”

“Not to pull rank here, but I’ve known her longer.” I give her a look and she huffs, crossing her arms. “And I know she’s not ready for that kind of bomb right now. We *both* know she’s still recovering from Michael.”

“That’s true,” she concedes. “I just don’t want her to get hurt. Cause you know if you hurt her, we can’t be friends anymore. And I kind of like being friends with you.”

I smile down at her. “I don’t know, it might be worth messing up so I don’t have to hear you call me Bennington anymore.”

She opens her mouth—probably to give a sassy retort—when Sophie comes barreling into the foyer.

“Sorry, sorry!” Sophie says, breathing heavily. “I know I’m making us late. I couldn’t find my silver heels, since I never wear them. So I had to go on an archeological dig in the bottom of my closet.”

Her bangs are disheveled, making me want to reach out and smooth them. I clench my fists in my hoodie pocket against the urge. Her hair is down today, which is a little rare for Sophie since she works in the food industry. The long lavender locks stand out against her sweatshirt. *My* sweatshirt. The article of clothing makes my breath catch. Not to mention her bright eyes and rosy cheeks. She looks beautiful, and I’m not sure how I’m going to survive this weekend. I already want to kiss her and I’ve only been in her presence for maybe a minute. The desire is bound to increase while spending a *whole weekend* with her.

“We’re not in a rush. Your sandwich might be a little cold, but that’s all.” I give an easygoing smile, though there’s nothing easygoing about me right now.

“I don’t think I’ll even care, I’m so hungry.” She laughs then turns her attention to Lottie. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to chat longer, but I’ll try to make time when I come back.” They both hug and Lottie eyes me over Sophie’s shoulder. Her look is a warning. I give her a nod of understanding, hoping that will ease her mind.

They say goodbye and Lottie walks away to go talk to MJ, who apparently is in the midst of a creative streak and can't leave her room until her painting is done. MJ is usually very practical and straightforward, but I know she can have her 'eccentric artist' moments as well.

I take Sophie's bags from her and she gives me a bright smile. The kind that makes me want to give her anything she asks for on a silver platter.

"Breakfast *and* carrying my bags? You might actually beat out Ryan Gosling," she jokes as we walk to my car.

"This is the first of many perks of being my fake girlfriend." I set a bag down to grasp the passenger side door and open it for her. Her eyebrows raise in appreciation, and I count that as a win.

"I'll have to return the favor somehow. Can't have our fake relationship be too one-sided." She slides into the car with a smile that looks almost ... flirty?

"So you won't be playing the indifferent girlfriend part?"

"Does that sound like me?" She looks up and meets my gaze, making me suck in a breath.

"Not at all."

CHAPTER 7

Sophie Cunningham

What on earth am I doing?

I glance over at Bennett as he turns right onto the interstate. He's smiling, the kind of look that would usually put me at ease but now has my stomach in knots. I *flirted* with Bennett. Sure, it was only a line or two, but still.

I've never flirted with him before. Okay, well, there was that one time in high school when I tried to flirt with him to see what would happen ... but he didn't understand what I was saying and just gave me this confused-but admittedly cute-look. My flirting skills were lacking back then, and probably still are considering I just got out of a long-term relationship. Maybe that's why Bennett didn't call me out. He probably didn't even realize it! I hope that's the case.

It's hard not to respond in kind though when he seems to be teasing me in a romantic way. Bennett and I have always teased each other, but not like that. He's talked about being my fake boyfriend a lot lately. Is he just making light of a weird situation? I shift in my seat and try not to look at him again. If

I stare at him too much he'll start asking questions. And since we've been best friends forever, it's hard to hide things from him.

Which is why developing a crush on him again would be awful. I had to tell way too many white lies to get him off the scent of my first crush on him. I *might* have made up a fake guy so that I could say I had a crush and not flat-out lie. Now, almost a decade later, he knows me even better and would know something is off.

"Soph?" Bennett's voice breaks into my spiral and I turn to look at him. His eyes are on the road, but I can tell he's concerned by the downturn of his mouth. "Are you okay?"

See. The man can read me like a book.

"Just thinking about this weekend," I say, hoping he'll believe me.

"I told you I've got your back. You don't have to worry about a thing."

"I know. You told your family?"

"I called my mom this morning. She was really happy about it." He laughs. "I told her not to go overboard, but I'm sure that all of Savannah and the surrounding cities will know by the time we get there."

I shake my head. Dee is one of the biggest overshareers I know. But she also has a huge heart and has loved me like I'm her own daughter for as long as I can remember. It's hard acknowledging that someone who isn't my mom seems to love

me better than my actual mother, but I'm also grateful for her. I think my childhood would have been much worse if not for her taking me in. She brought warmth and happiness into my darkest times, along with Bennett.

"I haven't told my mom yet. Do you think I should before she finds out through the grapevine?" I cringe at the thought of telling my mother I'm dating the one eligible candidate that she would not want me to date. Bennett would be perfect in her eyes if not for his encouragement of me being an individual with a mind of my own. He's too independent for her tastes. She'd prefer it if he was a little more ... *moldable* to what she wants for my life: a guy who does business on the golf course and assents to sending our kids off to boarding school whenever she suggests it.

"You probably should," he says and shoots me a sympathetic look. "She'll be even more upset if she finds out from someone else. And my mom can move pretty quick, so you might want to hurry."

I groan and grab my phone from my tote bag. At least if I get this over with now I can spend the rest of the drive in peace. As much peace as a girl who's headed to a town full of nosy people while fake dating her best friend can have.

My mom answers on the first ring. "Are you on your way?"

Well hello to you too. I lean my head back against the headrest, stifling a sigh. "Yes, Mom, I'm on my way."

"I don't hear any car noises, are you not using your car phone? You're going to get a ticket and it will go on your

record.”

I press my lips together tight for a moment, then respond. “Bennett is driving, that’s why I’m not using my car phone. I won’t get a ticket,” I speak slowly, dreading her reaction.

“I was unaware Bennett was attending the event. I assume you’re staying at Cordelia’s, then,” she says and there’s a tinge of sadness in her pompous tone. For a moment I feel sorry for her, but I know what it would be like to stay with her. I’d go crazy in a few hours. It would hurt both of us more if I stayed and then had to leave because of something she did or said.

“Yes ma’am, I am.” I pause, gather my low reserves of courage, and tell her what I called for. “Bennett is going to take me to the gala, as well. He’s actually going to be escorting me to all of the events,” I say and glance over at my fake boyfriend. He gives me a reassuring smile before turning his focus back toward the road.

“Sophie, I said you needed a date, not a friend. Bennett doesn’t count.” Her tone is clipped, her irritation unmistakable.

“That’s the thing-um-” I clear my throat. “Bennett and I *are* dating. So he’s not just my friend anymore.” The words feel odd coming out of my mouth, almost like someone else is saying them while I lip-sync along. I play with the edge of my-*his*-sweatshirt. When I put it on this morning, it was for comfort, but now I feel like I’m stepping into my role as a fake girlfriend a little too much. It’s hard not to cross lines when I don’t know where they are.

She huffs an annoyed sigh. “I can’t say I’m surprised that this day has come.” My eyebrows shoot up. “Cordelia always said it would. I *am* surprised that you’re dating someone so soon after your breakup, though. Are you sure that’s the best idea?”

I’m thankful that we’re not on a video call, otherwise, my face would easily give away my true feelings. What I want to say is: *You didn’t have a problem with me moving on fast when it came to you choosing the guy.* Instead, I scowl at the windshield and reply, “I’m sure.” I try to make my tone light, but I think my emotions slip through a little based on the look Bennett gives me. My mother stays silent for a moment.

“Very well,” she sniffs. “I will see you both at the ball then.”

“See you there.” She hangs up and I throw my phone back into my bag like it carries some sort of disease.

“Sounds like that went well.”

I groan at Bennett’s sarcastic commentary and reach up to rub my temples. “It went *swimmingly*. Why can’t she support me? Just for once?”

Bennett reaches over and squeezes my knee. The gesture catches me off guard, making my stomach flip. Bennett isn’t usually so physically affectionate. “I’m sorry, Soph. I know you want her support, but some people just don’t know how to give it. You’ve got me though.”

There's a smile in his voice, but I don't look to see it on his face because I'm too busy watching his thumb trace circles on the outside of my knee. Each swirl of his thumb sends tingles up my spine. Warmth spreads from where his hand is and trails up to pool in my stomach. I clench my toes to distract from the feeling. *What is happening to me?* Suddenly, I feel like I'm melting. My face is hot and my heart is pounding. I reach up and twist the knobs on the dash, frantic to get some air going through the car. Different lights blink on and off as I try to figure out the settings in my panic.

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?”

“It's just too warm in here,” I say, my voice coming out weirdly high-pitched. Bennett's hand lifts from my knee and he gently moves mine away from the buttons before pressing a few himself. Cool air begins flowing from the vents, shocking my flushed face back to reality.

“She must have really riled you up,” Bennett says and I nod, but stay quiet. If I speak again I'll probably sound more mouse than human, and give away what's really going on. “Just close your eyes and try to get some rest. It's going to work out.” He gives me another smile, and my heart confuses me by skipping in my chest.

I lean my head back and let my eyes flutter shut. Deep breaths still my erratic heart and bring me back to my senses. It's natural to feel a little off-balance around Bennett right now. Fake dating makes things weird. But what he did was normal, even for a friend. I think. Everything is fine.

I can do this.



I can't do this.

My stomach is in my throat as we pull up to the St. James Estate. The lengthy driveway lined with lemon trees stretches familiar before me. Memories of climbing these very trees to hide from Bennett make my lips lift into a smile in spite of my nerves.

There's a warmth here year-round that I don't think many other homes have. The St. Jameses are like warm apple pie on a crisp autumn morning: sweet and gooey and comforting. My best childhood memories are split between here and my dad's study.

Bennett parks in the circular drive behind a few other cars. My heart picks up speed. I should have known that Dee would invite the whole family to welcome us. Behind the antique French doors ahead is a slew of well-meaning, but overbearing family who love me too much. I'd rather this than the coldness of my own childhood home, but it's still nerve-wracking. Especially since Dee is virtually detective material in her ability to sniff out a lie. It won't be easy to pull one over on this tight-knit family. I bite my lip and consider calling it all off.

"Hey, don't spiral out on me." Bennett's voice tugs me out of my thought process. It's good he spoke up when he did because I'm certainly on the edge of the spiral to end all

spirals. He grabs my hand off my knee, and I turn to look at him.

His eyes meet my own, crinkled at the edges from his encouraging smile. His thumb rubs circles on the back of my hand, sending my stomach swooping once again. Does he know what he's doing?

“We're just going to go in and be ourselves. I know my family is wild.” He chuckles, and it makes me smile. My nerves dissipate with every brush of his thumb. “But they already love both of us. So what if we have to hold hands? We're doing it right now, and it's fine. Right?” Something shifts in his gaze, a flash of vulnerability. He really wants to know if it's okay.

I reach over with my other hand and cover his. “Right. To them, it's something more. But to us, it's just best friends holding hands. Like we did when we were kids.” I think I see his smile falter, but I can't be sure. He's probably nervous, too.

“Yeah, like when we were kids. Except less running away from nonexistent monsters.”

I scrunch my nose at the memory. “It's not my fault that statue in your mom's garden looks like a goblin at night!”

“I wouldn't blame you if you hadn't been in the garden and seen the statue a million times before then,” he says, breaking into laughter that spreads to me. I fall toward him, my head on his shoulder and our hands tangled together. Our laughter fills the car and it's not until it subsides that I realize our

positioning. I jerk my head back, knocking it against my headrest and wincing.

“Are you okay?” Worry replaces his smile as my face twists up in mild pain.

“I’m fine.” I’m about to say we should get out of the car, but the words die in my mouth as Bennett’s hand sweeps under my jaw. His fingertips prod the back of my neck and head gently. He’s not looking directly into my eyes, instead looking above my head. I’m frozen in place, barely able to breathe.

“What are you doing?” I rasp out and he finally meets my eyes, but his hand stays behind my neck. The car is so silent I can hear him swallow.

“I was checking to see if you had a knot. Just the doctor in me, I guess.” He breathes out a laugh.

A loud smack makes us both jump to opposite sides of the car. Outside the window is a smirking Daniel Worthington, Bennett’s brother-in-law, with his hands planted on the hood of the car.

“Quit making out in there and come inside. The whole family has been waiting on y’all,” he says and a low growl of sorts comes out of Bennett, making me whip my head over to look at him. He turns off the car with jerky movements and pushes open the door with more force than necessary.

“Are you trying to give her a heart attack?” He grumbles and slams the door behind him. With shaky hands, I sling my

tote bag over my shoulder and get out of the car. Daniel slings an arm around me and then Bennett.

“Aren’t you two adorable?” He squeezes us together, smushing my cheek against his side. “I thought everyone went crazy when Naomi and I got together, but it’s nothing compared to the excitement around y’all. They’ve been waiting on this moment for years.”

My brows furrow together. *Years?*

“What do you me—” I’m cut off by a cacophony of squeals and aww’s. Out the front door flits Dee, Nana, and Bennett’s aunt Chelsea. They’re all wearing wide grins and bouncing with energy that can only come from a gossip marathon. It’s like espresso to them.

“Oh, we’ve waited so long for you two to open up your eyes!” Nana wrenches me from under Daniel’s arm and pulls me into a death grip of her own. She sways and squeezes and I feel a little like I’m on a ship during a storm being tossed about by the waves.

“You have to tell us everything! Who admitted feelings first? What did the other say? Where was your first date?” Nana’s questions come one after another and with each one, my anxiety rises.

“Now, now, let the girl breathe, Mama. There will be plenty of time to hear their story soon enough.” Dee’s voice is happy but strangely calm. Nana lets me go but immediately pulls Bennett in for a boa constrictor hug. Dee replaces Nana and draws me in for a much less aggressive hug.

“I’ve missed you,” I say to her, and she pats my back.

“Ditto,” she says softly before pulling away. “I do expect a story though. I have been waiting for this match for a while now.” She pinches my chin and I muster up a smile that I’m hoping doesn’t reveal my nerves too much.

Bennett and I didn’t discuss a story. We probably should have, but we did not. Hopefully, they don’t interrogate us police style and split us up. I wouldn’t put it past Dee to do so. Our stories of first confessions of deeper feelings than friendship are bound to be so completely different that we’ll immediately give our fake relationship away.

“I for one didn’t believe it, but I’m so happy it’s happening!” Chelsea bounces excitedly and gives me a half-hug.

“It’s so nice to see you, all of you,” Bennett speaks up. “But it’s been a long drive, so I think we’ll save the inquisition for later.” He weaves through the small group of people to grab my hand. Will I ever get used to my hand in his? It’s this odd concoction of perfectly familiar and yet utterly bizarre.

“I suppose we can let you two rest up before dinner.” Dee smiles at our joined hands. “But just so we’re clear: you two are in *separate* rooms. No funny business.”

My eyes go wide at her implication.

“*Mom*,” Bennett groans and I duck my head to hide my blush.

“I had to be sure you knew,” Dee says, but there’s a smile hiding in her tone. Bennett leads me through the door, past the joyful faces of his family members, and guilt pricks at my heart. We shouldn’t lie to them, but with the way they all chatter I don’t know that they could keep it from my mother. I’m glad I told her before we got here, the news definitely would have reached her by now.

I keep my eyes on the floor as we head toward the guest wing. I have to do this if I want my business to grow. No one will take me seriously without help from my mother, as much as I hate to admit it. And I can’t date another man for real right after what Michael did. It’s just a month or so, and then it’ll all be over. Bennett and I can go back to being friends, and his family will be disappointed for maybe a week. Then everything will be back to normal.

No harm done.

CHAPTER 8

Bennett St. James

My heart is going to jump through my chest. And not because all of the women in my family are watching Sophie and me at the dining room table like we're their favorite southern soap opera— *Love Beneath the Willows*. No, I'm at a post-marathon heart rate because I crossed so many lines in the car with Sophie. I thought a hand on her knee, holding her hand, all of that was fine. But then I had to go feeling up her neck like it was something friends did all the time.

She hasn't said anything, but there hasn't been much time *to* say something. I dropped her off in the guest hall and then booked it to my childhood bedroom to think things over. We had two hours to rest before dinner. Rest for me looked like staring at my ceiling contemplating grabbing Sophie and running away back to Atlanta.

“So, now that we've all had time to settle down, I'm sure I speak for everyone when I say I'd love to hear the story of how this came to be.” My mom smiles from behind her glass of sweet tea. We're all surrounding the large dining table, food

scattered down the middle of it ready to be passed around and devoured.

“Yeah, how did you convince Sophie to finally give you a chance?” My sister Naomi smirks, and Sophie giggles.

“Who says I had to convince her?” I counter and she raises her eyebrows. “Okay, fine, maybe there was a little convincing on my part.”

“I’m not getting any younger over here Bennett, start talking!” my nana commands and everyone laughs. The problem with giving our story though is that we don’t have one. I glance to my left at Sophie, hoping for some assistance, but she just gives me a subtle nod. Okay, looks like I’m the author of our story. Fitting, since I’m the one who talked her into this.

“Well,” I clear my throat. The faces of my family shine with various levels of intrigue. My father is the reserved type, but even he is staring down at us expectantly from his place at the head of the table. “Sophie needed a date for the ball, and I thought it would be a good time to try to be more than friends.” The second half of my sentence comes out sounding like a question. Confusion crosses the multitude of expressions in front of me. My mom raises an eyebrow. I’m crashing and burning.

“That story is drier than the Sahara Desert,” my aunt Chelsea says and Daniel snorts. Panicking, I look to Sophie for support.

She lets out a laugh laced with nerves. “Ben,” she chides me and playfully bumps my shoulder with hers. “You’re leaving out a lot of details. He’s been so nervous to tell all of you,” she says and grabs my hand on top of the table. I stare at her delicate hand atop my own and not for the first time today, my breath escapes me.

“I came to Ben about the ball, and he was just so adorably nervous like he is right now,” she says and squeezes my hand. I lift my eyes from her hand on mine to her pale pink lips tipped up in a smirk—the kind of mischievous look she only wears when pranking someone. “He told me he’s had a crush on me since he left for college and he was just too scared to tell me until now. You should have heard him stuttering so much admitting to it,” she coos. A few snickers from my brother-in-law and uncle mix with the aww’s of my grandmother and aunt.

I fight the urge to scowl, instead twisting my face into a saccharine smile. “Oh yes, I remember now. You were so sweet too, you cried when I told you. Through her tears—” I cough to disguise a laugh. “She admitted she’d had a crush on me since high school.” Her nails dig into my hand, but I grin through the sting.

“It was hard not to tear up at the beautiful *poem* he wrote me.” My eyes narrow at her, but she stays smiling.

“If it’s anything like how he started the story I’d be crying too,” my aunt mutters and Sophie’s lips press together to avoid laughing. I shoot my aunt a look, but she just shrugs.

“What can I say?” I throw an arm around Sophie and squeeze her tight against me. “I’m a romantic when it comes to this one.”

“What a sweet story,” my mom says, her tone skeptical. “But why did you *need* a date for the charity ball, Sophie? Plenty of women go solo to these events.”

Sophie tenses and for a moment I think we’ve been caught. “I didn’t need one. I just said it to see if Bennett would step in as my date.”

Sophie and I are both smiling, but I know hers is fake because deep down she’s mad her prank has backfired. Mine is a smile of victory, but I’m hoping it reads more romantic than that.

“I wouldn’t have thought this is how you two would get together.” My mother’s gaze is searching, and I know eventually she’ll find what she’s looking for. I just have to hope she’ll keep quiet when she does. Our backstory isn’t airtight enough to pull one over on her.

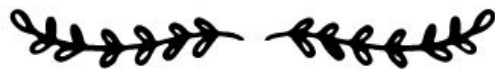
“These things rarely go the way we think,” Sophie says then looks at me, her eyes shining with—false—adoration. The expression undoes me all the same. Only a day into our ruse and I’m already wishing it was real. This does not bode well for me. “I’m just happy Ben and I finally became something more.”

If only.

“We all are,” Nana says then raises her tea. “To Sophie and Bennett, may your friendship blossom into a beautiful forever together.”

Everyone lifts their glasses in agreement. The ice in Sophie’s glass rattles as her hand shakes in the air. I run my thumb over her shoulder to try and comfort her. My stomach tightens at my family’s easy acceptance of a future with Sophie.

After the toast, my sister’s pregnancy becomes the new hot topic, so Sophie and I can breathe easier. I remove my arm so I can eat without hindrance, and the loss of warmth I experience shows me I’m already way too comfortable being close to her.



As soon as the guest bedroom door clicks shut behind us, Sophie is spinning around with narrowed eyes.

“*Tears*, really?” She huffs and crosses her arms. “That was a bit much.”

“You’re the one who said I was all nervous and stuttering! You had half the table laughing at me. All with that little smirk on your lips.” My eyes fall to said lips for a moment, which are currently fighting back a grin. I tear my eyes away to meet her gaze again. “Not to mention saying I wrote you a poem, of all things.”

“You wouldn’t write me a poem? Ryan Gosling would,” she teases. I give her a look that says I’m not impressed with being compared to the guy from the *Hey Girl* memes.

“Ryan Gosling wouldn’t put up with these antics because he’s not your best friend. My family is never going to let me live this down.”

“Fine,” she laughs. “The poem was a little mean of me. But you were sinking like a rock out there. I just threw something together in the moment.”

“We definitely should have discussed our back story before we got here.”

“Yes, we should have. But we made it through.” She falls back on the bed, my sweatshirt scrunching up on her waist, revealing a tempting sliver of smooth skin. “Do you think your mom believed us?”

Dragging my eyes away, I walk over and sit on the edge of the bed with a sigh. “I hope so, but I doubt she’s done with her investigation.”

“I hate lying to them,” Sophie says quietly, making me look down at her. Her lavender hair is splayed around her and her eyes are closed, lengthy lashes resting on her cheekbones. She’d look peaceful if not for the soft furrowing of her brows giving her anxiety away.

“I know, I do too, but it’s all for a good cause, right?”

“Nana said *forever*.” She props up on her elbows, concern splashed across her face. “Are we going to break her heart in a

few weeks?”

My heart warms at her calling my grandmother Nana like she’s her own. That warmth proves her point though. There are more people involved than I originally thought when I suggested this plan. My hope is that by the end of our fake dating ruse, it won’t be fake anymore. But Sophie doesn’t know those intentions, so her concern is warranted.

“She’ll probably be sad for a little while, but she’s strong. Everyone will move on eventually.” *I think*. My family is of the overbearing, attached type, so it’s likely that they will be a little more than just sad at the end of this. If there even is an end.

She pushes herself up so her position matches mine, then looks down at her lap. “Will they hate me?”

My heart softens at Sophie’s concern.

“Soph, look at me,” I whisper and she listens, her glassy eyes meeting mine. “My family could never hate you. I’m pretty sure they love you more than me.”

She sniffs and giggles. “They have invited me to things and forgotten to invite you before.”

“I swear they do it on purpose to humble me.” We both laugh in unison, our somber mood clearing slowly like clouds after a storm.

“You need some humility after getting that position at the university. How did I end up with such a successful fake boyfriend?”

The tips of my ears warm at her compliments.

“My fake girlfriend is pretty successful too. You’re going to need a trophy room if you keep winning all those foodie awards,” I say in return, then capture her gaze again. “In case I haven’t told you lately, I really am proud of you, Soph.” I know she doesn’t hear it from her family, not since her dad passed, so I try to encourage her as much as I can.

“Mush,” she says with a giggle and wraps her arms around my waist in a hug. When we were in middle school, Sophie started saying ‘mush’ in response to any particular compliment or kind word from me that was, well, *mushy* to her. It was her way of deflecting attention, but now it’s code for thank you.

I wrap my arms around her shoulders and she tucks her head under my chin. We’ve had thousands of hugs, and though my feelings have shifted to something more recently, her arms have always felt like home to me. I’m about to press a kiss to the top of Sophie’s head when the door flies open. We jump apart, reliving the car moment from earlier, and whip our heads toward the doorway.

My mom stands there, hands on her hips. “I thought I said separate bedrooms, Bennett.” Her pointed look makes me feel like I’m much younger than I am.

“We were just talking.”

“I’m sure you were, but now it’s time for Sophie to go to sleep and for you and me to chat.” I gulp. Here comes the real test. “Tell Sophie goodnight and meet me in the kitchen.” She turns on her heel and disappears down the hall.

“Good luck,” Sophie whispers with a sheepish smile.

“Thanks, goodnight I guess.” I laugh.

“See you in the morning.”

“If I make it.”

She laughs at my dramatics. I leave, shutting the door behind me, and make my way to what I hope isn't a doomed conversation. My instinct is to stay with Sophie or run out into the garden to hide, but Cordelia St. James takes her *talks* very seriously, so I have to grin and bear it. Or at least bear it.

My mom is pouring milk into glasses when I enter our kitchen. She always said the kitchen is the heart of the home, so she made sure our home had a kitchen big enough to fit most of the family. It makes it less cozy when there are only two people present, but that's a rarity. Though I and my sister have long since moved out, there's always someone staying here or visiting.

“I made red velvet cookies,” she says, nodding toward the plate with the deep red, powdered sugar-coated cookies. They're one of my favorite treats, made from cake mix and rolled in sugar before baking. They're gooey and sugary and terrible for you, but I'd never turn one—or six—down.

“Are they laced with truth serum?” I jokingly ask as I reach for one.

“Do they need to be?” Her singular eyebrow raise says more than words ever could. She's still skeptical, and this

conversation is likely going to determine where her opinion lands.

“Mom, come on.” I take a large bite of a cookie to occupy my mouth. I’m not a liar by nature. Most of my lies were related to sneaking candy as a kid or saying Sophie’s mom was fine with her coming over after school when she most definitely was not. I got away with it often, but I think that was due to my mom letting me more than my own skill.

“Things aren’t quite adding up. Sophie said you admitted to having a crush on her since college.” I nod and take a sip of milk. “I thought we raised you to be a confident young man. Were you really so timid as to not admit your feelings for years?”

I swallow slowly and try to gather my thoughts into a response. “Having feelings for Sophie is more complicated than with any other woman. She’s my best friend. I didn’t want to ruin our friendship.”

My mother surprises me by rolling her eyes. “That’s the oldest excuse in the book! Weak, too. I can’t imagine that you’ve had feelings for her for a decade and said nothing about it.”

“For most of that time I was in college and med school,” I hedge, and this makes her pause.

If this wasn’t for Sophie’s dream, I’d give up and tell my mom right now. I hate dancing around the truth. But this means a lot to Sophie, and beyond my own desire to show Sophie my feelings, I want her to achieve her dreams. I think

she has the ability to do it without her mom's help, but Sophie says otherwise, so I'm going to stick to the plan.

“And then I came back and she was with Michael,” I add, hoping to seal in that thought process. I didn't have romantic feelings for Sophie before I left, but the Michael part is true.

I remember seeing her under his arm for the first time, her bright personality dim. Her smile was half its usual size. Until she saw me ... then she lit up like a Christmas tree. That moment, that smile, opened up something in me that I never paid attention to before. It was like there had been a veil over my heart for years, making it impossible for me to see Sophie as anything other than a friend. But when joy danced across her face at the mere sight of me, that veil was torn away and my feelings were exposed.

“I believe that Michael would have stopped you from saying anything,” Mom says. “You'd never intrude on someone's relationship.”

No matter how much I wanted to. I spent months holding in semi-violent thoughts toward him. He had her wrapped around his finger and knew it. Then he broke her heart and left her behind to feel less than who she is. My fingers grip the edges of the counter just thinking about it.

“It was hard not to, but yes, I had to resist. Then this charity ball came up, and it brought us together.” I yawn, exhaustion starting to sink in after the day's drive and commotion. Tomorrow is likely to be a long day as well, and the cozy

pillows and quilts in my old bedroom call out from down the hall.

“There are still quite a few things that aren’t making sense, but tomorrow is a big day. I’m helping with the silent auction part of the ball, and I need rest as much as you do. Don’t think you’re in the clear yet,” she warns, pointing a manicured finger at me from across the island.

“Yes, ma’am. Are you at least going to be happy for us?” I keep my tone light.

“Of course! I’m over the moon that you two are together, but I’m going to be on alert. Relationships are complicated enough without playing games, Bennett.”

I sigh. “I know, Mom. I know.”

As I walk to my bedroom after another cookie and downing my milk, I can’t help but consider her words. I don’t think I’m playing a game, but there are a lot of moving pieces here and we haven’t even made it to the first event yet. I know we’re adults, and our friendship has years of strength behind it, but the worry about what this could do to us pricks at my conscience nonetheless.

I’ll just have to be careful, I think. Careful with our plan and with my heart.

CHAPTER 9

Sophie Cunningham

When I was nine, I told my mom that I wanted to be an actress. She looked down at me and said, *I don't think you have what it takes, dear*. I resented her for quite some time after that. She squished my childhood dreams like a bug under her Louboutin heel. Now, as I look at my reflection in the vanity mirror before me, I'm beginning to think she might have been right.

What was I thinking agreeing to this? I push a faux diamond stud into my ear and sigh. I've been avoiding Bennett and his family all day. Dee will likely scold me later for not spending enough time with her, but I couldn't face any of them. I snuck out of the house and took Bennett's car to a coffee shop, telling him on my way out that I needed to do some *business things*. Judging by his look of disbelief, my vague lie didn't fool him.

I was desperate for time outside of this house. The one that's filled with memories of me and Bennett and his family who thinks we're going to live happily ever after. So I might

have scrolled Pinterest and listened to true crime podcasts in a cafe until it was time to prepare for the gala. As soon as I got back, I locked myself in the room I'm staying in and started getting ready as slowly as possible.

My phone chimes on the vanity table and I read the message that's come in.

Lottie: How's your mission coming along, Soph?

Before I can respond to my friend's message, more come into our roommate group chat. Even though Lottie moved out, we'd never kick her out of the group chat. She's one of us, even though we have to share her with Callum now.

Grace: Have your feelings gotten mixed up yet?

Lottie: Have you kissed?!

MJ: Don't forget the man ban.

I take a deep breath, gather my wits, and type out a response.

Sophie: This isn't a mission, it's just a gala. There are no feelings to get mixed up. We have NOT kissed, why would you think that?? And the man ban is top priority!

I've now added lying to my best friends to my list of awful deeds. It feels like all my feelings toward Bennett have been thrown into an electric stand mixer on high speed. I'm not sure if they're going to come out more like cohesive dough or a crumbly mess. All of his little touches and secret smiles have gone straight to the part of my brain that overanalyzes. The part that has nothing better to do than keep me up replaying

his thumb making circles on my knee or his hand on the back of my neck in my hair.

It makes no sense to get caught up in Bennett's actions though. He doesn't want anything real with me. If he did, he'd say so. But even if he did tell me, I'm not sure what I'd do about it. This year is supposed to be about me. I can't get caught up in a whirlwind relationship with my best friend of all people. Especially since he has no relationship experience. It would be like setting my fragile heart in the middle of the Atlanta interstate and hoping it doesn't get run over.

Lottie: Boo, you're no fun. Couples kiss, you know, even of the fake variety. Grace, back me up with your romance novel expertise.

Grace: This is true. All fake couples share a kiss at some point. You're bound to.

I swallow and twist my earring nervously. I can't kiss Bennett. I'd never be able to look at him again.

MJ: If you kiss him, you'll break the terms of the man ban.

Sophie: I'm not breaking the terms. No kissing will be happening. Just attending a ball together as a fake couple, that's all.

Lottie: We'll see...

I turn my phone on 'Do Not Disturb' and throw it onto the bed. I need to hide from all my friends, or else I might call this whole thing off before I can even slip on my gown. It's almost

time to leave and I'm sure Bennett will be knocking on the door any second, but my motivation is waning. Maybe I don't need to expand my business after all. I can live with one successful food truck. Who needs dreams, anyway?

I'm chewing the lipstick off my bottom lip when a knock sounds at the door.

"Soph, are you almost ready? I know Whitney isn't a fan of tardiness," Bennett says, sounding like he couldn't care less about my mother's opinion on punctuality.

I shake my hands in front of me, trying to dispel my nerves.

"Soph." His voice is gentle and slightly muffled through the dark wood door. "I know you're nervous, but it's going to be alright. You did great last night. We just have to do that again."

My anxiety dissipates some at the sound of his soothing voice.

"Okay," I respond quietly.

"Okay as in you're going to come to the ball? Or okay as in you're jumping out the window right now and you don't want to alert me?"

I giggle and shake my head.

"I'll be out in a minute," I say through my laughter.

"I'll be here."

The idea of Bennett being right outside of the door while I'm changing shouldn't cause my palms to sweat, but it does. I silently thank the Lord that the store had a black dress because

I have a feeling that I'm going to be warm most of the night. Stress sweat isn't the most glamorous thing.

I shimmy into the dress and I'm able to get it up most of the way. I reach around, trying to grasp the zipper to pull it the rest of the way, but all I do is scratch my upper back. Everything important is covered, but the dress still isn't fully zipped. My hands try once more, my breathing heavy as I twist myself into an awkward pretzel woman. Nothing works, and I huff in anger at the ridiculous dress. T-shirts don't give you these problems. Leggings definitely don't. Why can't they make gowns that are easy to zip?

I look at the door, nerves settling in my stomach. I need help. With a raging blush heating my face, I open the door. Bennett springs off the wall he was leaning on and blinks at me, taking me in from head to toe. If I wasn't blushing before, I am now.

“Could you-um help me zip this the rest of the way?” I try to make the question sound casual, but my words come out stilted.

“Sure, I can do that.” He clears his throat and adjusts the tie around his neck before following me into the room. I watch in the mirror as he steps up behind me. He looks unbearably handsome in his black tux. It must have been made for him, because it fits his lean figure perfectly, showing off his love of running and swimming. He wore formal wear to Lottie's wedding last year, but I was too busy having my heart broken to notice how good he probably looked.

His knuckles brush my upper back, making me shiver.

“Sorry,” he whispers while grasping the zipper. I stay silent as he tugs it upward. His eyes rove over our shared reflection and I follow their path. The top of my dress is fitted, stopping at my hips before flaring out into layers of black tulle. The fabric brushes the ground, hiding the silver heels I’m wearing. “You look beautiful, Sophie.” His voice is gravelly, his gaze intense.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I whisper. Something in his eyes shifts. *Is that...desire?* It can’t be. He opens his mouth to say something when the sound of conversation floats into the room. Everyone must be on their way out. “Let’s go so we’re not late,” I say and he nods, but looks as if he wants to say more.

Usually I’d stop and push him to tell me what he’s thinking, but I don’t know if I can handle it tonight. My brain is already a cocktail of indecision and anxiety, I can’t add to it. So instead, I take my best friend’s outstretched hand, and head to the ball.



“Are you ready?” Bennett asks, his hand warm and comforting around mine. We’re currently standing outside of the manor where the ball is being held. Bennett hands his keys to the valet. Great, now we’re stranded. If we need to escape, we’ll have to wait on someone to return the car to us.

“Nope.” My stomach churns and has me wondering if my panini from lunch might reappear soon.

“Just breathe, okay? I’ve got you, and I’m the best fake boyfriend there is, remember?” He squeezes my hand, grinning down at me. I give him a nod and he responds by gently tugging me toward the door.

Two bored-looking men flank the ornate, oversized doors at the front of the manor. When our feet touch the top step, as if on cue, they open the doors for us. Golden light cascades into the cool night and beckons us inside. The skirt of my dress swishes softly as I walk hand-in-hand with Bennett. Inside, the manor is lit with hundreds, possibly thousands of candles. From far away, I can’t determine if they’re real or fake. I wouldn’t put it past the host to use all real candles. It’s warm enough in here to feel as though they did.

“I don’t see your mom,” Bennett says into my ear. His breath near my neck sends a chill through me.

“I don’t either.” And I’m relieved. Maybe I’ll have some time to gather my wits before heading into war.

Bennett leads me through the clusters of people into the ballroom where the main event is taking place. A large chandelier hangs down from the tall, tiered ceiling. It too is lit by candles instead of bulbs. Swathes of sage and gold fabric decorate the tables, along with tall orchids as centerpieces. Men relax at the tables while the women stand nearby, likely unable to sit comfortably in the dresses they’ve chosen.

Other less jaded women might enter this room and be awed by the glitz and glamour. I, unfortunately, see past it. The room is beautiful, but I know everyone here—including me—has an agenda. So underneath the glossy smiles and champagne glasses lies a world of deceit, and I'm sick to my stomach thinking I'm a part of it tonight.

“How about a drink?” Bennett's voice rips me from my study of the room.

“That would be wonderful. I think my throat is drying out from all the perfume.” I laugh.

“Why don't you find us a table and I'll go get some refreshments?”

“Okay, sounds good.” He walks off toward the series of food tables across the room and I watch him go for a moment before turning my attention to the tables around me. I spot one hidden away behind a pillar and grin. Perfect. This will be my base hiding spot for the night. I'll venture out when I need to, then retreat whenever necessary.

I've almost reached my safe house—er, table—when a voice stops me in my tracks.

“Sophie, you're late,” my mother says. Anxiety ripples through my body at the sound. *Here we go.*

“Hello, mother,” I say and turn to face her, hoping my pasted-on smile is convincing.

“Perhaps I should have made being punctual a part of our little deal.”

“I wasn’t late, so it would be fine if you did.”

Her lips pinch together at my defiant words. This has been a recurring problem in my life. I never know when to play along or rebel. It makes more sense to choose one method, but I’ve never been a decisive person.

“Yes, well, it seems as though you’ve chosen to undermine our family name in another way.”

My forehead wrinkles in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

“Yes, you should be. Wearing that hideous out-of-season dress that makes you look like you’re headed to some sort of elaborate funeral. I mean, really Sophie, *must* you wear black so often? The color washes you out and makes your purple hair stand out so much more. It’s not fit for someone carrying the Cunningham name.”

Any smidgen of confidence within me has been erased. Part of me knows she’s being ridiculous, but the other part is staring down at my hands wondering if black *does* make me look too pale. Not to mention the wonderful call back to what Michael told me the day of our breakup: *You’re not marriage material. You have purple hair and work in a trailer.*

An arm slides around my waist and soft lips are pressed against my temple, causing a burst of electric tingles to flicker across my skin. “Sorry I took so long, beautiful, there was a crowd,” Bennett says, startling me. I look up at him, and the sweetness in his gaze takes my breath away. *Fake, this is fake*, I tell myself, *but what was that kiss?* Unable to handle the emotions rising like steam inside me, I turn back toward my

mother. Her mouth is set in her signature scowl. I'm sure the expression would leave many wrinkles if she didn't get Botox done often.

"Here's your champagne." I take the chilled flute glass from him. "Now, what did I miss?" he asks, looking between my mother and I.

"Nothing at all," she says calmly. "I was merely telling Sophie that her dress suits her personality quite well." The disdain in her tone is unmistakable, but her words themselves aren't unkind.

"It does, doesn't it? A gorgeous gown for the most wonderful woman I know." He smiles down at me and it takes all I have not to tear up right here in the ballroom. My mother turns to grab a champagne flute from the server's tray walking by. Taking advantage of her look away I mouth *mush*, and his grin widens. My mother turns back toward us, her eyes sharp and watchful.

"Thank you," I say quietly as I avert my gaze, unsure of how to respond to either of their sentiments.

"You two seem rather close. I was under the impression this was new." My mother picks at an invisible piece of lint on her sleeve.

Bennett's arm moves up to my shoulders and tucks me further into his side. I wrap one arm around his back while the hand holding my champagne stays in front of his torso. He feels solid and steady, like an anchor in the storm that is my life right now.

“We’ve waited a long time for this moment, so it feels less new than it actually is.”

“You’re serious, then,” she says, her shrewd eyes observing us carefully like a jungle cat, ready to pounce on the first sign of insecurity.

“We’re taking things day by day,” Bennett replies smoothly. I wonder where he gained his confidence. This is no longer the flummoxed, nervous Ben from last night. He’s sure and unphased, his green eyes hard and unyielding against the force that is Whitney Cunningham.

My mother opens her mouth to speak again when her name is called. A woman at a table nearby is waving her over. My mom flashes her a polite smile, then sashays toward Bennett and me.

“I need to make my rounds, but I’ll be nearby if needed.” Translation: *I’ll be watching you*. She slinks away to a conversation of faux laughter and alternative motives. I take a sip of my champagne, but it doesn’t sit well in my nervous stomach, so I set it down on the table next to us.

“I’m sorry I left you. I should have known she’d take advantage of you being by yourself.” Bennett wraps his other arm around me in a full hug, then kisses the crown of my head. My nerves twist my stomach into knots. Lines are already blurring and I feel as though I drank a whole bottle of champagne instead of one meager sip.

“It’s okay,” I manage to get the words out. “You just left me in a lion’s den expecting me to come out without a scratch.”

He pulls back, looking down at me with a frown. “What did she say?”

“That we were late.”

“We were not.” I give him a look that says I know. “What else?”

“That my dress makes me look like a corpse bride.”

His eyes flash in anger. “She said that?” The low growl of his voice makes goosebumps spread on my arms.

“Essentially. Does my dress make me look pale?” I wouldn’t call myself insecure, but I think even the most confident woman can be knocked down by her own mother’s comments. So yes, I’m fishing for compliments in the sea of Bennett, but I don’t think it’s a big deal.

“Sophie, don’t let her get to you. I’ve already told you how stunning you look. We may be faking our relationship, but there is nothing fake about your beauty tonight.”

I take in a breath, surprised by how forward he’s being. “I’ll try not to let her get to me,” I say instead of acknowledging his compliments.

“Good girl.” He grins and pulls me in once more. His strong arms and steady heartbeat settle me back down, making me smile into his chest. Maybe tonight won’t be so bad after all.

CHAPTER 10

Bennett St. James

This evening with Sophie is a unique kind of torture. It wouldn't be so bad if she wasn't so achingly beautiful. The way her dress fits her makes me want to place my hands in the dips of her waist and pull her close constantly. I may have taken advantage of that opportunity more than once tonight already...

Everything about her is enticing. Her gray eyes are enchanting under the dim candlelight. They draw me in, like a smoke signal made just for me. Those same eyes catch mine from a few feet away. An investor's wife is talking to Sophie, and I'm acting as her way out. Her charcoal nail polish glints as her fingertips reach up and gently twist her earring. *That's my cue.*

I step up to them. "Excuse me, Mrs. Lordale, but I need to steal my girlfriend away. We haven't had a chance to dance yet," I say in my most respectful tone. The older woman smiles and pats my arm.

“Oh to be young and in love.” She sighs happily. “I miss those days.”

“Maybe you can find your husband and have him take you for a spin,” I say, and she glares off in the direction of a group of men holding whiskey glasses and laughing loudly.

“I’m afraid my husband values conversation with colleagues more than dancing these days.”

“Then later on I can dance with you myself. We can make him jealous,” I say with a playful wink that makes her blush and pat her silver hair.

“You hold onto this one, Sophie dear, he’s liable to get snatched up.”

Sophie laughs. “Yes, ma’am, I will.”

I lead her onto the dance floor. A languid jazz song is being played by a band nearby. We both learned various forms of dance when we were younger, so it doesn’t surprise me when Sophie falls in step easily as I lead her around the floor.

“Since when did you become so smooth?” she asks before I spin her out slowly, then back into my arms.

“Is that a compliment?” I ask with a smirk, making her roll her eyes.

“It’s me marveling at how you’re able to fake things in front of my mother but can’t string together a sentence in front of yours.”

“I strung together a sentence or two,” I defend and she laughs, the sound as bubbly as the champagne being served tonight.

“I saved us last night and you know it.” She gives me a look, daring me to defy her. I have the urge to do it once more just to see how she reacts, but I resist. “So what changed?” she asks.

I maneuver us around a couple who might have had too much to drink, based on their sloppy footwork and dazed faces. “I had time to think, for one.” Her head bobs as if she understands. “And the words came easier when I knew you needed me. I hate how your mom treats you.”

Sadness washes over her features, shadowing the brightness her laughter had caused. “Thank you for saving me. I wish I didn’t need it so much. She just knows exactly how to cut me.” Her dress brushes against me as we continue moving about the dance floor. Other couples are around us, but they fall away whenever I look at Sophie. She commands the room and doesn’t even realize it.

“I’m sure it’s hard, especially since you spend most of your time avoiding her.”

“I thought it would get easier as I got older, but in some ways, I still feel like a little girl under her thumb. This investor dilemma just proves that even with all the work I did, I can’t get away from her influence.”

Sensing that we need some more privacy, I guide us to the edge of the dance floor. “Are you sure you can’t get investors

some other way? As much as I enjoy being your fake boyfriend, we could have avoided these events altogether if there was another way.”

“The few offices I went to were quick to dismiss me, citing my lack of experience. I have the experience though, I’m just not old and proper like they want.”

Our movement slows to a simple sway in place. I look down at her, wracking my brain on how I could help. “Could you try some more? I could—”

She cuts me off, hurt in her eyes. “Bennett, this is the only way. No one wants me for me in this world. I’ve tried and it didn’t work. I appreciate you believing in me, but there are certain things that are just facts of life.”

I frown down at her. I can see pain all over her face, marring her usually sunny disposition. I want to push her, to show her she’s capable of more, but I don’t want to hurt her. I grew up in a loving family who encouraged me, but Sophie didn’t. So I have to be careful with how much I push because I could end up sounding like her mother accidentally.

“Okay, I won’t push anymore.” *Tonight*. “I’ll just be your smooth, way-better-than-Ryan-Gosling fake boyfriend.”

She laughs again and knowing I caused it is like the first sip of coffee in the morning. It makes me feel alive...and want even more.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re beautiful,” I counter, making her eyes widen a touch.

“You’ve said that a lot tonight.”

Our movement picks up along with a change in song. I lead us around the floor once again.

“Am I not supposed to say those things about my girlfriend?” I spin her away, then pull her back, this time closer than before. “It wouldn’t be believable if I neglected to compliment you.”

She tilts her head up to look at me, questions swimming in her eyes. “I suppose it wouldn’t. I feel as though I haven’t been the best fake girlfriend to you in that regard.” My heart picks up speed as her eyes seem to take me in. “What can I do to make it up to you?” I can think of a lot of things, none of which would be okay for *friends* to do.

“Make me dinner this week, and we’ll even out the score.”

She smiles up at me, and I have the urge to give her the world. It’s sudden and unsought but present all the same. My feelings are progressing at lightning speed, and I don’t know how to slow myself down. If Sophie does decide she wants to date me for real, I’ll likely already be in love with her by the time she even thinks about us that way.

“So now we’re keeping score?”

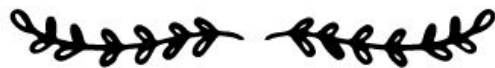
“Naturally,” I say with a grin. “And you’re losing.”

“I’ll have to see what I can do about that.”

“You should know, I’m terribly competitive.”

“You act as if I don’t know you. As if knowing you isn’t exactly how I’ll beat you, and I’m *going* to beat you.” Her tongue flicks out and licks her bubblegum pink lips, stirring desire deep within me.

This talk is all fun and games to her, nothing serious, but my heart is racing all the same. Flirting with Sophie is more than fun to me, it’s addicting. She’s a wildfire and I’m drawn to her blazing light. I know I’m going to get burned, but I’d rather be consumed by her than barely warm next to anyone else.



“Shhh,” I whisper to a giggling Sophie as we ransack my family’s pantry for snacks. You’d think we got into the champagne, but no, we’re drunk on success tonight. Sophie managed to woo some potential investors into reading her portfolio, and we both managed to make everyone around us think we were a happy couple. It wasn’t hard, considering we are one, even if ‘couple’ is a loose term right now.

“Do you remember doing this as kids?” She boosts herself up onto the counter in a seated position facing me, her ball gown puffing out around her.

“Of course I do. *Someone* was always too loud, waking at least one of my parents up and forcing us to hide.” I hand her a bag of peanut M&Ms from the bottom of the pantry while she giggles. The candy is in Christmas packaging, but it’s only

February so it should be safe to eat. Assuming it was from *this* Christmas. I also find a bag of—likely expired—gumballs and set them next to her. If anything, I’m helping my mom clean out her pantry.

“You were always making faces at me, so I couldn’t hold back my laughter!” She kicks one of her legs up, trying to jab me, her bare foot poking out from under the dress. I dodge the attack and smirk.

“What’s your excuse now?”

She shrugs, throwing an M&M in her mouth. “I’m just happy, I guess.”

Warmth bursts through my chest. “That’s good, Soph. I want you to be happy.”

Her eyes lock with mine and I feel a tug within me. Is this a moment? It feels like a moment—

A hard object pelts my cheek and I blink in surprise. Sophie giggles uncontrollably, falling to the side slightly.

“Did you just throw candy at me?”

She continues laughing and shakes her head, her lavender hair swishing around her face. She took it out of the updo on our way back here, complaining that the pins were hurting her scalp. It’s slightly wavy from the twist it was in, but it looks soft and tempting enough to run through my fingertips.

“You should have seen your face,” she wheezes as she’s consumed by laughter.

I glare playfully at her and cross the kitchen until I'm right in front of her legs hanging down. My hands find her waist, but instead of lingering, I begin to tickle her. She gasps and then falls into a fit of hysterical giggles, hitting me and pushing me with comically low force.

“Stop” -she gasps- “it!”

“You have to reap the consequences of your actions, Soph. How else will you learn?”

She keeps hitting me-if you can even call it hitting. Her sweet laughter fills the empty kitchen and my heart.

A throat clears, making me whip my head toward the sound. My mom stands in the doorway, her arms crossed, the faintest hint of a smile on her face.

“We're in trouble,” Sophie whispers, her breath fanning my cheek. It's then that I notice my hands are still on her waist, and I'm leaning way too close to her. Except, we're dating, so according to my mom's expectations this is normal ... I don't move.

“I missed waking up to this,” my mom says, leaning against the doorframe. “You're not as good as you used to be though, you didn't hear me coming.”

“I forgot to listen for you.” I breathe out a laugh.

“I expected to get in here to find crumbs on my counter and pretending that you two hiding in the pantry meant I didn't see you.”

“You knew we were in there?!” Sophie exclaims, making my mom laugh.

“Of course I did, but I trusted you both, so I let it slide.”

“Why did you keep up the charade?” I ask. I sort of suspected she knew. It was strange that we never got caught.

“I figured you two had more fun hiding than if I told you it was okay. You always ended up going to bed after I came to catch you anyway. It got to the point where I’d stay up reading, then when I got tired, I’d come to find you.”

“I should be mad at you for ruining my childhood illusions, but I love you too much,” Sophie says, and my mom gets that look that happens when she’s trying not to cry. Spoiler alert: she always ends up crying.

“I love you too, sweet girl. I’m happy you and Bennett are together, even if I think something is amiss.”

I feel Sophie tense beneath my fingertips.

“Why would anything be amiss?” Sophie’s bold question surprises me, but I’m curious about where my mom’s head is, too.

“No reason.” She waves her hand in dismissal. “It’s been a long night, I’m probably speaking nonsense. You two try to keep it down if you stay out here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sophie and I say in unison, watching her leave.

After she's out of the kitchen, we turn our heads to face each other. Except I'm still close to Sophie, my hands on her waist. Our noses brush and I freeze. Her eyes are wide and dark in the low light of the kitchen. I glance down at her lips, which are slightly parted. Her breath comes out in little puffs against my skin, smelling of candy. I wonder if she'll taste sweet, too.

My pulse is thrumming in my ears. *What if I closed the distance right now?* I meet her eyes again. Not a word is breathed between us, and I bet if one of us spoke we'd come close to brushing lips. Heat radiates off Sophie where I'm holding her. I lift a hand off her waist, intending to reach up to cup her jaw. The movement makes Sophie startle a little, and she shifts slightly.

A sound akin to a thousand marbles hitting the tile floor makes me step back. When I do, my dress shoes step right onto the source of the sound: scattered gumballs. I lose my balance and wave my hands in the air like a tightrope walker trying to stay upright.

"Ben!" Sophie exclaims as I fail in my attempt to stay standing, sliding awkwardly to the ground. The cold tile mixed with the candy feels terrible on my tailbone, making me groan. Sophie moves off the counter carefully, then kneels beside me, her dress like a tulle blanket over my legs.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be alright," I grit out. My pride is hurt more than anything else. I was about to kiss my best friend, and now I'm

on a kitchen floor with gum smashed into my best suit. I guess my ability to be smooth ran out at the gala.

“Why don’t you go get cleaned up and lay down? I can sweep up the mess since it was my fault. I think my dress knocked the package over.”

I push myself onto my knees, then to standing. Pain radiates from the spot that first hit the ground, and I’m sure I’m going to have an ugly bruise there tomorrow.

“I don’t mind helping clean,” I say, even though I want nothing more than to hide in my room and pretend none of this happened.

“Don’t worry about it. Go rest.” She pats my shoulder. I give a weak nod and then turn to go. “Hey, Ben?”

I turn over my shoulder to see her biting her lip. “Yeah?”

She wrings her hands together. “Nothing! Just, uh, hope you sleep well. It’s a long drive back home tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Soph.” I turn back and head toward my room down the hall.

I wonder what she was going to say.

CHAPTER 11

Bennett St. James

I rake my hands through my hair, letting out a frustrated growl as I lose focus on my paperwork *again*. It's impossible to get anything done when this past weekend is all I can think about. I didn't sleep last night, because every time I closed my eyes, I thought of Sophie. Her soft skin as I pulled up the zipper of her dress, her fingers toying with her earring whenever she was nervous, her breath on my face when we almost kissed. Rather, when I *think* we almost kissed.

That moment has been the real sleep-stealer. She didn't move away when our noses brushed, but she also didn't move any closer. Was she in shock, or did she feel what I was feeling? And then there's the fact that I could have sworn she was going to say something before I left the kitchen. I wish I could know what would have happened if the situation had gone differently. What it would look like if I had seized the moment with her.

I'm ready to confess the truth, and we've only gone to one event. I don't know if I can make it through another ball

pretending that I like her while actually liking her. It's driving me up the wall. Every second I spend with her is a second spent in agony because I want to kiss her and can't. I haven't been able to talk to anyone about it either, because our friends are too nosy and protective of Sophie. They won't be unbiased in their advice on whether we should be more than friends or not.

I push my laptop away with a groan. This is pointless. I'm not getting anything of importance done. If I wasn't brand new on the job, I might try to leave early, that's how scattered I feel. My eyes are drawn to the cluster of three frames on the edge of my desk. In one, Sophie stands with my family in front of the Christmas tree. She's got a giant grin on her face and has bunny ears up behind my youngest cousin Kira's head. The other photo is of my mom, dad, sister, and Sophie standing with me on the day I graduated Harvard. Sophie is almost smiling bigger than me in that one. The last one is of just me and Sophie on the day her truck made it on a local morning show. I'm looking down at her while she beams at the camera.

Most of my memories are tangled up with Sophie. Even when I was gone, my favorite memories are when she'd send packages or we'd stay up all night talking on the phone. A part of me is scared that these memories will sour if things go wrong with her. It makes me not want to risk anything. But I also know I can't continue like this; it wouldn't be fair. It's hard to know the right timing, though, whenever I'm not even sure if she feels anything more than friendship for me.

I let my head fall onto my cherrywood desk, feeling hopeless. After a moment of moping, the sound of heavy footsteps coming into the room makes me straighten. Coach Bash stands in front of me wearing a bemused expression.

“Hey, Coach Bash, how can I help you?” When the words rush out of me, he chuckles.

“I was coming to ask if you wanted to grab lunch together, and I’m glad I did. You look like you need to talk.”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Is it that obvious?”

“I heard you groaning from down the hall, then walked in to find your head plastered to your desk. Those are some strong indicators of a man in need of conversation.” He tucks his hands into the pockets of his Georgia Thrashers jacket, the kind that they only give out to the coaching staff.

“You’re right, I do need to talk. So I guess lunch would be good.”

“We could go to the campus diner. I know it’s not the best, but it’s close by.”

The diner is as a diner should be: greasy, sugary, and mediocre for someone sober. He and I have gone to a few of the campus restaurants for lunch since I started working here, and the diner isn’t my favorite, but it doesn’t matter that much today with how nervous my stomach is.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to eat anyway, so that sounds fine.”

“That bad, huh?”

I get up, pull on my windbreaker, and start to follow him out. “It’s about a girl,” I start, and he laughs.

“Isn’t it always?” We exit the office building and he leads the way to the diner. “Did you mess up with your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” At least not a *real* one. “But I’d like her to be mine.”

He looks at me, confusion threading his brows together. “Who’s that girl in all of the photos on your desk? Your sister?”

“No, that’s the girl.” I sigh as we walk up the ramp to the diner. “Sophie, my best friend.”

“I see,” he says as he opens the door for both of us. The smell of coffee and grease hits me as soon as I walk in. “So you’re in love with her and don’t want to hurt your friendship?”

“Not exactly.”

We slide into a slightly sticky booth and peel apart even stickier menus to choose our food. A waitress comes over and takes our drink orders, interrupting our conversation.

“So, what is it then?”

“I started falling for her while she was dating someone else, but I couldn’t do anything because I didn’t want to ruin their relationship.”

“Good man,” he says, and I nod.

“Thanks. It was especially difficult to be good when the guy was a Class-A jerk. But I managed, and then they broke up last year around Christmas. Now she’s afraid of being hurt again. She even said she’s not going to date this whole year.”

I leave off the fake dating part for now, unsure of how he’ll take it. He scratches the light scruff on his face, looking down at the menus instead of me.

“A year without dating? That’s rough.” He laughs lightly. “Do you think you could wait?”

“I could but things have gotten more complicated recently, making it even more difficult.” I take a deep breath in, but before I can tell him, the waitress is back to take our orders. Sebastian orders enough food to explain why he’s as broad as he is, while I order a plate of pancakes I’m hoping I can finish so I’m not wasteful.

Sebastian eyes me expectantly from across the table once the waitress leaves. I take a long drink of water before speaking up again.

“We’re fake dating,” I admit, making his eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“What? What does that mean?”

“I’m pretending to be her boyfriend, essentially. Sophie needed a date to a few events to please her mom, and I thought it would be a good way to show her I’m boyfriend material. But after our first event over the weekend, I feel like I’m

spiraling. I have no idea how to manage all this pretending with my own feelings.”

Sebastian sits back in the booth, crossing his arms with a pondering look. After a few beats of silence, he straightens.

“Just tell her how you feel,” he says with a shrug, as if it’s the easiest thing in the world.

“What? No, no, I can’t just tell her. Did you not hear the whole *she’s heartbroken and swore off men* part?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “I heard you, and *I* say be straightforward. Let her know your intentions and see what happens from there.”

Our food gets delivered and he dives into his giant stack of French toast right away.

“What if she responds poorly though?”

He looks out the window as he swallows his bite. “Has she given you any indication that she might have feelings for you?”

I push the side of my fork into my warm pancake stack, butter and syrup melting over the side. Flashes of moments from the past week come to mind, but nothing feels solid enough to hold onto. “There’s been a couple of times where I thought we were having a moment, but I can’t be sure. We’ve been friends for so long, but we kept all of our relationships out of conversation. Until I saw her with her ex, I rarely saw how she was when she liked a guy.”

“Well, I guess the question becomes,” he points his fork at me, “are you willing to take a risk? I tell my players all the time that risk is tricky. You can’t just jump into everything; all your risks in life and on the field need to be calculated. But if it’s worth it, then it’s worth it.”

“Sophie is more than worth it,” I say, sure of myself. “But I’m not sure if she even feels that way about me. I could move too fast for her.”

“Tell her she can set the pace,” he says as he saws off another mouthful of French toast. Powdered sugar puffs into the air between us. “Then she won’t feel as rushed if your feelings are further than hers. But the more you lie, the worse she’s going to feel when she finds out, in my opinion. I’d rather move fast than let her feel manipulated.”

Leaning back against the booth, I consider what he’s saying. The last thing I want to do is hurt Sophie, which is why I’ve held back in the first place. But maybe by holding back, I’m ensuring she’s going to get hurt more. I don’t want her to feel lied to. There’s a chance that if I keep hiding my feelings, I’ll end up looking like Michael. The very thought makes my stomach churn. At the same time, I need to be sure she feels at least close to the same way. Like Sebastian said, my risk needs to be calculated.

“Are you secretly a relationship counselor?” I ask him and he laughs, grabbing a napkin to wipe the sugar off his face.

“I just look at the bigger picture is all. Take what I’m saying with a grain of salt, anyway. I’m not in a relationship, so I

might not be the most qualified to be giving advice.”

“That is surprising. I would think it would be easy to find a woman, what with a career and reputation like yours.”

He grimaces and takes a sip of coffee. “It is easy, maybe a little *too* easy. But I need someone who can be a mom to Maddie. Someone who sees past the ESPN version of me and wants to be with the real me in day to day life. Unfortunately, this line of work makes you susceptible to a lot of manipulation in relationships.”

“Man, I didn’t think about that, that sucks.”

I try to think if I know anyone who would fit that description, but the only girl who’s single—and not Sophie—that I know of is MJ. Not that MJ isn’t nice, but she’s definitely on the grumpy side. Sebastian seems more like he’d get along with a girl like Lottie, if she wasn’t taken. Plus, he is a lot older than all of the girls. I shrug off the thought. He probably wouldn’t appreciate someone playing matchmaker for him anyway.

“It’s hard, and I’ve been burned in the past, but I try not to let it keep me from going for it again. It comes back to that calculated risk thing I was saying earlier. I have a daughter who’s old enough to remember the women who come and go now. Old enough to get attached, too. So now I have to be extra careful who I date, but I also can’t live in fear of something going wrong.”

“That’s a good mindset to have. I can’t imagine having a daughter and trying to date.”

He laughs. “It makes things more interesting, that’s for sure. She’s tried to set me up with several women in the past. Mostly moms of her friends.” His face twists up. “Those ones I’m more hesitant about because I don’t want it to hurt her friendships if something goes wrong. She always throws my risk comment back in my face though, saying I have to take risks too. She’s too smart for her own good sometimes.” He shakes his head, but the smile on his face tells me he doesn’t mind her antics too much.

“She sounds funny,” I say with a smile. “You should bring her into work sometime so I can meet her.”

“She comes by on occasion, but she’s old enough to have crushes now and stares at the players too much for my taste. Not that they’d ever do anything-she’s not even a teenager yet-but she’s a little distracting with her wide eyes and drool.”

I snort and almost choke on a sip of water.

“Drool?” I cough out through a laugh.

He smiles and shakes his head. “She’d kill me if she found out I said that. She doesn’t drool, but she does ask strange questions. One time she asked my defensive back if he got so tall and muscular from eating acai berries, because she heard they were a superfood.” He chuckles and I do too.

“She’d get along with Sophie, then. Sophie likes to ask whatever pops into her head in the moment.” Which has me wondering if she’s ever thought of me as anything other than a friend. Would she have said something? Or is she hiding it like I am?

“Well, hopefully you and Sophie will get together and then you can come over to the house for dinner sometime. I’m sure Maddie would love to have someone new to pepper with questions incessantly.”

“Thanks, I hope we can do that.”

My whole life seems to be hinging on hope lately. It’s not the most secure feeling in the world. I wish I knew for sure how Sophie would react to me telling her the truth. At the very least, I hope she doesn’t get mad at me for not telling her right away. Sebastian is right about telling her though: I can’t wait much longer without digging myself into a hole I won’t be able to climb out of.

I just have to sit her down and tell her the truth. The few bites of pancake I was able to eat feel heavy in my stomach. *Tell my best friend I have feelings for her.* No big deal. It’s not like we’ve been friends for two decades or anything. It’s not like losing her would crush me. Everything is going to be fine.

When I’m back in my office later, my phone vibrates against my leg. The screen shows a message from Sophie.

Soph: Saw a gumball machine and thought of you. How are you feeling?

I shake my head at the awful memory of when my suaveness went down the drain.

Bennett: So glad that’s what I’m associated with in your brain now. I’m doing fine, feeling tired after the weekend.

Soph: I know, me too. I can't believe we have to do it all over again this weekend. At least this one is being held close by. I can't handle missing an entire weekend of work again.

Bennett: Do you think you'll have time to hang out this week before the next one?

My stomach is in knots thinking about making plans with her, but the more time we spend together the better I'll be able to tell if she has feelings for me. I just have to hold my own in long enough to find out.

Soph: My work schedule is crazy this week, but I can try!

I frown at my screen. I'm not ridiculous enough to want her to cancel plans for me, but I worry that she's working herself too much. I'm sure the pressure of investors looking in on her is hurting more than helping.

Bennett: Make sure you rest, Soph.

Sophie: Don't worry about me, I'll be fine!

Sighing, I lock my phone and set it on my desk. I have a feeling that worrying about Sophie is all I'm going to be doing for a while.

CHAPTER 12

Sophie Cunningham

In most areas of my life, I feel out of control. Business? Can't get investors to take me seriously. Family? My mother's default setting is disappointment. Love life? My last boyfriend told me I wasn't marriage material ... on Christmas Eve ... at my best friend's wedding. Yeah, my life looks a whole lot like those inflatable worm guys they put outside of car dealerships: I'm just being whipped around by the wind, with no way to stop.

But there's one place where I'm always in charge and it never fails to make me feel stable: the kitchen. It doesn't even matter who the kitchen belongs to, as soon as I step in it, my insecurities fade like a road sign in a rearview mirror. I'm unmistakably good at what I do, and it's the one area I won't back down from thinking just that.

So, right now, when my mind is a mess and my world feels like a spinning top on a wobbly table, my food truck is the best place to be. The sizzling heat of the fryers, Hayden shouting

orders from the front window, customers chatting at picnic tables nearby, all of it combines to make my favorite song.

“Another sweet and spicy chicken sandwich, extra glaze!” Hayden shouts out and slaps a ticket onto the counter nearby. The lunch rush is coming to a close, but there’s still a short line out front that will keep us busy for a little while longer.

I dip my already marinated chicken into the seasoned flour mixture, making sure to thoroughly press the piece in flour so it’s perfectly coated. Then I drop it into the hot oil, letting it cook until crispy. While it cooks I change gloves and prep the rest of the ingredients. I pull a brioche bun out and toss it on the warm griddle to heat it up, then I place it in a to-go basket and drizzle some of my signature spicy sweet glaze on it. Once the chicken is done, I dip it in a bowl of the glaze and throw it on top, and it drips with flavor. I place two thick sliced pickles on top and set it on the pick up counter to the right of Hayden, slapping the bell nearby so he knows it’s there.

My back is aching and my feet sting, but I can’t stop. Throwing myself into my work is the only way to forget about the pain of long days. Missing out on last weekend to go to that ridiculous gala for my mother set me back on my financial goals for the month, so I need to work twice as hard because of it. I’ve gotten a lot of recognition for my work, but missing a weekend is a big deal in this business.

Pushing through the pain and fatigue, I keep making meals until there’s only one ticket left on the counter. Hayden sits on the stool by the window, reading a book, so I know that means

we're about to be done for the day after this last meal. I make the order and place it on the counter, deciding to call the number out myself since it's the last one.

"129!" I yell out the window, and before I turn back around, I see Bennett leaning against a tree, smiling at me. He walks up and my heart skips. He looks extra handsome today. Ever since the ball a few days ago, I've felt little pinpricks of attraction each time I've thought of him in that suit. It would be hard for any woman not to with how gorgeous he was. Today he's got on black jeans, a dark green t-shirt, and a corduroy jacket. But his clothes aren't what make my heart pitter-patter; it's that smile that could chase away a rainstorm.

"That's me," he says with a grin and grabs the basket containing a fried chicken burrito with a side of spicy glaze.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, unable to keep the joy out of my voice even if I wanted to. I shouldn't feel this way, but that moment in his parents' kitchen has had me feeling off-kilter. It's another area to add to the list of messy things in my life, I suppose. We've been flirty and close, but it's fake, and what isn't fake is just friendship. I need to get that through my head.

"I got a text alert that your truck was parking near the university, so I thought I'd swing by and try to catch you after the crowd left." It shouldn't make me feel all warm and gooey inside that he signed up for my alert program, but it does.

"That's sweet of you, thanks Ben."

“Do you have time to hang out? I’ll split my burrito with you. I hear it’s the best in the city.” He winks and a flush of heat hits my face. I hope that he can’t tell with how red my face must be from the hot friers and cold February air.

“I think we’re done for the day anyway, so sure,” I say before turning to Hayden. “Can you close down for me?”

He looks up from his book and nods. “You got it, Chef.”

“Thanks, Hayhay,” I say with a grin, and he scowls at me. I try out nicknames on him occasionally, he’s never liked any of them.

“Come on, that was a good one!” I laugh. He grunts in response. I throw away my gloves and hang my apron on the hook near the exit. Hayden moves about the trailer in his usual gruff way, but I know he’s not actually mad at me. He just suffers from resting grump face. I don’t take it personally.

“*Hayhay?*” Bennett questions when I step out next to him. Something in his voice is off, but I can’t quite tell what.

“I like messing with him since he’s so grouchy.” We walk over to a picnic table in the sun nearby. On a summer day, this table would be the last place to go, but the warmth of the light is more than welcome in this winter weather.

“So you’re close then?” I sit down across from him and study his expression. He looks close to how Hayden does on the daily.

“We work together, so yes, we’re in close proximity,” I say, tilting my head to the side. “Are you jealous?”

Bennett's eyes widen and he starts to sputter. "Jealous? Of him?"

"You're *so* jealous!" I laugh at the thought. "You know you're my best friend, Ben. My work friend will never come before you."

"Friend, yeah, that makes sense," he says, almost to himself while he unwraps the burrito.

"If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn't let anyone else be my fake boyfriend."

He laughs at my words, but it comes out forced, making me frown.

"Good to know." He avoids my eyes and cuts the burrito in half with a plastic knife before sliding the basket into the middle of the table. Steam rises from the burrito and the sight makes my stomach growl. After working on my feet for so long, I'm starving.

"Everything okay?" I ask as I grab half of the burrito. Taking a bite out of it, I close my eyes and savor the recipe I perfected over a year ago. Usually, I get tired of my menu staples, but when I'm hungry like this it tastes close to the very first time I made it.

"Yeah, I was just thinking, are you busy tonight?"

I take another bite and nod. "MJ and I are hanging out tonight. She wants me to go to some art gallery opening with her. Her ex might be there, so she wants backup. He's one of the dramatic ones, and she's worried he'll make a scene."

Bennett's face falls slightly before he masks the emotion, but I see it. "Why do you ask?"

"I figured you might be feeling down because it's Valentine's Day. I thought we could hang out, but having plans is good! You and MJ will have fun."

"I forgot that was today! Lottie usually decorates the whole townhouse, but she isn't there anymore so it's easy to forget without a boyfriend." I laugh. "Probably for the best I didn't remember."

"Yeah, I'm glad you weren't upset today."

"Me too. If I wouldn't have already committed to this gallery thing, I'd hang out with you though. Look at you, being a thoughtful fake boyfriend."

"I try," he says with a wry smile. "I guess I'll give you your present now then. Let me grab it from my car."

"Present? You didn't have to do that, Ben." He shrugs like it was nothing, but my heart picks up speed as he jogs off toward his car. Valentine's presents aren't something we've ever done, and I didn't think it was necessary for a fake relationship.

He comes back toting a red bag with black tissue paper poking out of the top. I quickly wipe my hands on a napkin whenever he sets it on the table.

"I feel bad that I didn't get you anything," I say and he shakes his head.

"I wanted it to be a surprise. Just open it." He gestures to the bag with a smile. I pull out the paper and Bennett takes it so

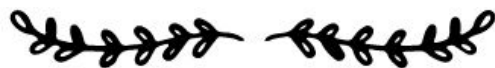
the wind doesn't blow it away. I pull out the gift and gasp. It's a black t-shirt that's been distressed with bleach, and on the front is my Airstream with my food truck name, Farm-To-Truck, written beneath it.

“Do you like it?” he asks and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my tears at bay. Crying over a t-shirt would be too much, but it's one of the sweetest gifts I've ever gotten. Bennett gets me, he just does.

“I *love* it!” I squeal and he chuckles. I climb out of the picnic table and run over to hug him. He wraps me up in his arms, his familiar scent and strong arms almost bringing my tears to the surface. I pull back and look up at him. “Thank you.” His smile is warm, and I swear I see attraction in his gaze. *Has he always looked at me this way?*

“You're welcome, Soph.” His voice is low, sending tingles down my spine. I step out of his arms, letting the cold air shock me back to my senses.

I cannot develop a crush on Ben again. That's a tragedy waiting to happen.



“So if he's here, what are the chances he hands you his cut-off ear tonight?” I ask MJ as we click-clack across the parking lot in our heels to the gallery.

She cuts her eyes to me. “Does your knowledge of art history consist of that one Van Gogh fact?”

“Of course not, I also know that Salvador Dali once filled up a car with cauliflower and drove to Paris to give a lecture. But cauliflower seemed less romantic than an ear.”

“Your idea of romance is demented.” She opens the door to the gallery, the warm air inside carrying the scent of patchouli and berries.

“Artists are weird, MJ, so their romance has to be too. I live with one, I’d know.” She shoots me a glare, but I see the smile touching the edge of her lips.

“All sorts of people are weird, not just artists,” she says quietly as we start toward the first piece nearby. Light music consisting mostly of windchimes plays, and the people around are wearing various kinds of dress clothes. I’ve been to a handful of these things with MJ, and they all seem the same. Blandly dressed people look at strange art pieces for an hour, then spend millions of dollars to hang them in one of their twelve guest bedrooms and never look at them again.

“Speaking of weird,” I mumble as we approach the large painting hanging under a spotlight. It’s a completely black canvas with the smallest dot of red in the center. The title card reads *Red Eye Flight*. “Your friend painted this?” I ask her and she shakes her head.

“No, Gillian works with clay. This is Vander Cleo’s work. His study on contrast is very popular right now.”

“I’m so glad you don’t do stuff like this,” I say, and she breathes out a laugh, trying to keep quiet. We move on to the next display. This one a violent yellow shade that feels like it’s burning my retinas. It’s aptly titled *Sun*.

“Why don’t you put your work in a gallery?” I ask. “I’m certain people would buy every single one if only because they’re thankful that they’re different from that Cleo guy.”

She ducks her head, hiding a smile, and walks to the back of the gallery, where some clay sculptures are displayed on pedestals. “I don’t want to make it about other people and their opinion. Art is my escape, I don’t want to lose that.”

I look at the clay sculpture closest to us. It resembles the ocean, waves cresting and colliding. It’s actually pleasing to look at, though it’s not hard to beat the yellow highlighter explosion we previously viewed. “That makes sense. This investor stuff has been hard lately. It’s not like someone eating my food and not enjoying it. They’re looking at my dream and saying it’s not worth anything.”

“Who cares what the people who said no think? You just have to decide if it’s worth it. If so, keep pushing.”

I smile at how she gives advice with her brusque nature.

“It is worth it, that’s why I’m going through all of this with Bennett.” His gift today comes to mind, making my stomach flip.

“How’s that going?” We walk around the display, keeping our distance from the other onlookers as best we can. The

small gallery makes it difficult to occupy the same space comfortably, but there's not so many people in here that it's impossible.

"It's been fine, just a little weird. Sometimes Bennett gives me these looks that..." I trail off, shaking my head. "It's probably nothing."

"Sounds like *you* think it's something. Are you breaking the man ban?" Her tiny smirk hints that she's teasing me.

"There are just these little moments that seem more than friends, but we're fake dating. That's bound to happen, right?"

"I wouldn't know." She shrugs. "You know Bennett best—does it seem like he's been different with you? Enough to question his feelings?"

My mind wanders as we circle through the gallery. The clay sculptures are the only thing worth looking at, but I use each painting as an opportunity to think, hoping I look like I'm pondering the art itself. There's been plenty of times where we've gotten close lately, but we've never been afraid of sitting close or hugging. Maybe the fake dating aspect has that heightened. So it's just us, with another layer added.

"I don't think there's enough to worry about," I say, and MJ simply nods, not questioning me anymore. I'm grateful for her silence, because I think if she pushed any more I might overthink and feel something I shouldn't. I did that before with Michael.

I can't make that mistake again.

CHAPTER 13

Bennett St. James

“If you say a *word* about my appearance,” Sophie calls through her bedroom door, “I will fill your bathtub with snails. Those things have hundreds of babies!”

I choke on the coconut water I stole from the fridge. After clearing my throat, I respond. “Soph, just come out here.” Sophie didn’t have time this week to find a new gown, but Lottie had an old pageant dress from high school that she gave to her. She wouldn’t take any of the gowns from her mother on principle.

The door clicks and slowly opens to reveal a mountain of pink tulle and sparkles swallowing Sophie’s figure. The bodice is covered in crystals, and the tulle skirt that flows from her waist shimmers in the light, flecks of glitter embedded in the fabric. I press my lips together hard to keep in my laughter.

On Lottie, this dress would be perfect. She’d float around like she owned the entire earth. But on Sophie, it looks like someone forced her into this dress in some sort of hostage situation. Her arms are crossed, her brow set low in anger.

“I look ridiculous.”

“No.” I choke down my laughter. “Y-you look beautiful.” And she does, but the dress and her frustration combined are comical.

“Let’s just go.” She huffs and stomps toward the door, her heels loud against the hardwood floors. I follow her out then move ahead to open the car door.

“Your chariot, Princess Cupcake,” I say, and she swats my arm before squeezing into the passenger seat. Her dress skirt pokes out in every direction. It seems like it’s growing bigger by the second.

“Ryan Gosling wouldn’t call me a cupcake,” she grumbles, trying to yank the seatbelt over her torso to no avail.

I duck my head inside the car. “He probably would, and you’d like it.” She rolls her eyes at me. I take the seatbelt from her hand, our fingers brushing. “Besides,” I say and start pushing at the tulle fabric to find the buckle. Once I find it, I push the seatbelt in with a grunt of effort. “I called you *Princess Cupcake*, because I’m a chivalrous fake boyfriend.”

I start to move out of the car, but our eyes lock, making me freeze. A small smile is on her lips—which are painted in gloss tonight—and there’s something in her gaze that makes my breath hitch. The amber ring surrounding her pupils is more evident in the golden hour light, and it creates this mesmerizing warmth that draws me to her.

“Thank you,” she says quietly. “You’re a good fake boyfriend, even if you compare me to baked goods.”

“You’re welcome.” I should move, but I can’t bring myself to. Her scent is stronger since we’re so close, and she smells like fresh flowers. She swallows, the movement drawing my eye to the base of her throat. I wonder if I pressed my lips there if it would be like kissing a rose petal.

“Ben? Is everything okay?” Her soft voice makes my eyes jump back to her face.

“Everything’s fine!” I clear my throat and pull my head out quickly before I do something stupid like kiss her. I shove in the remainder of her dress so that it doesn’t stick out the door then jog around the front of the car to get in.

There are a few beats of silence as I start the car and adjust the air so that it’s warm enough. The night air has some bite to it, and Sophie’s shoulders are exposed. A fact I desperately need to ignore if I want to be able to focus on the road.

“My mother is going to be ecstatic when she sees me.” Sophie breaks the silence, sounding like the idea is physically painful.

“Isn’t the goal to please her, in a way?” I pull out of the driveway and start on the road.

“I don’t even know anymore. I need her approval for the catering gig, but I also hate the idea of needing her at all.”

“I know your relationship is...” I trail off, a million words flitting through my brain.

“Toxic?” Sophie replies cheerfully.

“Strenuous,” I try instead. “But you agreed to this deal of hers, so on some level you were okay with it.”

“The ends justify the means, Ben.” She shifts in her seat and mashes her dress down some more with her hands. “I need her connections.”

“And no part of you simply wants to prove to her that you’re a good daughter? A successful woman who she can be proud of?”

“Why would you think that?” Her face twists up like she smelled something bad, but something in her tone says I’m close to the truth.

I make a turn before responding. “Because I’ve known you your whole life. Even when you rebelled against her, you still wanted her love and approval deep down.”

She’s quiet for a moment, and I’m worried I’ve hurt her feelings.

“You just had to go and pull the lifelong friendship card, huh?” She sighs. “I guess I’m torn in a way. Not to sound too existential, but I feel like I don’t know who I am sometimes. Either I’m the rebel child or I’m the golden child. The disappointment or the shining accolade. I choose which to be depending on the day. I don’t know who I am outside of those two extremes some days.” Her words and voice breaks my heart. I know I can’t have this conversation and not be able to look at her, so I veer off into a restaurant parking lot.

“What are you doing?” she asks when I take my seatbelt off. I shift my body to face her better. The hopeless look she wears distracts from the extravagant dress she has on.

“Sophie, you are so much more than how she sees you,” I say and watch her shrink in on herself slightly.

“Ben, please, I don’t need a pep talk. I’m a big girl.”

“I know, but you’re wrong about some things. I can’t go into that ball with you when you don’t know the truth.”

“Your opinion isn’t the truth,” she says, shooting me a look.

“Today my opinion happens to line up with the truth. So be quiet, Cupcake, or else I’m taking a photo of you like this and sending it out to all our friends.”

She narrows her eyes at me, then mimes locking her lips and throwing away the key.

“Good girl,” I say and she rolls her eyes, but a blush creeps up her neck. “Now, back to what I was saying. You aren’t confined to these two images of yourself. Trying to put your personality in a box is like trying to put a great white shark in a fish bowl: it just doesn’t work. You deserve more space than that.”

I reach over and grab one of her hands.

“Sophie, you are kind, beautiful, business savvy, and an absolute master in the kitchen.” She tries to smother a smile but fails. “Would you let any of the people you love think this way about themselves?”

“No,” she whispers, her slate gray eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“Then you know it’s not good for you to think this way. I know how Whitney treats you, and it must be hard to go through that, but you can’t let her words dictate your life. Whether that looks like rebelling against her or going along with what she wants. Your choices need to be based on what you want, not in reaction to her desires.”

“Stop making sense,” she says, then sniffles.

“I love you, Sophie,” I say, and something shifts within me, like tectonic plates moving into place, and it shakes me to my core. Those three words are beginning to mean something different than they used to. I push the feeling down to keep talking. “And because of that, I have to tell you the hard things. You don’t need this deal with your mom to be successful. But if you *want* to do it, I’ll be here by your side.”

“I love you too, Bennett.” That seismic feeling comes back, reminding me that what Sophie is saying is likely no longer the same as what I am. It’s amazing how a simple phrase can mean so much based on the heart of the person saying it. “Thank you for telling me all this, I needed to hear it. But I think I do need this deal, still. I need the investors. I will keep in mind the stuff about my mom, though.”

I sigh and nod. “Alright, then let’s go.” I get back on the road and head toward the venue. I know one conversation can’t help Sophie, so I just have to hope that me being by her side is enough.

We arrive at the venue, and I reach over the console to unbuckle Sophie's seatbelt. She keeps her gaze focused out the window though, so I can't tell how she's feeling. After tossing my keys to the valet, I open the door for her, and she practically rolls herself out of the car in her dress.

Her frustration has melted away however, and she laughs at the situation. Her whole demeanor seems lighter now, making me feel better too. As much as I want to know that Sophie feels the same way I do, I want her to be secure and happy more. So if that meant calling off the fake relationship and staying home, then I would have been ready to do that.

But now that we're here, hope is rising like the sun within me. Maybe tonight will show me something that I can hold onto whenever I confess my feelings to her. She grasps my hand tight as we walk up the stairs to the event building. I'm sure it's because she's worried about falling, but it brings a smile to my face all the same. *I'm* who she's holding onto. The one she's confiding in. That has to mean something.

Our entrance into the ballroom is quiet and unsuspecting, making Sophie's shoulders sag in relief. This ball is much more modern than the last, as it's held in a corporate building. The tables are decorated with square vases that have disproportionately tall gold branches poking out of them. It looks like they were trying to be edgy but settled for gaudy instead.

"Let's hope the decorations aren't an indicator of how our night is going to go," Sophie says and I laugh.

“How do rich people have so much money and so little taste?”

Sophie shakes her head. “It’s the eighth wonder of the world.”

“Sophie? Is that really you?” Whitney walks up to us. Sophie tenses visibly, and I pull her into my side to offer reassurance. She gives me a grateful look.

“Hey, Mom,” she says while looking down.

Resentment toward Whitney burns in my chest, but I know that isn’t healthy. It doesn’t solve anything, but I can’t help feeling protective over Sophie and upset at how she’s been treated her whole life.

“I can’t believe you’re wearing something in your color palette. It’s out of season and looks like a costume, but it’s not black! How wonderful.”

I pull Sophie closer.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” I ask, and Whitney’s eyes flick over to me.

“Yes,” she sneers. “To my *daughter*, whom I was addressing.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Sophie speaks up, making me glance down in surprise. “I hope you have a nice evening. I think I see someone I need to speak to.” She gently tugs me away from a stunned Whitney Cunningham.

“What was that all about?” I ask her as she pulls us toward the buffet tables.

“I figured the best way to get out of it was to throw her off guard. It bought us enough time to make a break.”

“You’re right, but I was prepared to go to bat for you just so you know.”

She laughs and stops in front of a table with a chocolate fountain on it. “I know you were, but it would have just made things worse. So I’m going to drown my issues in chocolate and avoid her for the rest of the night.” She picks up a big red strawberry and slides it under the waterfall of chocolate.

“Sounds like a solid plan.”

She lifts the strawberry to her mouth and takes a bite. My eyes are glued to the movement. When she pulls the strawberry top away and a line of juice flows from her lips down her chin, a fire could break out across the room and I wouldn’t even notice.

“You’ve got a little-” I gesture to her mouth. She giggles and swipes at the juice with her thumb before licking it off. I think my brain short circuits.

“Ben?” The sound of my name breaks the trance.

“Hm?”

“Do you want a strawberry?”

I’d rather see if your lips taste like them, I think and then yank myself out of that thought pattern.

“No!” I say a little too aggressively, making her jump. “I mean, no, thank you.” I grab a graham cracker piece, dip it in the chocolate, then eat the whole thing to keep my mouth busy.

Get it together, Ben.

“You’re being extra weird tonight.” She laughs. “It’s entertaining though, so keep it up.”

I fake a smile while attempting to swallow the sandy graham cracker. I grab a champagne flute from a server’s tray as he walks by and down the whole thing in one sip.

“Okay I said *weird*, not *wild*,” Sophie remarks, staring at me like I’m short a few marbles, which I am. Several pieces of my brain must be rolling around the ballroom floor after seeing her eat that strawberry. I am a weak man tonight, and all nights when it comes to her.

“That’s my first and only,” I assure her. “Just needed to wash the graham cracker down. Don’t recommend eating those, they’re very dry.”

She nods but eyes me as if I might jump on top of the table or something. I don’t blame her.

Suddenly, the chocolate fountain starts slowing down and gaps appear in the chocolate.

“Of course this thing would break. It’s like this place knows I’m happy and has to put a stop to it.” She pouts, and I frown too.

“Maybe something is wrong with the cord. I’ll check.” I go around the buffet display and see a variety of cords, but the

one leading to the chocolate fountain table is partially undone.

As I'm walking in that direction, my foot catches, and I start to fall. Out of sheer instinct, I reach out to grab ahold of something. My hand grips the white fabric and yanks it down with me. I hit the ground with an *oof*, but I'm sure it wasn't heard due to the objects crashing down around me. I push up from the floor, groaning. My groan gives way to a shocked intake of breath though, when I see what table I ruined.

The chocolate fountain is tipped over and splattered everywhere. My eyes travel from the machine to Sophie, who's standing there in shock. Chocolate stains her dress and droplets of it are on her chest and face. I scramble to my feet and around the front of the display. I can feel the eyes of everyone here on us.

"Are you okay?" I ask and Sophie nods, her mouth open in an 'o'.

A woman with a clipboard rushes over, worry and anger all over her face. She attempts to mask it when she reaches us, no doubt understanding that we're guests which means she has to cater to us.

"I'm so sorry. I was trying to fix the machine and then I tripped and—"

The woman lifts a hand, sharing a tight smile. "Don't worry about a thing, sir. My team will have this cleaned up in no time. Next time though, I will remind you that we have event staff who handle the food and machines. You are welcome to find an employee to assist you."

I look down at my dress shoes.

“Yes, ma’am,” I mumble, feeling thoroughly chastised. I deserve it, because even though it was an accident, she’s right. The woman power walks away, and I chance a look at Sophie. Her lips are pressed together like she’s holding back laughter.

I narrow my eyes at her. “We should probably get out of here,” I say, and she nods enthusiastically, covering her mouth as a giggle escapes. I keep my head down as we walk through the crowd, not wanting to meet anyone’s eyes. My family isn’t here tonight, but I know they’ll call in the morning to make fun of me. I’m going to hear about this for the rest of my life.

The doors shut behind us, the cool night air biting at my skin. Sophie’s laughter bursts out of her and she doubles over.

“That-that was *amazing*.” She can barely get the words out she’s laughing so hard.

“I’m so glad you think my humiliation is hilarious. What about my fall? You didn’t even ask if I was okay.”

“Are you?” she asks, amusement glittering in her eyes like starlight.

“I think I pulled something in my leg.” That unlocks her laughter again, and I leave her on the steps while I tell the valet to get my car. I stomp back up the stairs and grab her hand to help her back down.

“Come on, Ben, laugh a little! It was comedic perfection.”

I twist my mouth to keep from laughing, but her persistent giggles have me succumb to my own quickly. When the valet

pulls up, we're both in stitches.

"We have to calm down," I say before another round of laughter. I take the keys from the wary valet and open the door for Sophie. She falls in, sighing as her laughter begins to subside some.

I lean in to help her again, and after I click the seatbelt in, our eyes meet just like they did before we came. Except this time, only the dim overhead car light illuminates Sophie's face. It makes it feel like we're more alone than we actually are. I reach up and swipe at some chocolate in the corner of her mouth.

"I guess this would make you a chocolate cupcake," I tease, and she tries to look put out by the joke but fails. Her eyes fall to my lips for a moment, then spring back up as if she realized what she was doing. It takes every last reserve of my willpower to pull myself out of the car and shut the door. *Slow, we need to go slow.*

My heart is already careening downhill toward love, though. That spark of desire in Sophie is the push I need to tell her the truth. Maybe soon all of these *almost* moments will give way to a true moment. And maybe, just maybe, I'll get to kiss my best friend.

CHAPTER 14

Sophie Cunningham

Fake dating is stupid. So very, very stupid. Why did I agree to this?

I peel off Lottie's gown, the layers of tulle shimmering as the dress pools on the floor. Bennett is in the living room waiting for me to get cleaned up. He survived the chocolate disaster mostly unscathed, minus his suit jacket which is hanging on the back of the couch right now. I, however, did not fare as well. Not only am I covered in chocolate, but I can't breathe properly because I'm pretty sure Bennett was going to kiss me tonight. And I think I was going to *let him*.

I wrap my fluffy robe around myself, knowing it's going to have to be washed now because of the chocolate all over me and pick out some pajamas from my dresser. Various tattered t-shirts and threadbare leggings stare up at me, taunting me with their ugliness. A few weeks ago, I'd throw on whatever my hand touched first and not think twice about it. But now, Bennett is not just my best friend, but my fake boyfriend. My *extremely attractive* fake boyfriend wearing a suit.

I scowl at the clothes, upset that I'm even thinking this way. It's Bennett, for goodness' sake. I snatch up a random t-shirt and pair of leggings, refusing to give in to the idea that I need to dress any other way. He's seen me much worse than this, for one. And for two, he's not my real boyfriend. Nor will he ever be. This whole fake dating fiasco just has my feelings clouded, that's all.

I poke my head out my bedroom door, peeking out to see if Bennett has left the living room. My bathroom is down the hall, and I don't want to run into him before I can get there. The robe I'm wearing is more grandmotherly than vixen-like, but I still don't think I could handle running into him in just this.

When I deem the coast clear, I speed walk into the bathroom and shut the door behind me, breathing a sigh of relief. I'm being dramatic, but my mind is fraying. How do I reconcile what I thought of Bennett with the man from the past few weeks? The one who holds me close, flirts with me, and stares at me with enough heat in his gaze to cause a kitchen fire.

I turn the shower on and double-check that there's a towel in here. I'd dry myself with toilet paper before I asked Bennett to grab me a towel. I'm relieved when I find a stack of towels on the shelf above the toilet, so I don't have to resort to that.

The blazing hot water of the shower burns my back when I step in, but I don't turn the heat down. I need the extra heat to sear tonight out of my brain before it becomes a core memory. High school Sophie is already planning her wedding in that

awful notebook of hers. Practicing her calligraphy and writing drafts of her vows. But present me is very much aware that dating Ben would be a terrible idea.

I scrub chocolate off my skin while I ponder. He's never had a serious relationship, which means that I'd be his first. I want to write him off just for that reason, but my heart won't let me. Bennett isn't immature; he's going to make some girl incredibly happy one day. *Would it be so bad if you were that girl?* The thought floats through my brain but I wave it away, hoping it will disperse along with the shower steam.

It doesn't matter if I want to be more than a friend to Bennett, because he doesn't feel the same. He'd tell me if he did. At least I'd hope so. No, whatever I'm seeing in Bennett must be our fake relationship blurring the lines, something all the girls warned me about. And my feelings are from that same thing, too. Once this is all over we'll go back to normal. There will be no more handholding or wiping chocolate from my mouth. We'll be just friends, as we should be.

I try not to think too hard about why that thought makes my chest ache. Instead, I focus on getting every bit of chocolate off my skin and out of my hair. Once my skin is dry out of the shower, I pull on my ratty pajamas and twist my hair up in the towel. I don't let myself wipe away the condensation on the mirror to analyze my reflection. I simply open the door, steam billowing around me, and walk to the living room. Bennett is sprawled out on the couch, but he sits up when he sees me.

“Better?” he asks with a warm smile on his face.

“Much,” I reply and sit on the far end of the couch, tucking my legs under me. Bennett must have removed his tie while I was in the shower because it’s gone from his neck now. He’s also unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt, making him look like a debonair spy ready to save me if I was in distress. Ugh, curse my foolish romantic heart and Lottie’s love of romance movies! Now I’m picturing him scaling a building with me holding onto him, the look in his eyes the same as when he was leaning over me in the car helping with my seatbelt.

“Soph, you good?” Bennett’s voice yanks me out of my movie moment and a blush heats my face. *Oh, this is bad.*

“I’m fine!” I squeak, making Bennett raise his eyebrows. This only increases his flirty secret agent look, making my skin flush even more. I’m going to look as red as the tomatoes I buy from the farmer’s market soon.

“Okay,” he drags out the last syllable, eyeing me for a moment. “I pulled up your Netflix account and saw a couple of things saved for you to watch. What are you feeling, a romcom or a true crime doc?”

“True crime, definitely,” I say, trying not to let my relief leak into my voice. There’s no way I could handle a romantic comedy right now. I’d melt into this couch out of embarrassment.

“Weird serial killer documentary it is,” he says and clicks on the movie.

Soon after it starts, my feet start to hurt beneath me, so I shift to try and get comfortable. After working all week and then wearing heels tonight, my feet are beyond sore. I'd put them on the coffee table, but it's not the most comfortable, and there are books and plants all over it.

“Why don't you put your feet in my lap so you can stretch out? I don't mind.” Bennett's offer is sweet, and the discomfort I'm feeling forces me to accept. I'm probably going to regret putting myself closer to him than I should, but right now it's either this or kick him out so I can go to bed. And some clingy part of me—probably high school Sophie—doesn't want him to leave yet.

I tuck a throw pillow under my head, grab a blanket, and then lay my feet across his lap, immediately feeling better. Once I'm situated, I set my attention fully on the documentary, trying to ignore how warm Bennett's legs feel under my feet. My attempt at ignorance is futile though because the man is determined to torture me. Suddenly, one of my feet is in his hands, and he's kneading it in a way that has me biting my cheek to hold in any reactions.

“Ben, you don't need to do that,” I breathe out, pulling on my foot. He grips it firmly, giving me a playful but stern look that sends ripples of awareness through me.

“You deserve a little pampering, Soph. You work too hard. Just relax.” He starts massaging again, rendering me incapable of speech, much less the ability to fight him. It's hard to focus on the documentary, so I don't bother. Instead, I watch Bennett

in the flickering light of the TV. He moves to my other foot, and I barely stifle a moan when he hits a particularly tender spot. His hands work the spot expertly, and it occurs to me that he likely learned these techniques in school. There are women out there who dream of this, a handsome doctor in a suit rubbing their feet. It's a worthwhile fantasy, I'm discovering.

This is the kind of fantasy that I wouldn't mind fulfilling more often. That line of thought is dangerous, though. Seeing Bennett taking care of me this way is creating a soft spot, a chink in my armor, and I'm worried that if this all goes wrong I'll end up devastated. I should have fought him more, should have pulled my feet back and told him he was crossing a line, but I didn't. Now I'm thinking of what could be, all the while knowing this can only end poorly for me.

If there's anything the whole breakup with Michael taught me, it's that I can't trust my own judgment. I thought he was going to propose, and instead, he laughed in my face and insulted me. Maybe there have been a few heated moments with Ben, but I can't let it go to my head. If he really felt something for me, he'd admit it. He wouldn't hide it from me while being my 'fake boyfriend'.

"Is it true that pressure points in the foot connect to everywhere in the body?" I ask, trying to think of something else other than romance.

Bennett chuckles. "Some holistic professionals think that, but I don't know if it's true. I didn't learn about it in school if

that's what you're asking." His fingers move up to my ankle, rolling his thumbs over it, making me close my eyes.

"So it's just hippie stuff?"

"That's one way to say it."

"I think it's true." My voice hitches when his hand finds the back of my calf and begins rubbing it.

"What makes you say that? Am I detoxing your kidneys by massaging your feet?" He jokes as he slides his hand up and down my calf.

"I don't know about that, but I do feel much better than I did earlier. I think you should quit your fancy surgeon job and do this," I mumble as my muscles relax and sleep begins to sound like a very good idea.

"That's a lot of med school hours to have gone through to give up surgery for massage therapy."

"Good point." I hum as he starts on my other calf. "You can do this for just me then. Forever."

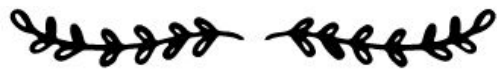
He laughs and I smile, feeling like my movements are happening in slow motion.

"Deal."

My eyelids feel heavy like someone is pushing them down. My heart chooses this time to ask a question I've worried about for a few years now. "Do you think we'll be friends like this forever?"

Deep down, I know the answer is no. One or both of us will find someone, and they won't like that Bennett buys me Valentine's gifts and rubs my feet. They won't like that I know all his favorite foods or that he knows what size clothes I wear. We'll grow apart, maybe even lose each other. I know this is true, which is why Bennett's response makes my heart ache even as I slip into the dream world.

"I sure hope so, Soph."



The sound of voices brings me reluctantly to consciousness. Blinking open my eyes, I squint against the light pouring in. I'm warm and though I usually wake up sore after working all week, I don't today. It's only when I see that the ceiling above me is different than the one in my room that I remember I fell asleep out here.

"Sophie," Grace whispers, making me startle. I twist and see her standing behind the couch with wide eyes. "You have five seconds to get in the kitchen and tell us what's going on!" She hisses and my brows weave together in confusion. Until I shift my feet and freeze. My feet aren't warm because I curled them into my blankets. No, they're warm because down at the end of the couch sits Bennett, with my feet in his lap still. His head is leaned back, his mouth partially open as he sleeps sitting up.

I slowly pull my feet away from him and then scramble up, rushing into the kitchen where MJ, Grace, and Lottie have convened. I run a shaking hand through my hair. Last night... I almost kissed Bennett. He gave me a *massage*. Then we slept together. Kind of. Enough of a kind of that I'm freaking out, as are all of my wide-eyed best friends.

"Are you two a thing now?" Lottie begins the inquisition in whispering tones to not wake Ben.

"No, we're not. We just fell asleep watching a movie last night is all."

"With your feet in his lap?" Grace sounds skeptical.

"That doesn't mean anything. It's not a big deal," I try to reassure them and myself.

"He could have left at any time, Sophie. He slept sitting up on our mediocre couch because he wanted to be near you," Lottie says and the other girls nod.

"I'm sure he was just too tired to drive." None of them look like they're buying it, which is fair. I wouldn't buy it if I was them.

"Honey," Lottie says in her sweet southern way, placing a hand on my arm. "This doesn't look fake to me." Panic builds in me like steam in a boiling kettle.

"We're best friends, all of this is just the fake dating messing it up. I don't feel that way about Bennett," I lie. "And he doesn't feel that way about me. If he did, he'd tell me. I know he would."

Lottie averts her gaze and steps away from me. “You know him better than me,” she says and I nod. Yes, I know Bennett. That should be a comfort to me. I know him well enough to be certain all of this isn’t real. It’ll go away once we’re done with the plan.

Except ... I don’t really know what Bennett looks like when he’s pursuing someone, do I? He’s never done it before. Tendrils of confusion push through what I thought I knew, like tree roots encroaching on the foundation of a building. I’m worried that what I’ve built my case on, why I’ve said all along that Bennett and I won’t work, is beginning to crumble beneath me.

CHAPTER 15

Bennett St. James

Something jabs at my cheek, bringing me out of sleep. I groan and scratch my face. The jab comes again and again until my eyes open.

“Bennington, you better wake up right this instant and tell me what’s going on!” Lottie stands over me, her sparkly pink fingernail pointed in my direction, no doubt the source of the poking I woke up to.

It takes me a moment to realize why Lottie would be standing in front of me. When I survey my surroundings, embarrassment flushes my face. MJ and Grace are nearby, watching with their own curious expressions.

“It’s not what it looks like!” I shift on the couch, pain shooting through my neck. That’s not going to be fun for a few days.

“Really?” MJ asks in an even tone. “It looks like Sophie fell asleep on you last night and you’re so in love with her that you

didn't want to wake her." I cringe, rubbing the back of my neck to release the tension.

"Okay, so it's exactly what it looks like," I say while looking around for Sophie. It would be awful if she heard any of this.

"Sophie went to get ready for work," Grace says, answering my thoughts.

"You're finally admitting you're in love with her?" Lottie asks, her expression hopeful and excited.

"I-" Pausing, I frown. I've been falling in love, sure, but am I in love with Sophie, truly? I wanted to deny Lottie, but I don't know that I can anymore. I've never been in love, but I imagine it must feel like this. I can't stop thinking about her, my heart races whenever she's near, and I'd do anything for her. "Yes," I whisper. "Yes, I'm in love with her."

The girls, even MJ, are all wearing smiles now. I can't help but smile too, but it fades when I realize what comes with love. *Confessions* of said love. My stomach turns sour at the thought. Sophie has shown she's attracted to me, but it could be a result of the mixed emotions that come with fake dating. When I first jumped on this idea, I thought the mix between fake and real would work in my favor. Now, I'm not so sure.

"You have to tell her! She—" Grace hits Lottie's arm and shakes her head. "Ugh," Lottie grumbles. "Fine, no meddling, but he does need to tell her." She gives Grace a pointed look.

“I’m going to tell her,” I assure them. “I don’t want to wait any longer. I’ve just been afraid that she’ll be overwhelmed and run away.”

“She might,” MJ speaks up and the other two women shoot her a look. “What?” She shrugs. “He should know what he’s getting into. Sophie just went through a breakup, and now he’s going to admit his feelings not even two months after. It’s no small thing.” She’s right, even though I wish she wasn’t.

“You’re going to scare him off from telling her,” Lottie says and MJ seems unconcerned.

“I’m scared, yeah, but I’m still going to tell her. I don’t want to keep this a secret anymore. It will only get more difficult as time goes on.”

“You’re a good guy, Ben,” Grace says with a soft smile. “We’re all rooting for you but be careful with our girl. She’s sensitive lately.”

“I know, I’m going to do my best. I’d never want to hurt her.”

The sound of a door opening interrupts our conversation. Sophie walks into the room and eyes our group.

“What did I walk into?” she asks with a laugh. Her hair is in two braids, a style she often does for work, and she’s wearing the t-shirt I got her, making me smile.

“We were just talking about how you fell asleep on me last night.” A blush tints her skin, which only makes me grin more. “Couldn’t even make it through the documentary.”

“I was exhausted from work all week and you were—” she cuts herself off, biting her lip.

“He was what?” Lottie asks, ever the instigator. Sophie shakes her head.

“Nothing, he was nothing.” Her blush deepens and she avoids my eyes. She must not have told them everything from last night. Warmth surges through me at the thought that she hid it from them because that means she thinks of it as more than just friendly.

Lottie looks like she wants to say something, but she holds it in.

“You’re heading to work?” I change the subject, hoping to rein in all of the emotions in this room.

“Yeah, I figured I needed to make up for some of the time I’ve missed with the events.”

“Okay, um.” I suddenly feel awkward in front of our audience of close friends. “Have a good day,” I say lamely, but she grants me a smile anyway.

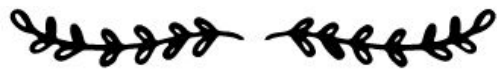
“You too, Ben,” she says before heading to the door to grab her bag and keys.

I’m able to leave the townhouse without any more questions thrown at me, and as I drive I’m barely able to focus on the road.

I slept awful last night, but I’m wired now, and there’s not a drop of caffeine in my system. There’s no way I can sleep now that I know I’m in love with my best friend.

I'm in love with Sophie. The very thought makes me feel as though I'm standing on the edge of the high dive board in high school. There's this unsettled feeling in the deepest part of my abdomen. The kind of feeling that makes you want to run away, but also jump and get it over with. It's a feeling I've never felt when it comes to a person before, and you'd think I'd be unsure of whether to run or jump, but no.

I'm jumping. Head first, no holding back.



“Bennett?” My mom lifts her eyes from the book in her hands when I walk into the home library. Her feet are draped over my father’s lap, where he’s reading as well. Their position reminds me of Sophie’s feet on my lap last night.

“Sorry I didn’t call, but I figured you’d be home. Nana said you were in here,” I say and my mom waves a hand at me.

“Don’t apologize, we’re happy to see you. Is everything alright? You look like you haven’t slept.”

“I wouldn’t sleep either if I’d made such a spectacle of myself at the ball,” my sister says, her head popping out from behind a bookshelf, making me jump. Mom gives her a chastising look, while my dad just smirks.

“What are you doing here? Where’s Daniel?”

“We’re here for Sunday dinner because I’m the favorite who didn’t move away,” Naomi teases. “Daniel is watching a

hockey game in the media room. He doesn't let me watch it with him because I talk about how cute the players are."

I shake my head. "I'm not surprised by anything you just said."

"No one is anymore," my father mumbles and Naomi shoots him a glare.

"Let's focus on the fact that your son toppled over an entire chocolate fountain last night and then ran away."

"Let's not," I say and flop down into a large armchair across from my parents. Naomi ambles over, her large belly showing her impending due date, and sits in a chair next to me.

"Mrs. Beverly came up to us at church this morning and detailed the whole fiasco. I laughed so hard I peed a little."

I scrunch up my face in mild disgust. "I did not need to know that."

"You're going to scar the poor boy," Mom laughs.

"What else are sisters for?"

I'm about to retort when my dad clears his throat. "I doubt Bennett came all this way to talk about a chocolate fountain," he says, watching me over the rim of his wire glasses.

"Then what did you come for?" Naomi asks, and everyone looks at me expectantly.

"Can't a man come to visit his family just because?"

"He can," my mother assents. "But you didn't."

"How do you know that?"

“Oh for goodness’ sake Ben, just tell us!” Naomi huffs from beside me. My leg starts to bounce and everyone in the room now knows I’m nervous. I came here because my family always has the best advice, but I can’t be fully truthful with them either because of Sophie’s whole situation. If anything got out, she’d be so upset.

“I’m in love with Sophie,” I blurt out and it’s quiet for a moment.

“Well, duh.” Naomi leans back, one hand on her stomach. “I thought you were coming here to tell us something we don’t know.”

“Don’t tease him, Naomi. He just didn’t know himself yet,” my mother chides before swinging her legs around so she’s facing me fully. “I’m happy for you darling, but why are you here alone to tell us? Did Sophie respond poorly?”

“I haven’t told her,” I cringe.

“Ah, so that’s why you’re here. You’re worried she won’t respond well since your relationship is fake.” My mouth drops open as my mother tears down every illusion Sophie and I built.

“Wh-what are you talking about?” It’s not hard to look caught off guard because I am.

“I knew something was off from the moment you told me, but I couldn’t figure it out. I had my suspicions that you two were faking things, but I had no motive to ground that theory.” I resist the urge to roll my eyes at her detective terms. “But I

ran into Whitney at the first ball. After she'd had a few too many glasses of chardonnay, she informed me that the only way she could get Sophie to come was to bribe her. I figured Sophie wouldn't want to date right after her breakup, so you stepped up."

"Glad you cracked the case." My tone is dry, making her narrow her eyes.

"You should have known better than to keep something from me."

"So I guess the whole family knows now?"

"Just us in this room," Naomi chimes in. "Oh, and Daniel, because we're married so no secrets."

"Okay, that's good at least. Please, don't tell anyone else. Sophie will be so upset."

"You two shouldn't be lying to everyone," my dad says in his baritone voice. My head hangs at his disappointed tone.

"I know. It sounded like a good idea at the time, but we both hated lying once it started. Sophie needs this for her business, though, so please don't say anything. We're so close to the end."

"We won't say anything," Mom says, and I breathe a sigh of relief. "*If* you promise you're going to tell Sophie your true feelings. Lying to Whitney is one thing, lying to Sophie is not an option."

"I'm going to tell her the next time I see her alone, I promise. I don't want to wait any longer either." Sebastian's

words about Sophie feeling manipulated are ringing in my head. I hope that by waiting to see her attraction I didn't shoot myself in the foot. My leg bounces faster.

“Bennett, it was easy for all of us to see that both of you have feelings for each other. Nothing fake about it on either side. You just have to be open and honest with her. It's going to be okay.”

“What if it's not? What if I already messed everything up with this fake boyfriend thing?”

“Then you take it in stride and show her that it's been real all along. But I really think it's going to be okay.”

My mom's words reassure me and help lessen my anxiety. Mom's known Sophie for as long as I have. In different ways, because theirs is more of a mother-daughter relationship, but she knows her just as well as I do. I hoped this would be the feeling I'd have before heading back to Atlanta. Telling Sophie isn't going to be an easy task but knowing that my family is rooting for us helps. Even more than that, knowing that they saw affection on her side to help ease my mind.

Sophie wants more with me. She might be scared, but I think she still has that desire. I just have to show her she doesn't need to be afraid of me. Michael might have broken her heart, but I won't.

CHAPTER 16

Bennett St. James

It's Thursday and I still haven't been able to talk to Sophie about my feelings. I went by her food truck when she was supposed to be closing down for the day yesterday, but she hit a hot streak and was still slammed. There was no way I'd have time to talk to her. She looked exhausted too. Having grown up with a mom and sister, I know better than to have a big conversation while a woman is tired.

So now I'm on my way home from work, unsure of how to tell her before our next scheduled event. We have a sit-down charity dinner tomorrow night, then another ball on Sunday evening.

There's no way I can last through another event...seeing her all dressed up, being close enough to smell her sweet perfume, staring into her captivating eyes... I shake my head, gripping my steering wheel in an attempt to stay focused on the road in front of me. Yeah, I won't make it through without revealing something.

When I pull into my building's parking lot, I glance around just to see if Sophie maybe came to surprise me. That's when I spot the edge of her red pickup parked in the designated street parking down the road. *She's going to prank me.* I decide to leave my bag of paperwork in the car and come back for it later tonight. There's no telling what she has up her sleeve.

The trek to my apartment feels incredibly long and yet so short at the same time. I'm not ready for what's behind my door. Not because of the prank, but because of what I have to say afterward. I hope Sophie pranks me for the rest of our lives, and that's why this conversation needs to go well. I barely know what I'm going to say to her, much less how I can segway from her pranking me to confessing my feelings.

Could I lose my best friend tonight? The thought weighs on my mind, heavy and uncomfortable. There's too much at stake here. I'm not sure if I can even envision a future without Sophie at this point. At least as my friend. She's sweet and understanding and wonderful, but she could also take all of this the wrong way and our friendship could turn into a bittersweet memory as a result.

With that pleasant train of thought swirling around my head, I rake a hand through my hair and shove my key into the lock of my front door. Upon my first step into my apartment, a shocking cold falls over me. Freezing water and chunks of ice hits the top of my head and soaks my whole upper body.

"Ahh!" A gargled sound of shock leaves my mouth. Icy water slides down my spine, making a chill wrack my body. A

squeak of laughter makes me lift my drenched head to find Sophie standing a few feet away. Her phone is dangling from her hand, leading me to believe she filmed the whole fiasco.

“Welcome home,” she says with a toothy grin. I shut the door behind me and then narrow my eyes at her.

“Oh, you’re in for it, Sophie Cunningham,” I say, making her turn on her heel and book it toward the kitchen. I run after her, my shoes squeaking and slipping under me. I slide into the kitchen where Sophie is standing behind the island. We circle it in tandem, eyes locked.

“Come on, Soph, just let me give you a hug and then we’re even.” I hold out my arms while she holds back a smile.

“Somehow, I don’t believe that will be the end of your payback.”

I shrug. “The longer you run the worse it will get.” Her eyes flick around the room as we keep circling, no doubt thinking of an escape plan. Suddenly, she lurches to the left, and I do the same, but she runs to the right. It’s no use though, I’m faster than her. I snag her before she can run any further and pull her to my chest. Her head hits right under my chin, so her face gets mashed into my cold and damp jacket.

She squeals. “Ben, stop! It’s freezing.” I hug her tighter while she pushes against me. When I finally let go, her sage green t-shirt has turned into a forest green, and her face glistens from being wet. She glares at me, but it’s all for show.

“You know I always get payback,” I say and she rolls her eyes.

“Well, are you done now? I made dinner for you, it’s in the oven to stay warm. But I’m not letting you have any if you try to hug me again.”

“Trying to up your score in our fake relationship?” The line comes out before I can think about it, and my smile falls soon after I say it. It’s an unwelcome reminder that I have to talk to Sophie, soon.

“Maybe.” She walks to the oven and opens it to check on whatever is inside. “Go get changed before you get a cold. Can’t have my fake boyfriend too sick to go to the event. I think I’d rather lose the catering gig than have to go with someone my *mother* chose for me.”

“Do you need a shirt too?” I ask and she glances down at her damp one with a laugh.

“Yeah, that would be good. Thanks, Ben.” She throws a smile over her shoulder that sends an arrow right into my heart. I can’t lose this. I can’t lose her.

After changing into sweatpants and a t-shirt, I come out with a plain black one for Sophie. She’s dishing out our dinner onto a plate. Whatever it is has the entire house smelling amazing, which I’m able to notice better now that I’m not freezing and wet.

“What did you make?” I stand near her as she plates the meal.

“Osso Buco over polenta,” she says as if making braised veal is no big deal. As if she didn’t work all day and then come to my house to make a meal that takes a few hours to cook.

“Soph, you didn’t need to do all this. You know I’m happy with just a grilled cheese. Or even take out.” She shrugs then drizzles more of the sauce from the bottom of the pan onto the meat.

“You’ve done so much for me recently. You comforted me after the breakup with Michael, then you volunteered yourself to be my fake boyfriend and helped defend me against the force that is my mother. I think that deserves more than a grilled cheese.” She looks up at me and my chest tightens. Her face is open and sincere, making me want to do even more for her than I have already. If she told me she wanted authentic French bread for our meal I’d hop on a flight to Paris and buy a whole bakery if it meant she’d give me a smile.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the fake relationship stuff, actually,” I say and her face falls.

“You don’t want to do it anymore? I know it’s hard, but it’s just two more big events and maybe a couple of small ones but I—”

I cut her off. “Soph, breathe. That’s not what it is. Why don’t you change and we can eat and talk in the living room?”

She lets out a breath and nods.

“Okay, I’ll do that.” She takes the shirt from my hand and goes into my bedroom to change. I try not to think about the fact that she’s changing in my room. I might have failed by the time she comes back out. No one will ever know.

We settle onto my couch and Sophie looks so at home in my t-shirt, under my blanket, that it almost hurts to look at her.

“Did you taste the food while I was changing?” she asks and I give her a pointed look.

“No, I didn’t, because I’m your best friend who knows you like to creepily watch people take their first bite.”

She scrunches her nose up at my wording, then gestures to the plate in my lap. “Well, try it! Then we can talk.”

I dig my fork into the veal, and it’s so tender that it falls apart. I scoop up the polenta, sauce, and chopped vegetables as well to get the perfect bite. As soon as it hits my tongue, I have to stop myself from groaning. It’s rich and salty but balanced out with a hint of acid. As with everything Sophie does, it’s impeccable.

“Amazing,” I say as I shovel another bite in, and she giggles.

“Good, thank you for waiting to try it.” Silence falls over the living room for a moment, and I take another bite before gathering the courage to speak up.

“I have to tell you something, but I don’t want you to freak out.”

“That’s not foreboding at all.”

My heart picks up speed. I set my plate on the coffee table and clear my throat. I open my mouth to confess my feelings, but the words won't come. I run a hand through my hair, sighing. *Just tell her. You can't avoid it any longer.*

“Ben, whatever it is, it will all be okay. We're best friends.”

“That's the thing: I don't want to be best friends anymore.” Her eyes get big, a bewildered look on her face. It's only then that I realize what I said. “Oh! No, no, I mean I *do* want to be friends.” *This is not going well at all.* My mouth feels like someone poured a truckload of sand in it, so I grab my water to take a sip. Except when I do, my hand catches the edge of my plate hanging off the table, sending the meal to the floor. I don't think this could get any worse.

“Let me get something to clean it up,” Sophie says as she stands, and I spring up out of my seat.

“No, don't worry about it!” I laugh nervously.

“Ben, what on earth is going on? Are you okay?”

I cross the room over to her and grab her hands. “I'm not okay, I'm a mess.” She nods like she agrees completely. I squeeze her hands and she squeezes mine back with a wary smile. I draw strength from her gesture. “I want to be more than friends. I'm in love with you, Soph. This fake relationship hasn't been fake for me in the slightest. I want more with you and I have for a while.”

She pulls her hands away and takes a step back. Confusion and shock intermingle in her eyes. She shakes her head like

she doesn't believe me. "I think you're just mixed up, Ben. It's hard to pretend when we're so close to each other. I felt some things too, but it's all fake. You're confused is all."

I shake my head and take a step toward her, but she takes another back, making me frown. Hearing that she felt something gives me hope, but her moving away from me counteracts the feeling.

"I felt this way before we started fake dating. It just helped me confirm how I felt."

"I think this has all gone to your head and that's okay. I can go with someone else. In a week you'll see this was all silly."

"I've had feelings for you since before you and Michael broke up," I blurt and she just blinks at me.

"You must be mistaken." Silence stretches between us. I feel like I'm looking at her from across an ocean instead of my living room. "Tell me when. The exact moment." She must want me to say I don't know so she can use it against me and say I'm confused still, but I remember that fateful day all too well.

"The first day I met Michael. You two were walking up to me outside to meet up for dinner. You looked like a shell of yourself under his arm. I could tell he was a lampshade over your light. But then you lifted your head and saw me. You smiled and it was beautiful, like pure sunshine. Something changed that day, and it's only gotten worse since then."

She shakes her head, stepping back again. She trips over herself but jerks away when I try to help her. My heart feels like someone is taking a carving knife to it.

“That can’t be true. How did I not know?”

“I kept myself busy for a long time because you were with him and I couldn’t do anything about it. But now you’re not with him, thankfully.”

She snaps her eyes to me, anger flashing in them. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sophie, everyone hated how he treated you. He wasn’t good enough for you.”

“Oh, I know what this is. You were jealous because I started spending more time with him than you. This isn’t you having feelings, this is the result of male ego.”

I take a step back, feeling like I’ve been hit physically. “How could you say that?” I think I see regret come over her, but it’s gone just as quick as it came.

“If you had these feelings for me, and they were real, why did you suggest fake dating?”

“Because I was scared of you running away or getting upset like you are right now. I hoped that maybe you would see how good we are together.”

“So your plan was to manipulate me into loving you?”

I scrub my hands over my face, feeling like my world is crumbling around me and I can’t do anything except try to

catch the pieces as they fall. “I’m telling you now to avoid that. I felt awful and knew I couldn’t pretend any longer. I know you’re scared, but please, don’t think the worst of me.”

“I’m not scared, Bennett, I’m angry. If this is all true, you should have told me right away. Michael broke up with me *months* ago. You’ve had a hundred opportunities to say something, but you never did.”

“Why are you still questioning if it’s true? You know me, Sophie. Why would I hurt you?”

“Either way, true or not, you’ve hurt me. Best friends don’t lie to each other-not like you have.” Her words sound cold and distant. She’s pulling away. Panic claws at my chest.

“I was scared, Sophie. I didn’t want to lose you. You have to understand I’d do anything to make you happy. I’ll still go to these events with you, and it can be as fake or as real as you want it to be. I’m not trying to force you into anything.”

“I can’t be here right now,” she chokes out and rushes toward the door.

“We need to talk this out. Please don’t leave.” *Me, don’t leave me*, my brain finishes.

“I need some time alone.” She slings her bag over her shoulder and grabs her shoes, not even bothering to put them on before rushing out the door.

The door slams shut, echoing through the empty apartment.

What have I done?

CHAPTER 17

Sophie Cunningham

No, no, no. This isn't happening.

I can barely see the road through the blur of my tears. My bare feet are wet and keep slipping against the pedals. I make it a few miles away from Bennett's apartment before I have to pull over in a parking lot.

I bang the steering wheel with the palm of my hand until it hurts too much to continue. When I went to Bennett's apartment tonight this is the last thing I thought would happen. I thought we'd laugh and eat dinner together, that maybe being around him would feel less strange if I did something normal like that.

Now, it's like I'm on a tilt-a-whirl at the fair, my emotions spinning me faster and faster until I want to throw up. My mind can't wrap around what he confessed. It just doesn't make sense. I aggressively swipe the tears from my face with the hem of my shirt. It's only then that I realize it's *his* shirt. My chest aches, but I force myself to drive again.

I don't understand why he'd lie to me. It's hard to fathom that he's in love with me, but beyond that, he *hid it* from me. We've never had secrets, at least not intentional ones. I don't know how to process any of this. Tears stream down my face the whole drive and by the time I pull into the townhouse driveway, the sleeve of Bennett's shirt is drenched from me wiping away my tears.

There's a small, green SUV parked in front of me, which means MJ is home. If I had anywhere else to go, I'd leave right now. I love my best friends, but I just want to lock myself away until the pain subsides. Except, right now I'm convinced it won't ever fade. The hollow feeling in my chest has been growing since I slammed the door to Bennett's apartment. If it keeps up I'll be a shell before the night is over.

I wipe my face again with the ridiculously soft black fabric. It annoys me how comfortable it is. I want to yank it off and rip it to shreds, but more likely than not I'll wash it and keep it forever.

I get out and slam my truck door. I want to be angry, not sad, but my heart isn't cooperating. My brain wants to take a sledgehammer to every memory with Bennett, but my heart wants to take each memory out and go through it like the heartbroken girl I am. I try to unlock the front door, but my hands are shaking too much and I drop the keys. Picking them up, I try again, only for them to drop once more. I'm about to get my keys and throw them into the bushes when the door swings open.

MJ is standing there, watching me with concern in her hazel eyes. She bends down and grabs my keys for me, then stands to the side so that I can walk over the threshold. She shuts the door behind us and looks at me without saying a word.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“No one is asking you to.”

I nod once and start walking toward the kitchen. I get halfway before I stop in my tracks.

“Bennett told me he has feelings for me.” MJ makes a noise of acknowledgment but says nothing else. “I don’t know if I believe him. Or if I’m upset with him. Or if I have feelings for him too.” Actually, I do know. It’s all of those things. Which only makes it hurt more.

“Sounds confusing,” MJ finally says after a long moment of silence.

I start toward the kitchen again. Whenever I’m stressed or anxious or upset, I like to organize things. The pantry seems like a good place to start tonight, so I begin unloading all the items and placing them on our countertops.

MJ enters the kitchen and leans against the cabinet across from me. I keep taking out canned goods and stacking them on the counter. Why do we have so many cans, anyway? We rarely use any of them. Maybe one of the girls became a doomsday prepper and didn’t tell me.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I grumble and MJ raises a dark brow.

“I didn’t know you became a mind reader. Do tell,” she says and I huff at her snarky tone.

“I can’t handle your attitude right now, MJ,” I say and she shakes her head. “You’re thinking that I shouldn’t have done this whole fake dating thing and that I should have listened to you and Grace and Lottie.”

“Sounds like you’re projecting.”

I give her a dark look, but she seems unphased.

“I’m not projecting, I just know you and I know what everyone is going to think when they see me this way.”

“They’re going to think exactly what I thought when I saw you: *I hope she’s okay.*” I stop my stacking and look at her across the kitchen. “Sophie, no one is waiting to pull out the ‘I told you so’ banner. I’m here for you if you want to talk about what happened, so quit making me sound like a bad friend and just tell me.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry, you’re right. You’re not a bad friend, I’m just a mess.” She doesn’t say anything to this, which is probably confirmation that I am a mess. I pull out the organization bins I ordered after Michael broke up with me and start rearranging the snacks and ingredients in them.

“Bennett told me he’s had feelings for me since he saw me with Michael in person for the first time.” The admission hangs in the air like a heavy raincloud ready to pour. “I don’t know if I believe that, though. It doesn’t seem possible.”

“Has he given you any reason to think he’s lying?” MJ asks. Anger flares at the question, but I tamp it down. When Bennett asked how I could think he was lying, it infuriated me. He’s been lying to me since that day, according to him. How can I trust anything he says?

“If he’s not lying about the time period, then it’s almost worse in a way. Then he’s lied about having feelings for me all this time.”

“How do you feel if you assume he’s not lying? Let’s say he’s telling the truth about starting to fall for you after your first date with Michael.”

Her saying that Bennett is falling for me out loud makes my stomach dip. I’ve never allowed myself to think that Bennett could love me in that way, not even when I crushed on him in high school. I went in assuming my crush would be unrequited.

I can’t respond. Emotion clogs my throat. It should be a dream come true for Bennett to want more with me. What girl doesn’t want to date her best friend? But I can’t get all of the voices out of my head telling me this is a bad idea.

He lied to you.

He’s never been in a relationship before.

Your heart is still healing from Michael.

Can you trust your own judgment again?

What if you break up?

You'll never be enough for him or anyone else.

The scary part is most of the voices sound like my mother, and some of them sound like Michael. I shake my head as tears burn my eyes once again.

“Hey,” MJ says softly, coming around to pull me into a hug. “You don’t have to respond. I was just trying to help, but if that’s not helpful, we’ll do something else. I can make brownies.” MJ has a bunch of dietary restrictions that make her brownies devoid of refined sugar, gluten, and dairy, but somehow they’re still delicious. She knows they’re my favorite.

“Normally I’d say no to be polite ...”

MJ laughs and pulls back from the hug. “I’ll start making them. Why don’t you go get cleaned up and lay on the couch? No romance movies allowed.” She gives me a stern look.

“Thank you,” I sniffle. “You’re secretly mushy on the inside and I love you for it.”

MJ sets her mouth in a hard line, but I can see the warmth in her eyes. “Go before I change my mind.”

I scurry out of the kitchen because there is no way I’m jeopardizing my chance at homemade brownies.

I scrub my face with a washcloth, probably ruining my skin in the process. But there’s just something about a good scrub after you’re crying and your mascara is all goopy. It makes you not care about your moisture barrier or whatever it is those skincare gurus talk about on the internet.

After washing my face, I change out of my jeans into leggings ... but I keep the t-shirt on. It's soft, and I need soft right now. That's the only reason. Not because it's Ben's.

When I walk into the living room, Grace is there and so is Lottie. Sympathy lines their faces and I instantly want to run away. It's not in their character to judge me, but it's still scary to be vulnerable. Lottie wraps me up in a cupcake-scented hug and Grace throws her arms around me too.

"I love Ben, but I will beat him up," Lottie says, and I laugh at the sound of her sweet voice trying to be threatening.

"You don't need to do that." Because I love Ben, too. Even after all this, it's too ingrained in me to stop. I think that's what makes it hurt so much. It always hurts more when you love the person who wronged you.

"MJ can send her brothers over to get him too," Grace offers as we pull back from the group hug and I laugh. I know neither of them is serious and are just trying to make me smile.

"I don't think that's necessary," MJ says as she comes into the living room. "Bennett told her he loved her, so I feel like that doesn't warrant a house call from the Carter brothers. Now, if he would have done anything to hurt her ..." She trails off, sitting down on the couch. "It would only take one call."

"All MJ said in her text was that you came home from Bennett's upset. What happened?" Lottie asks, tugging me down to sit on the couch next to her.

“He told me he’s had feelings since he met Michael, and that none of this fake dating stuff has been fake to him. It’s hard for me to believe that it’s all true, especially because I thought he would tell me before now.”

Lottie looks to Grace. They seem like they’re having a conversation, except no words are being shared. Grace nods, and then Lottie glances at MJ, who immediately shrugs. *What on earth?*

“Sophie, Bennett is telling the truth,” Lottie says and reaches out to grab my hand. After giving it a squeeze, she continues. “We’ve known for a while now that he’s had feelings for you. He made them pretty obvious at my bachelorette party. He even admitted it to Callum during their poker game before.”

My mouth drops open. “All of you knew?”

“We didn’t want to say anything because it wasn’t our place,” Grace elaborates. “But now that he’s told you, you should know he didn’t want to hurt you.”

Lottie nods. “It was genuinely the last thing he wanted to do. We’re on your side, so if you’re mad at him so are we, but I don’t think he meant to lie to you.”

I try to let this information soak in. Bennett didn’t want to hurt me, but he did. He should have just been honest. At the same time, I didn’t make it easy on him. I was dating someone else, then I told him I was giving up men for a year. Assuming he’s been wanting me all this time ... it would have been hard

to *not* jump into the fake dating plan I came up with. It still wasn't right of him, but I see how it happened.

"I don't think he did either." I sigh. "But what am I supposed to do now? My best friend has feelings for me, and I don't know if I'm ready for any relationship, much less one that could make me lose him for good."

I had a taste of that pain tonight, and it's awful. I don't think I could handle a true breakup with Bennett.

"Just tell him that," Grace says. "Tell him that you're unsure. Bennett is a good guy, he'll understand."

I stare down at my hands. "I don't know. I said a lot of awful things to him." A realization stabs me in the chest, making me suck in a breath. "I was *so* mean to him." Tears spring to my eyes. "What if I ruined everything? What if none of this matters because he never wants to see me again?"

I'm crying again, and I have a feeling the tears aren't going to let up for a while.

"You've been friends for over twenty years. You're not going to lose him over one fight, even one as big as this." MJ's straightforward words are a balm to my heart tonight. She wouldn't say that if she didn't believe it.

"My suggestion is to just take a day to rest and think, then reach out to him. That way you've both cooled down and maybe you'll have thought of what to say to him," Lottie says. "Chances are he'll reach out to you before tomorrow is over anyway."

“That sounds like a good idea.”

The oven beeps, and MJ stands.

“For tonight, let’s just eat our weight in brownies and watch your weird crime shows,” Grace laughs and I smile, but on the inside I’m all twisted up thinking about Bennett’s hands on my skin as we ignored that documentary. He was so kind to me like he always is. I can’t recall a time when Bennett hasn’t tried to take care of me, to love me. Looking back on the evening, I can see that during his confession he was still trying to care for me.

Worry wraps its way around my lungs and squeezes. I hope that I didn’t ruin everything good by being scared. Because now that I’m faced with the thought of losing him, my feelings are becoming clearer.

It feels like someone has sprayed Windex on my brain and I can see everything from the past month clearer. All the little moments I second-guessed now become sweeter when I think of Bennett’s true intentions. Each touch and look is layered with meaning. It makes me wish I could go back and react differently.

How did I not see it before? Oh, I wish I would have known.

My heart aches for the chance to have known how he felt sooner. If I did, maybe we’d be together right now. Cuddled up on his couch, eating Osso Buco and laughing about my prank. But now there’s so much between us to figure out.

After living with my mom's toxic form of affection for so long, and then doubling down on that with Michael, I feel as if maybe I did know of Ben's feelings all along, but refused to see it. I've spent my life second-guessing the love others gave me because one of the people who was supposed to love me the most, manipulated me instead.

I snuggle deeper into the couch as MJ passes out brownies to all of us. I just have to make it through tomorrow, then Bennett and I can talk. A part of me wants to run over there now, but a much bigger part of me is too scared. I couldn't bear to face him if he was angry with me. No, Lottie is right, we need a break.

I just hope when that break is done I still have my best friend.

CHAPTER 18

Sophie Cunningham

I didn't think this through. That seems to be the motto of my life lately. I've been too afraid to reach out to Bennett all day, and because of our argument I forgot about the event tonight. It's a charity dinner, and I have no date now. After all we went through, I'm going to miss out on this opportunity right at the finish line. It's not like I can call him now, it'll look like I'm using him.

I stare at myself in the mirror, trying to will myself to calm down. My hands shake as they brush over the black satin fabric of my cocktail dress. It hugs at my waist and shimmers over what little curves I possess, accentuating them. The dress stops mid calf, and I'm using a pair of black heels to boost my height and balance out the lengthier dress.

I'm still going to the dinner. Hopefully, my mother will accept Bennett's last minute cancellation and still keep our deal. Bennett's words about me not needing her help come to mind, but I can't think of them right now. I need to just keep going and do what I can. Even if I have to do it alone. The

thought makes tears come again, so I tilt my head back and fan my face to keep them in.

I kept my makeup relatively simple tonight, but my wing liner cannot survive a sob fest. And I know that if I start crying I'll face plant into my pillow and not even go. No, no tears allowed tonight.

I smooth the top of my hair which I've left down in soft curls. The lavender dye in my hair is fading some, starting to look more silvery blonde, but I don't mind tonight. That could work in my favor with my mom too.

I wave to the girls on my way out, avoiding eye contact so that they don't say something and accidentally trigger the tears I've been desperately trying to hold in all day.

The drive to the dinner venue isn't long, which I'm thankful for because every song that comes on reminds me of Ben. Love song, breakup song, party song, you name it. I somehow relate it to him. If I was on a game show and this was the game, I'd win big time.

I hand my keys to the valet, who eyes my truck like it's going to break down on him the moment he gets in it. I'm sure most of the people here drove up in a Tesla or a Mercedes. Once he drives away, I'm left alone again and hating how it feels. I'm convinced loneliness is the worst thing a person can feel.

I walk around the big fountain at the entrance, admiring the architecture, and stop dead in my tracks. There, waiting on a bench in the courtyard is Ben, *my* Ben. He lifts his head and

sees me. I'm frozen in place, unsure of what to do or say. Immediately, he stands and takes a step to me. He falters, but when I don't make any moves, he walks slowly toward me.

He looks achingly gorgeous tonight in black dress pants and a white shirt with a few buttons undone. I'm suddenly overcome with the desire to press my face right where his skin is exposed. To breathe him in and feel his warmth.

"Sophie." My name sounds like desperation on his lips. Under his eyes is dark like he hasn't slept. Mine would look the same if not for the concealer I piled on.

"Ben," I choke out, my emotions starting to overtake me. "You came."

"Of course I did I—" He stops for a moment, looking pained. "I love you," he grits out.

Everything around me falls away and I'm brought back to the first time Bennett said he loved me when we were kids. My dad had just passed away from a sudden heart attack. Bennett came up to me in the hospital hallway and told me it was going to be okay. I told him he was stupid for saying that and that he had his dad, so he didn't know anything. That maybe if his dad died he'd know how I felt. He tried to hug me and I hit his chest, crying, until I collapsed in his arms. Bennett, at eleven years old, whispered that he loved me for the first time on a dirty hospital floor.

Standing in this courtyard at twenty-six years old I feel the same as I did back then. Scared, unsure, and unworthy of the words he just uttered. It's the kind of feeling that steals your

breath and makes your knees buckle, and when that very thing happens Bennett grasps my elbow and leads me to the cold metal bench he was occupying when I arrived.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, now holding both my hands. “I should have told you sooner.” His thumbs rub circles on the backs of my hands, threatening to distract me from his words. “I promise I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know,” I whisper, trying to hold myself together. “I love you too.”

His thumbs pause and I find I miss the soothing movement immediately. I recall all the times he’s comforted me over the past month and beyond that, and it makes my heart inflate like a Valentine’s Day balloon. He’s so easy to love. Maybe that’s what makes loving him so scary in the first place. I know if I let myself I’d tumble over the edge, no parachute in sight.

“I don’t know how I feel about us yet,” I say, training my eyes on our joined hands so that I don’t have to look into his eyes. I’m too afraid of what I’m going to find there.

“That’s okay, you can take your time. I never wanted to rush you.”

“You aren’t upset?” I chance it and look up at him. He’s smiling.

“The only thing upsetting me is the thought that I hurt you.”

“I wish you would have told me sooner,” I admit. “But I understand why you didn’t.”

“Can you forgive me?”

“Yes,” I answer and his grin rivals the sun. He pulls me into a hug and the scent of him calms the anxiety swirling like a tornado inside of me just for a moment. He’s safe and steady.

“Take as much time as you need to figure things out. And don’t be afraid to tell me if you don’t feel the same way.” I almost laugh at the thought but hold it back.

There’s no question anymore *if* I feel something for Bennett. Now I’m just afraid of what the feelings I have will do to me, to us.

“Where do we go from here though?” I look behind us at the large mansion, warm light in the windows breaks the darkness of night settling around us.

“We’ll do what we’ve been doing all along. If that’s what you want,” he says, drawing my eyes back to him.

“I want to see this through ...”

“But?”

“But now I feel like things will be even more awkward. You want something I’m not sure I’m ready for, but I’m making you go through the motions of the very thing you want. It sounds like torture.” I shake my head and look at the ground. “I can’t put you through that.”

“Hey,” Bennett whispers and lifts my chin up. Sparks scatter from the small touch, and my heart stutters in my chest. “You’re not making me do anything, Soph. I came here hoping for a chance, and you’re giving it to me.” His hand shifts so

he's holding the side of my face. "If being by your side tonight is torture, then it'll be the sweetest torture I've ever endured."

I think I've forgotten how to breathe. The very notion of inhale then exhale seems foreign in this moment. Bennett's thumb caresses my cheekbone before his hand slides away. I sway forward when he removes his hand and have to grip the metal bench to not fall into him.

How does a woman respond to *that*?

The door to the home opens, light spilling out. The figure in the doorway is tall, slender, and ominous. My mother.

"There you are!" She clicks down the stairs in her too expensive shoes. "What are you doing out here? Dinner is about to begin." She says this with the same urgency as one might say *the ambulance is on its way*.

"We were just about to head inside," Bennett says and stands. He holds out his hand to me, giving me a boyish grin that reminds me of hiding in pantries and eating cake under tables. "That is, if you're ready?" I place my hand in his and stand up next to him.

He intertwines our fingers and it feels like safety, like home.

"Of course she's ready," my mother sneers. "She's *late*."

"The wonderful part about questions is that I can direct them at a specific person depending on word choice," Bennett says, "In this case, mine was directed to Sophie, not you."

My mouth drops open. My mother sputters like she doesn't know what to say, and she likely doesn't. It's probably been

quite a long time since someone antagonized Whitney Cunningham.

“See you inside, Mom,” I say and tug Bennett past my malfunctioning mother and we walk up the stone steps to the imposing door that looks like it belongs on a castle in England, not a mansion in Atlanta.

He opens the door and smiles down at me. I pause for a moment, still unsure of what could come from spending a night pretending to date a man who has professed his love for me. Everything feels different already and we haven't even crossed the threshold.

“We can leave if you want. It's all up to you, Soph.” Those words are exactly what I need to hear. I step inside and he follows me, placing a hand on my lower back that sends warm tingles up my spine.

I don't know if I've ever felt this level of control in a relationship before. Bennett has his own feelings and desires, but he's sacrificing them to let me make my own choice. Michael never did that. In fact, he often did the opposite. My desires were less important than his, but I was so caught up in the idea of being wanted that I didn't see things for what they were.

We enter the dining room, and I have to admit that whoever is hosting has done an amazing job. The table is lengthy, able to seat all of the guests in one spot without being crowded. It's decorated with black taper candles set in brass candelabras. The florals are rich burgundy with dark greenery woven

throughout. The host clearly enjoys a gothic style, and I know my dress color will be welcome here.

Most of the seats are taken, except two near the head of the table where I expect the host will sit. I'm sure that's why it's been avoided so far. This house is intimidating enough to make me want to ask to switch seats. But when an older woman with streaks of blue and purple in her curly white hair comes and sits in that very spot, I suddenly feel at ease.

Bennett pulls out the high backed chair to the right of the hostess for me. I sit down and follow him with my eyes as he pulls out his own chair and sits down. The dim lighting casts shadows on his face, making his jawline even sharper. I have an urge to run my finger down it.

When he reaches for his water glass I take note of his hand. Some would say he has the hands of a surgeon, strong and skilled. But when we were younger I would have called them piano hands, because his long fingers could easily reach out and play every note effortlessly during our lessons. I wonder what it would be like to feel them sift through my hair as he kissed me.

He looks over at me, smirking behind his glass when he catches me watching him. My skin flushes with heat, and my cheeks are liable to match the flowers on the table. He takes a sip of water and I've never wanted to be an inanimate object until this moment.

What is wrong with me? It's like the moment he told me it was my choice I just abandoned all my anxiety surrounding

our relationship and fell into a pit of desire. I wrench my eyes from him and study the place setting in front of me as if it was the most interesting thing in the world.

I can't get caught up in mere feelings. There's too much at stake here to let go of my concerns so easily. Bennett reaches over and grabs my hand in my lap. The cool condensation from his glass has left his fingertips damp. My traitorous mind forces me to wonder if his lips would have that same coolness if I kissed him right now.

"Are you two newlyweds?" The hostess grins at me when I lift my head and balk at her.

"Just dating," I squeak and she chortles.

"Even better! I know young love and desire when I see it. Ah, the days of questioning each look, each touch." Her tone is wistful yet there's a sauciness about her that makes my nerves swirl. I don't need any reminders to question everything Bennett does around me. I've already been doing it for the past month.

"How long have you and your husband been married?" I nod to the large black diamond settled on her wrinkled left hand.

"We were married fifty-two years before the Lord took my sweet Harold home. Those years were the best of my life, and I know no one else will compare to him. It's why I keep this ring on and turn down every old buck who asks me on a date. It's not fair to them."

“That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Thank you, dearie. I do miss having someone to share the ups and downs of life with, but I entertain myself with parties like this and throwing color in my hair like I’m twenty. It passes the time.”

My heart breaks for her, but at the same time I get the feeling she wouldn’t accept my pity. “Do you have any advice to give? Fifty-two years is a long time.”

She smiles at me and Bennett. “Make sure you marry someone who makes you laugh. That’s the only way life won’t be so boring. Oh! And be sure they’re a good kisser.” She winks as my eyes get big.

“That’s good advice,” I say, making sure to keep my eyes glued to her and not even glance at Bennett. He’s either going to have some flirty look on his face, or a silly one that will make me burst into laughter in front of all these haughty rich people.

The first course comes out, and the woman turns her attention to those on the other side of the table. Bennett removes his hand from mine so we can both eat, but in between each course one of us reaches out to grab the other. I’ve never eaten so fast before. All to hold my best friend’s hand.

I’m not sure what to make of the fact that each time our hands touch my heart skips. Or that when his thumb starts to trace shapes over mine at the end of the dessert course, desire for something more builds deep in me. Each tingle, each spark

is disconcerting and delicious all at once. I can't recall feeling this way about anyone else.

I'm ... falling in love with Bennett.

CHAPTER 19

Bennett St. James

Sophie is stunning. She's a burst of color in a sunset, the first bite of ice cream in summer, the feeling of coming home after being gone for days. She's tantalizing and enchanting and intoxicating. Every muscle in my body is taught in an attempt to not interrupt her conversation and smash my lips against hers.

Something changed tonight. I feel it in every touch of her hand, see it in every look from her sultry gray eyes. When I was waiting for her outside of the house tonight, I thought she might come up and tell me to leave. A dark part of me wondered if she'd show up with someone else. But she didn't. She showed up alone, looking as beautiful as ever, with a brokenness hidden within that only years of knowing her made me able to notice.

After we talked, though, that layer of brokenness slipped away to reveal a roaring fire. She's grabbed my hand and pulled it to her knee more than once, leaned into me countless times. I almost came undone when she trailed her fingertips

absentmindedly through the hair on my neck. She was mid-conversation, looking at ease and unaffected, all the while I was almost splintering the wooden chair while I gripped it.

Even now she seems intent on torturing me, snuggled into my side in the library of the hostess for tonight, Sylvie. Sylvie invited a select few people to stay behind for espresso and bonbons. Whitney wasn't one of them much to her dismay—and my delight. Sylvie didn't hesitate to say she only wants positive people in her home afterhours.

We've been talking to the loquacious old woman for hours, but it hasn't gotten old. Others left, but we stayed. She told us about her and her late husband's business. How they built their investment firm from the ground up and now she mostly sits back and watches it grow. She has plenty of children and grandchildren to run it, so she only works whenever she gets too bored on her own.

I'm not sure how she's ever bored enough to work though, because she regales us with stories of backpacking by herself through Europe and learning foreign cultures by living in the homes of the people she came across. Sophie is enthralled, and I know she's found a new idol to look up to.

“And then I ate fresh tuna sashimi right on the boat they caught it on. I've never tasted anything like it.” Sylvie finishes the story of hopping on a boat with some sports fisherman. Sophie's head is nestled against my shoulder and I feel her sigh.

“That sounds amazing. You’ve lived a beautiful life, Sylvie.”

“And I’m not done living it, so don’t sound so sentimental.”

I laugh and Sophie does too.

“All of your food stories make me want to run to the nearest kitchen and start cooking,” Sophie says and Sylvie gestures with her demitasse to the library door.

“I’ve got two of ‘em, you’re welcome to either.”

“If you keep talking like that, she’s never going to leave,” I joke and Sophie hits my chest lightly before settling her hand there.

“You like to cook?” Sylvie asks and I squeeze Sophie to my side. We haven’t talked business all night, but this is her chance. She could do something big, no Whitney Cunningham in sight.

“I’m a chef, actually,” Sophie says and sits up out of my arms. I’m disappointed until she lays one of her hands on my leg, as if she doesn’t want to be apart from me either. I draw lazy circles on her shoulder, enjoying the way she shivers under my touch.

“Really? I knew there was something I liked about you. I always get along with chefs—they feed me.” She laughs wholeheartedly at her own joke. Sophie giggles and my heart leaps at the sound of her so happy.

“I’ll have to come cook for you sometime, or you can come by my truck. I own a food truck called Farm-To-Truck.”

Sylvie reaches over and grabs a brass pen from the table and scribbles on a notepad. “You’ll see me there.”

I believe her. Sylvie doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who would lie to make someone feel better.

Sophie quiets down again, making me frown. This is her shot, why isn’t she going for it? Her hand on my knee is tight and even her side profile looks tense. She must be nervous.

“She’s amazing,” I say and squeeze her arm. “I know I might be biased, but her food is phenomenal. So great, that she’s looking into franchising.”

Sophie looks up at me with eyes as wide as the saucers our espressos sit on.

“Do you already have investors?” Sylvie is straight to the point, making me grin. I like her.

“No, ma’am, but I don’t want you to think we stayed just to convince you. I didn’t even know you owned a firm until you told us a little while ago.”

She waves her hand as if she’s swatting away Sophie’s apology.

“I know you aren’t trying to manipulate me. No one can anymore. I see right through them. Tell me about your business.”

Sophie instantly rattles off her sales—which impress both Sylvie and me—and her goals for the franchise and her love of local farmers and bakeries. By the end of her speech, I’m amazed she hasn’t gotten further with other investors. Her

heart for the business is clear, and she has the data to back up that she knows what she's doing. A beam of pride shoots through me for my best friend, for the one I love.

After Sophie is done, Sylvie stands up and walks over to a large desk in the corner of the room. There's a business card in her hands when she returns, which she hands to Sophie, her red nail polish glinting in the lamplight. She's not afraid of color, that's for sure.

"Give me a call and we can set up an appointment to talk shop. I'd tell you you've got the investment already, but my kids get all up in arms whenever I don't at least bring someone in before going off my gut feelings." She rolls her eyes. "Little do they know that this gut of mine built those fancy skyscrapers they work in."

"Thank you, Sylvie. I'm looking forward to working with you." I grin at the newfound confidence in Sophie's words.

"You should, I'm the best." She winks and we all laugh. "Now, you two lovebirds get out of here. I've got all my grandkids coming over in the morning and I need all the sleep I can get."

I appreciate that she doesn't skirt around asking us to leave. It's refreshing after spending the past month with high society snobs.

"Thank you again. Your home is lovely and dinner was wonderful." Sylvie pulls Sophie into a hug, and me into one right after.

“Thank you for coming. These parties are usually so I can people watch and keep an eye on those who want to work with me, but tonight, I actually had fun.” She gives us a meaningful look. “Don’t let all these money grubbers smother your light.”

“We won’t,” I say with a finality that Sylvie’s smile shows she approves of.

She leads us outside, hands us our keys, and tells us our cars are parked out front since the valet left a long time ago. We exchange goodbyes and once we’re back in the courtyard alone, Sophie squeals.

“I did it!” She jumps in my arms and I spin her around, laughing.

“You were *incredible*, Soph,” I say into her ear as I set her down. Her body slides down mine and I keep her close, my hands pressed against her back through the thin satin of her dress.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” she says and presses her face into my chest when she hugs me tight. I hold her to me, bringing one hand up to the back of her neck.

“You could have, and you did. Nothing about that in there had to do with me. You worked hard up until now and you just being you was impressive.” I kiss the crown of her head, the sweet floral scent in her hair reminding me of running with her through the garden as kids.

“Mush,” she whispers and I chuckle. It feels too good to have her in my arms. My thumb begins to trace formless

patterns on the back of her neck, and I relish the way her breath catches in response. She doesn't move away or tell me to stop. I'm soaring once again toward the sun, and I pray I don't come crashing down this time.

Suddenly, she nuzzles into the space where my shirt buttons are undone, her nose brushing my skin in a way that makes me inhale sharply.

"I've wanted to do that all night," she whispers into my skin, sending chills down my spine.

"You have?" I rasp out and feel her smile against me. I'm supposed to be the one who holds her up, but if she keeps this going she might have to carry me to the bench to sit. There's no way I'll be able to stay standing.

"You're tempting, Bennett St. James," she murmurs, and I wonder briefly if she got into the wine when I wasn't looking. Could she really mean this?

"Says the woman who looks like she poured herself into that dress." For the first time, I'm bold in my flirtation, and my heart pounds hard against my ribcage.

Her head lifts from my chest and she looks up at me. It's dark out, and the courtyard isn't brightly lit, but I can see the desire swimming in her eyes. I want to pull her in, but I can't. She has to make the first move. I won't steal her choice away, not when she was so scared before. She needs to know she'll always be safe with me.

Her fingers begin sifting through my hair on the back of my head. Her eyes rove over my face as if she's working through a puzzle. I let every emotion pent up inside of me come to the surface. I'm an open book for her to read.

"Do you remember what Sylvie said? About marriage?" she whispers into the night.

"I do," I say, and the irony of the phrase isn't lost on me.

"You make me laugh." The anticipation buzzing through my veins is stronger than any alcohol I've ever tried. Every brush of her fingertips is pure electricity, sending pulses of awareness through my body.

"You make me laugh too." My words come out like my throat is made of sandpaper. I'm trying so hard to control myself around her. She's my dream come to life. She knows me better than anyone, and if she kisses me tonight, if she admits to feeling even a fraction of what I feel for her, then I'll know that this is it. There's nothing hidden from her. The only thing hidden were my own feelings, and I'm wearing those like a banner right now in hopes that she'll respond.

"Do you think if we kissed, we'd feel something?" Sophie has asked me thousands of questions over the course of our friendship. Some have been normal, others outrageous. There's been plenty of times I haven't known the answer to what she asks. This isn't one of those times.

"Yes."

"How are you so sure?"

I want to push her against the nearest wall and show her, but I see the vulnerability in her gaze, and it makes me pause.

“Because, when you look at me it sends a shock straight to my heart. Like a defibrillator pressed to my chest.” I slide my hand from her neck to under her jaw, daring to let my thumb graze her bottom lip. She breathes in deep at the contact. “It’s like we’re attached to each other by a live wire. Do you feel it?”

I’m being vulnerable now too, letting my armor down. She could plunge a knife right into me. Push me straight into the abyss of heartbreak with just a word.

“Yes.” That one syllable whisper sends my heart into overdrive.

Her hands slide down to my collar and all it takes is a singular tug to make me press my mouth to hers. The first brush of our lips is like striking a match and then we’re kissing, tangled up in each other, set ablaze. She’s soft at first, like the satin she’s wrapped up in tonight, but then her fingers clench into the fabric of my shirt.

Our kisses become desperate and greedy. It feels like we’ve waited our whole lives for this, and in a way we have. My fingers find their way into her hair, tugging at the strands as I sift through them the way I’ve been dreaming about for months. A soft sound comes from the back of her throat, sending flames of desire across my skin. My teeth graze her bottom lip in a breath between kisses, then I’m diving into her again—lost in her without a care for returning to the surface.

She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me like the world is crumbling around us and we only have one night left. She tastes like rich chocolate and my future.

I pull away, pressing kisses down her jaw, each one a declaration *mine, mine, mine*. When I kiss the space below her ear she grabs my face and brings me back, her fevered kisses taking control to where all I'm thinking is *yours, yours, yours*.

We breathe heavily when we finally break apart, our foreheads pressed together. If someone checked my pulse right now they'd diagnose me with tachycardia, my heart is beating so fast.

“That was—I mean—” I stutter and Sophie giggles, the sound makes me feel like I'm floating.

“Perfect,” she whispers. “It was perfect.” Her lips brush mine again tenderly. I want to kiss her again. The yearning is overwhelming, but I realize where we are.

“We should probably go,” I say and it's like she comes back to earth, her eyebrows raising in surprise.

“Yes, we should,” she laughs. “Sylvie is probably watching from a window somewhere.”

“Let's hope not.”

We both laugh and I walk her to her car slowly, not wanting the night to end. If she gets in her car and leaves, will she start to regret what happened? We stay silent as we walk, her hand in mine. She hasn't said anything about her feelings, but if her

kiss is any indication ... I think I'm the luckiest man alive. Still, I worry that the moment was just that—a moment.

“Ben.” Sophie squeezes my hand. We're at our cars now, and she's looking up at me with eyes that see right through me. “Don't overthink this.” She takes a deep breath, seemingly steadying herself. “There's obviously more between us. I might take some time catching up to you, but I want this. I want *you*.”

I pull her to me and kiss her again, every cell in my body on fire with want. I'm about to deepen the kiss when cold water hits my back and sides. Sophie gasps into the kiss, then pulls away and squeals. The sprinklers have turned on where we're standing, spraying us from all directions.

I try to shield her, but it's no use. The sprinklers are right next to us. She throws her head back and laughs in my arms. I can feel her skin already chilling. It's still cold mid-February in Georgia with no sun to lessen the bite.

“You're going to freeze to death if you stay out here much longer,” I say over the sound of the water. “You need to go home.” I kiss her forehead and she grins.

“You take care of me.”

“Always,” I say and mean it. She slides into her car, rolling down the window. I block the sprinkler spray from getting in.

“Text me when you get home. I love you.” The words fall out easily. I used to hold them in for special occasions, never wanting them to lose their meaning. But now I can see myself

saying them all the time. They'll never lose meaning when it comes to Sophie.

"I love you too." She gives me a quick kiss, her lips wet.

My stomach swoops because I know the meaning of those words is changing for Sophie too. I may have slowed us down by hiding my own feelings, but I know that we're meant to be more. And now I know she agrees.

She drives away and I stand there, drenched to the bone and grinning like a fool, because my best friend *kissed me* tonight. I'm so glad we want people to know we're dating. If I had to hide it, everyone would just have to take one look at me to know how bad I've got it. And I don't even care, I do have it bad.

Look out everybody, because I'm all in, crazy in love with Sophie Cunningham.

CHAPTER 20

Sophie Cunningham

When rays of morning light hit my face, my first waking thought is Bennett. Okay, it's actually wondering why my blinds are open to let the bright light in, but Bennett is the *second* thought. I kick my feet under the covers and grin. I kissed Bennett last night. And oh, it was good. The best kiss of my life. All other kisses were a waste of time. If given the choice I'd choose one kiss from Ben over a thousand from any other guy. *Including* Ryan Gosling, a fact I'm sure Bennett would smirk if he heard.

I reach over to my nightstand and slide my phone off the wireless charger. The screen comes to life with various notifications, but there's one that makes my heart somersault.

Ben: Good morning, beautiful. Are you working today?

I squeal and sit up in my bed. I'm way too giddy over a good morning text. It must be residual energy from the kiss last night.

Sophie: Good morning <3 I'm working the truck tonight at the Thrashers' basketball game. Why?

Ben: It's a surprise. Pick you up at 12 PM?

I bite my lip as I type out my response.

Sophie: Sounds good!

Ben: It's a date.

I push up to standing on my bed, jumping and giggling like a freshman who just got asked to the prom. My door swings open, slowing my jumpathon. MJ stands in the doorway with raised brows.

“What are you doing?”

“Exercising?” I try but can't even keep a straight face. It's not like I'm going to hide anything from them. Standing on my bed, I can clearly see over MJ's short stature. Which means I see Grace and Wyatt, then Lottie and Callum, come to stand behind her and stare at me.

I'd stare too if I caught one of them in their pajamas, sporting bed head as they imitated a kangaroo in their bedroom.

“We heard you squealing in here. What happened?” Lottie asks, always on the hunt for information about her best friends.

I press my lips together, but it's no use. I can't contain it any longer, even if this feels like a moment the guys don't need to be here for.

“I kissed Bennett last night!” I blurt out and Lottie’s mouth drops. Grace grins big, while MJ gives the tiniest of smiles. The guys are grinning too, and I know they’re going to mess with Bennett later.

“Tell us *everything*,” Lottie demands and pulls me off the bed. I stumble a little on the ground, but the girls catch me, all of us laughing.

“I didn’t realize I’d have this big of an audience so early.” It makes me wish Bennett was here. These are our shared friends, after all. *Should I have waited? Did he want to lay low for a while, announce our new relationship status together?* I glance down at my phone. *Is calling him weird?*

“We invited everyone over for brunch. We didn’t invite Bennett because we didn’t know how things were with y’all yet,” Grace says.

“I appreciate that.” I look at my phone again. *He’s my best friend, I can call him.* “I’ll tell y’all in a minute, let me make a quick call.”

“Awww, she’s going to call him. Do you remember those days, Sterling?” Lottie looks up at her husband Callum with a grin. They used to call each other by their last names, and still do occasionally. It’s the cutest when he calls her Sterling back. She turns into an absolute puddle.

“Yes, I miss those days. Back when I didn’t wake up to you poking me telling me you’re bored and want coffee,” he teases and she hits his arm.

“You love it,” she says it more like a command than a question.

“I love *you*,” he says and kisses the crown of her head. She goes all starry eyed and MJ starts to push the group out of the room.

“Come on, let her make her call. I need space too, all this lovey dovey stuff is going to make me gag.”

I laugh at all of their grumbles and mouth *thank you* to MJ before she closes my door. The phone rings twice before I hear Bennett’s voice.

“Hey gorgeous, missing me already?” I roll my eyes at his question, hating that the butterflies in my stomach are answering a resounding *yes*.

“No,” I lie and he chuckles. “I’m calling because everyone is here for breakfast, and I *might* have told them we kissed.”

“Everyone as in...?”

“As in *everyone*—even Wyatt is here from Sweet Oak. But I didn’t tell them the whole story because I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to.” I play with a loose thread on my bed sheets.

“Do you want to tell them?”

I narrow my eyes at his turning the tables. “You tell me first.”

“I want you to be in charge here, Soph. If it was up to me, I’d blast every social media platform, call all our friends, and jump on the nearest rooftop to shout it out.”

I giggle as I picture him screaming from his apartment rooftop.

“I want to tell them.” I pause. “But I’d like it better if you were here. I understand if it’s too needy of me though—”

He cuts me off. “Don’t downplay what you want, Sophie. I want to make you happy. Will it make you happy if I come over right now?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Then I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” He pauses, his tone softening. “*I love you*, Sophie. I know it might take some time for you to believe me, but I’m always going to put you first.”

I blink back tears, tired of crying but too happy to stifle them completely. After being with Michael, it’s hard to believe I’m worth someone dropping what they’re doing and coming to me just because.

“Thank you.”

“Expect more of this, Sophie. Expect more in general. You deserve to.”

My heart is trying to soar, but it’s like a bird attached to a chain in the ground. I can’t go far without hearing the words of those who hurt me most.

“Mush,” I quietly say and bite my lip. “I’ll try.”

“That’s my girl. I’ll see you soon.”

We hang up and I smile down at my phone. Maybe I can break off these chains of doubt with Bennett by my side. I

know why I love him, but it's hard to understand why he loves me.

The sound of laughter in the other room brings me out of my ponderings. I'll have time to work through all that. For today, I can enjoy being happy with all my best friends. I make my way into the kitchen, where MJ is making a parfait in a small mason jar. She looks up from spooning the coconut milk yogurt and gives me a small smile.

"Is he on his way?" I nod and her smile grows. "Everyone has already started eating, but there's plenty for him when he gets here."

"Thanks, MJ."

I pause in the doorway, watching her layer homemade granola and fruit on top of the yogurt. She's about to walk into a room filled with couples, but she doesn't look sad. I don't think she needs a man, she stands on her own feet just fine, but I hope for love for her. She's never been upfront about her feelings, but I've seen her eyes glued to the sweet scenes in romance movies, a small smile tugging on her lips. Under her gruff exterior is likely a woman who wants to find love like the rest of us.

"I'm sorry I broke our man ban," I say, and she shrugs, licking some stray yogurt off the side of her mason jar.

"I figured you would. I knew Bennett was in love with you, remember?"

“So are you going to give up too, then? Find some weird performance artist to date?”

She glares at me, stabbing a spoon into the parfait. “I’m not giving up. Also, I don’t appreciate the tone around performance art.”

“If you can look at me and tell me performance art isn’t weird 99% of the time, then I’ll change my tone.”

She levels me with a look that would probably scare most people, but since I know her, I don’t back down.

“Normal is boring,” she says instead of refuting. I can’t help but laugh.

“I have purple hair, I obviously agree with you. I’m just saying, you tend to date the same kinds of guys and end up breaking it off because they’ve found a new muse or asked you to be a *certain type* of model.” I shiver as I recall that creep. You can be fully clothed and have your portrait painted, but not if you wanted to be painted by this guy.

“Which is why I’m keeping the man ban in place.” The finality in her tone lets me know she’s done talking about it. I shouldn’t have pushed her or teased her so much. Teasing is one of our friendship’s love languages, but this topic might be more off limits than I originally thought.

“Okay, good for you. As long as that’s what you really want.” I watch her face and there’s a flicker of emotion, but that’s all I’m given before she walks around me to leave.

“It is.”

She leaves me alone in the kitchen. While I fill my plate with breakfast foods, I think about how I wish MJ would open up a little more. She's opened up to me when it comes to grief, but even then it feels like she's mostly comforting me. We've all tried to break through her shell, but she likes to keep most everyone at arm's length. The only way we've been able to coax her into sharing with us is by asking questions about her art.

It's easy to see that she uses art to release her emotions, but there's only so much a painting can hold. I worry that she's lonely unnecessarily, but I can't force her to reveal anything about herself. Maybe if she meets the right person, some of those walls will come down. I decide to pray about that for her. Not even for a romantic relationship, but just *someone* to break through. Feeling more at peace about it, I drizzle syrup over my Belgian waffle.

The sound of a door opening makes my pulse kick up. Bennett's voice carries down the hall to where I am, almost making me drop my plate from being so excited to see him. Footsteps head toward me and I unashamedly wait by the counter, watching the doorway for him to appear.

I can't contain my smile when he enters the kitchen, his grin matching my own. He's dressed more casual than usual, in a black v-neck that matches the one I stole from him and—*someone get me a fan*—gray sweatpants. It's like it's locked into a woman's DNA to feel a little warm when a guy wears those things. Well, maybe not *every* woman's, but *this* woman's for sure.

His green eyes are like tumbled jade stones, bright and shiny. I set my plate down as he walks toward me and cages me against the cabinets behind me. He dips his head down and gives me an agonizingly soft kiss. Yes, I think I wouldn't mind this being a daily occurrence. I slide my hands up his chest and around his neck.

"It seems like you missed me," Bennett teases and I bite my lip. His eyes follow the movement, turning my stomach upside down with the desire on display in his gaze.

"I could say the same about you," I breathe.

"Is it too cheesy to say I did miss you?"

I smile and shake my head. "No, it's not."

"Good, because I did." He pulls me to him and buries his face in my hair. Calmness washes over me and I hold him tight. The worries about him loving me feel less prominent when he holds me like this. They're not gone, but his touch pushes them to the recesses of my mind, and I'm able to relax.

"They're going to come looking for us if we don't go out there," I mumble into his shoulder and he sighs, his breath tickling my neck.

"You're right. I'll have you this afternoon, anyway. I shouldn't be so selfish."

"I like it when you're selfish," I say as he pulls back. He grins and places a sweet kiss to my lips. "But I don't want to have an audience."

“You go into the living room and start the story, I’ll grab some food and be right behind you,” he says and starts to step back but I fist my hands in his shirt. He glances down at my hands rumpling the fabric. “Don’t ruin this one, it’s the only black t-shirt I’ve got left. *Someone* stole my other one.” He smirks down at me.

My skin flushes when he gives me a meaningful look. The kind of look that says he’s imagining me in the shirt I took. “It’s in my room if you want me to give it back to you.”

“I didn’t say that.” His gaze is molten. He kisses me again and I have to push him away to stop us both. He tries to grab me as I’m walking away, but I twist out of his grasp, giggling.

“I’ll be yours in just a few hours,” I say, but when I meet his eyes I know that I’m already his right here and now. He runs a hand through his hair and smirks like he’s thinking the exact same thing. I leave the kitchen before he can reach for me again, pressing my fingertips to my tingling lips, only letting my hand drop when I walk into the living room.

“Oh, they were *so* making out in there. Pay up.” Lottie holds out a dainty hand in Wyatt’s direction.

“You don’t know that. No one would go check on them to make sure, so Sophie has to tell us or no bet.” All eyes are on me and I feel heat creep up my neck to my face.

“She’s blushing.” Grace laughs from under Wyatt’s arm. “You’re going to be out five dollars, Cowboy.”

“She can blush without it being true. That’s not proof.” Lottie and Wyatt’s competitive natures are usually entertaining for me, but today they are to my detriment.

Bennett walks in the room carrying the plate I left behind in one hand, and his own in the other. He hands me my plate, kisses my temple, and then takes an open seat on the couch.

“What are we talking about?” he asks as he settles in. I’m still frozen in place, not used to this much attention to any of my romantic relationships. The girls didn’t exactly love Michael, so over time they talked less and less about him. To be fair, so did I. Bennett tugs on the edge of my pajama shirt, nodding to me to sit down next to him, so I do.

“Were you and Sophie making out in the kitchen?” Lottie asks him directly, almost making me throw my plate. Bennett’s lips curl up in a slow smile.

“Define making out.” My mouth drops when he winks at me, meanwhile all of our friends go crazy. Wyatt and Lottie argue loudly while Callum gives Bennett an air high five. Grace is laughing at her best friend and fiancé fighting. MJ is snickering nearby. And I’m glaring at Bennett while my cheeks flame.

“I can’t believe you,” I say and he kisses my warm cheekbone.

“You know you love how crazy they are. I had to play into it. Look at them go.” He gestures with his fork to Wyatt animatedly defending his stance, dragging Callum into it. Callum initially agrees with Wyatt, which makes Lottie turn

her piercing blue stare on him. Their teasing quickly moves into the flirting territory, though, and Wyatt ends up throwing the five dollars at Lottie to get them to stop.

I laugh and lean into Bennett's side. He's right, I do love this. I love him even more for being apart of it.

CHAPTER 21

Bennett St. James

“You’re cute when you’re nervous.” Sophie reaches over and taps my nose while I’m driving. I give her a playful glare, then turn my attention back to the road.

“I’m not nervous.” I’m *so* nervous. This is our first real date, and I want it to be perfect. Sophie has been through so much in the past, so I want her to see that she’s deserving of love and grand gestures.

“Mhmm. That’s why your leg is bouncing so much, because you’re not nervous.” I still my left leg, instead opting to clench my toes. “I bet if you told me where we were going you’d be less nervous.”

I grin at her attempt to crack me. Ever since she got in the car fifteen minutes ago she’s been needling me for information about where we’re going and what we’re doing. I’ve stayed strong so far, but I know she won’t let up until we’re there.

“Not happening, Soph.” She groans and lets her head hit the seatrest dramatically.

“You drive me crazy,” she says and I glance over at her when we come to a red light. Her hair is in a messy knot on her head, and she’s done her makeup in this smudged sort of way that makes her look like a rock princess. When she walked out smirking in my t-shirt and a pair of ripped dark wash jeans, I wondered if we’d make it through our date tonight, or if we’d end up kissing in my car until time for her to go to work. The jury is still out with her pouty lips looking so kissable next to me.

“The feeling is mutual,” I say in a husky tone that has her blushing in an instant. A heady rush of satisfaction rolls over me, and it’s heightened when the color of her cheeks deepens as I place my hand on her knee.

She looks out the window, her questions stalling for the moment. Instinctively, my thumb sweeps along the exposed skin of her knee in her ripped jeans. I’ve never cared much about fashion, but I’m thankful to whoever invented distressed jeans today. They get my support, even if my Nana thinks they’re a waste of good pants.

“If I guess where we’re going, will you tell me?” I laugh when Sophie speaks again.

“Yes, if you guess, I’ll tell you.” She’ll never guess.

“You’re taking me to the botanical gardens for a picnic.”

“The cherry blossoms aren’t blooming yet, so no.” She smiles big, placing her hand over mine. She’s always loved cherry blossoms. Her dad would take her to walk the gardens each spring when they were at their peak.

“Hmm ... you’re taking me to an escape room.”

“You figured it out,” I say and she gasps. “I’m kidding. That wouldn’t be much of a surprise if it was so easy to guess.” She rolls her eyes.

“Fine, you’re driving me to New Orleans to go see that serial killer museum!” She sounds actually excited about this one—her love for true crime worries me at times—and I shake my head at her.

“There’s no way I could get you back by the time you needed to work.”

She sighs as if it’s the biggest disappointment in the world.

“I guess you’ll just have to add that to the list of your potential surprises.”

“Is this your way of telling me you’d like to go there?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Maybe.”

I snort. “Subtle, Soph. Real subtle.” My fingers pinch above her knee to tickle her and she squeals, pushing my hand away.

“Stop it!” She giggles. “Or else I’m revoking your touching privileges.”

“Is that so? I’d like to see you try.” I tickle her a few more times before it becomes a major distraction and focus on driving. “We’re almost there, so you can stop guessing now.”

“Aw I was having fun guessing. I didn’t even give my most ridiculous ones yet.”

“You can tell me more over lunch,” I say as I park in front of the newly refurbished brick building. Sophie leans forward in her seat to look up at the sign. When she reads it, her brows draw together.

“Amelio’s? It’s not open yet.”

“Not for everyone else. For us, it is.” Her eyes get big and she grips my hand.

“You didn’t.” I lift her hand to my lips and kiss it.

“We’re going to be the first to eat at Amelio Ortega’s exclusive restaurant.”

“Bennett,” she whispers.

“Come on, before we miss our reservation.”

I get out of the car and walk over to open the door for Sophie, who’s currently staring straight ahead and not moving.

“Do I need to unbuckle your seatbelt again?” I tease, but she doesn’t laugh.

“I can’t go inside.”

“What? Haven’t you wanted to eat his food for months now?”

“Yes! Which is why I cannot go in. I’m wearing your *t-shirt* and my hair looks like a racoon might pop out of it any second. I’m not fit to go in there. What if he wants to *meet* us?” I chuckle and lean against the truck.

“I’m counting on it, considering I asked him to.” She whips her head to me and looks at me like I just told her I was

moving to Antarctica for the winter. “Also, you’re gorgeous, Soph. Everything about you makes me want to kiss you. I’m sure Amelio will think the same. On second thought, I think we should leave. We need to take you back home so you can change and look less appealing.”

I make a move like I’m going to close her door and she grabs my arm, laughing.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re making us late,” I say and she bites her lip. After another moment of hesitation, she unbuckles her seatbelt and gets out of the car.

“How on earth did you get us in before the grand opening?” I place my hand on her back and lead her down the sidewalk to the small restaurant. It took a few calls, and some namedropping, but I was able to get us the private dining experience I knew Sophie would be excited over.

“I hate using my last name, but ...”

“But you did for this?”

“I did it for you.” I look down at her. She’s biting her lip and staring up at me. “If you tell me you don’t deserve it I’m going to tickle you again.” She laughs, shaking her head.

“Can I say it’s too much?” She asks as I open the door for her. Warm spices scent the air in the restaurant.

“No, nothing is too much when it comes to you.” I wrap an arm around her shoulder and pull her to me, kissing the side of her head.

A hostess looks up from where she's wrapping silverware in linen napkins.

"Dr. St. James?" She asks and I nod. "You and your wife can follow me."

My wife. I don't mind the sound of that. When I look at Sophie, her shy smile tells me she might not either.

We follow the hostess to a table set with a white table cloth, a vase holding a singular red rose in the center. Sophie slides into the buttery leather booth and I do the same across from her.

"Would you like to see a menu or have the chef prepare his choice for you?" The woman asks and I look to Sophie, nodding my head to indicate it's her choice.

"Whatever the chef decides will be perfect," Sophie says. There's a note of giddiness in her voice. The hostess nods, then tells us she'll also be our server today and will be back with our drinks shortly.

When the server disappears to the back, Sophie bounces in her seat.

"I cannot believe we're here, and that you remembered I wanted to eat here. I told you forever ago when I saw that he was opening a restaurant here in Atlanta."

"I wanted our first date to be memorable."

"You could have taken me through a drive thru and it would have been memorable. I'm with you, that's all that matters."

Her eyes meet mine and I'm contemplating how frowned upon it would be to slide in the booth next to her and kiss until our food comes. The eyeliner smudged around her eyes intensifies her already alluring irises, turning them the color of summer storm clouds. I could stare into them for the rest of my life, noting how they change in different lighting, committing to memory every shift in color.

"I love that you don't care about frivolous things, but I'm going to give them to you anyway. Whatever I can give, I will." She ducks her head to hide her blush.

The server returns, balancing our lemon waters and the first dish.

"For your appetizer, the chef has prepared croquetas de jamón." She sets a white dish on the table with what looks like thick mozzarella sticks on top. After confirming we don't need anything else, she leaves again.

"Do you know what these are?" I ask and Sophie laughs, pulling one of them onto her appetizer plate.

"Ham croquettes. They're made with mashed potatoes and bechamel and ham. I had them a lot when I went to Miami for spring break in college." I nod and grab one for my plate.

I watch as she bites into the croquette. Sophie doesn't shade her reactions when eating, ever. She *loves* food and it's very clear when she's eating it. Her eyes close and she hums as she chews. A grin breaks out across my face seeing her enjoy herself.

Her eyes flutter open, catching me watching her.

“Don’t watch me while I’m eating! You’re making me self-conscious.”

“I like watching you. You’re adorable.” Another blush blossoms on her cheeks.

“Stop making me blush.”

“Never.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she’s biting back a smile.

“You haven’t even taken a bite yet.” She gestures to my plate. I pick up the croquette and take a bite, crunching through the fried exterior. The creamy center is savory and delicious and I can see why Sophie reacted the way she did.

“It’s fantastic,” I say.

“Amelio grew up in Spain and trained with the top chefs there and then traveled through France and Italy after culinary school. He came from nothing, and now he’s won a James Beard award and owns several restaurants.” A small smile plays on her lips. She looks down at her plate. “I really can’t get over that we’re here, Ben. This place is booked months out from opening, and with my work schedule, I thought it would be a year before I could get in.”

Her hand reaches out and covers mine on the table.

“No one has ever been so thoughtful when doing something for me. I don’t know how to make it up to you.”

A rush of mixed emotions burns through me. I know that Sophie didn't get to this mindset on her own. Her mother probably pushed the idea that she needs to prove herself to be loved on her, and Michael likely cemented it. I think of all the times he said something off or didn't treat her the way she deserved and regret settles heavy in my stomach. I should have broken our no relationship talk rule and said something. But we're here now, thankfully, and I won't let Michael's mistake harm Sophie any longer.

“Sophie, there's no such thing as *making it up to me*. I know we joked while we were fake dating about keeping score, but that was all it was, a joke. There are no scoreboards here. I don't expect anything in return for this.”

The server comes before she can respond.

“For your main course, the chef presents Paella de Marisco.” She sets a large skillet of yellow rice topped with different kinds of seafood down, then gives us larger plates and serving utensils. “Enjoy.” I give her a polite smile as she turns away.

Sophie toys with the edge of the tablecloth, avoiding my eyes.

“Soph, tell me what's going on in that beautiful mind of yours.” A hint of a smile touches her lips.

“I don't know how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be loved.”

Her eyes lift, and they're shining with tears. I immediately slide out of my side of the booth and go to hers. I draw her into my arms, rubbing her back. She sniffles and my heart breaks. Pulling back, I take her face in my hands and press a soft kiss to her lips.

"I want to be better at receiving love I just- I don't—" I cut her off with another kiss.

"It's okay, Soph. You don't have to get it all right now. I want you to *get* better, not *be* better. Because this is more about you healing from the past than becoming someone different for my sake." I pull her back in for a hug, her floral scent mixing with the spices from the dishes in front of us. "I love you, and all I want is for you to be who you were made to be and feel as loved as you are. That's my sole agenda. No scoreboards, no alternate motives. Just you and me."

"I like the sound of that."

"Yeah?" Warmth pools in my chest when she hugs me tighter.

"Yeah." She pulls back out of the hug. "Thank you, Ben. I don't know what to say besides that I love you." I smile and brush my thumb across her cheekbone.

"You act like those three words don't make my whole world brighter every time you say them." She gives me a teary-eyed smile. "Feel better?"

"Much better," she replies and her eyes are drawn to the food.

“I’m guessing you’re ready to eat then.” I chuckle when she gives an enthusiastic nod. “Are we going to be the weird couple who eats on the same side of the booth or am I going back to my side?”

“Would you stay over here if I asked?”

“That depends, is it a prank or something that would make you happy?” She shoves my shoulder and laughs.

“Pranks make me happy.” I give her a look. “*But* this isn’t a prank. I like being close to you.”

“I like being close to you too.” I smirk and lean in to kiss her, but she stops me, pressing her fingertips to my lips.

“If this paella gets cold before my first bite I might cry again.” I laugh against her fingertips, press a kiss to them, then lean back.

“No more tears, let’s eat.”

Halfway through our—insanely delicious—meal, Chef Amelio walks up to our table. Since he’s in his sixties, it’s easier to quell my jealousy that comes up when Sophie stares up at him like he hung the moon.

“Are you enjoying your meal?” His voice is deep, and coated in a thick Spanish accent that reveals his roots.

“Yes! Chef, this is amazing. I feel like I’ve traveled all of Spain in one meal. You have a gift,” Sophie gushes, and Amelio gives a humble nod.

“Your joy brings me joy. The vision for this restaurant was just that, to whisk my patrons away to Spain. My home’s cuisine is still my favorite even after traveling the world, and I wanted to bring a bit of that home to the states.”

“You’ve done just that. It really is wonderful, and your story has inspired me so much.”

“I’m so glad. Please, continue to enjoy your meal. I will have your server bring out your dessert shortly.” He gives another nod, then disappears into the back. Sophie still looks a little starstruck even after he’s gone.

“Should I be concerned that you’re going to run away to Spain with him?” I joke, making her scrunch her nose.

“Don’t be silly. You might have to worry about me never leaving this restaurant though.” I soak in her laughter and smiles. *Wow, I love this woman so much.*

Our server brings out a plate of miniature churro bites, with a side of rich chocolate sauce. Sophie goes to grab a churro bite, but I stop her.

“Allow me.” A flush of red comes over her face, but her eyes are warm and happy.

I take the churro, dip it in the chocolate and lift it to her mouth. She takes a bite, her lips brushing my fingertips and sending a shiver through me. Her eyes flutter closed and she licks the cinnamon sugar left on her lips. When her eyes open again, there’s a teasing glint to them.

I eat the other half of the churro then lick the sugar off my thumb. Her eyes darken with something that resembles desire. She grabs my shirt collar and pulls me down into a searing kiss. I almost deepen it, but stop before we get carried away.

“Are you trying to get us kicked out?” I rasp, and she flashes me a seductive smile that tests my will power.

The desire within me swirls and combines with the love in my heart and I’m overwhelmed with how perfect this moment is. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, but I’m not scared of it.

With Sophie, all I want is more. More laughter, kisses, time, just more of *her*.

CHAPTER 22

Sophie Cunningham

Tonight is the last ball I'm required to attend to complete the deal with my mother. We're back in Savannah and being around Bennett's family has been a kind of healing I didn't know I needed. Their constant encouragement and gentle teasing has had me smiling and feeling at home. No one is holding the fake relationship against us. I think everyone is honestly just happy it turned out the way it did. I know I am.

One of the Velcro curlers I pinned in my hair begins to fall, so I redo it. I want to look my best tonight, even with the awful dress I'm going to wear. My mother mailed me a gown that looks like someone stole my great grandmother's doilies and made a dress out of them. Sighing, I turn in the vanity chair I'm sitting on to look at it where it hangs on the back of the door.

It's made of a dull pink lace. There's no shape to it. It's essentially a lace sack. It's ugly as sin, as Bennett's nana would say—and did say when she saw it. The note was uglier than the dress, if you ask me.

Sophie, it would be nice if you could wear something presentable for this ball. Something that would do your father's namesake good. I've included a dress I think he would have approved of.

Yeah. *That* was fun to read.

I was so young when my dad died, not even a teenager yet, so I have no idea what dresses he would have approved of in actuality. He was a proper man, but he also encouraged me to play with boys like Bennett when I was younger, even when I was wearing expensive dresses.

Bennett frowned when I showed him the dress earlier, but he didn't say anything. I didn't show him the note. I know he would just get angry. He doesn't understand why I want to please her. He's never had to earn love from his parents.

I know that my mom wants to control me, but she also wants to be close to me. If I wear the dress, I might honor my dad's memory and have a moment with my mother not tainted by disapproval. A rare gem that I can hold onto whenever she says something passive aggressive in the future.

A knock sounds through the door of the guest room I'm in, pulling me out of my melancholy spiral.

"Who is it?" I wrap my robe further over me and tighten the belt.

"The best boyfriend ever." I laugh at the sound of Bennett's voice. Crossing the room, I open the door to him holding a large white box tied with a gold bow.

“I was going to tease you, but after lunch yesterday and seeing you with a present today, I might have to agree.” He grins and pecks my lips before walking in the room.

“You can have a trophy made for me. *Best Boyfriend Award*. It would look great on my desk.” The crisply made bed dents under the weight of the gift box when Bennett sets it down.

“I feel like great boyfriends don’t talk about how great they are. Maybe I need to revoke your title...”

He grabs me by my waist and pulls me to his chest. The room spins when he captures my lips with his own. He shows me just how deserving he is of that trophy in this kiss. It’s soft and tempting, and when he pulls away I’m left wishing for more.

“How about now?” he whispers against my lips, his minty breath warm against my skin.

“You can keep your title,” I say and he gives me a smiling kiss. “Now, about this present...”

He laughs and steps back.

“Go ahead.” His head dips in the direction of the box. I unravel the gold ribbon and slide off the top of the box. Under delicate tissue paper is a black dress made up of the softest silk I’ve ever touched. It’s simple, elegant, but still me.

“Ben,” I whisper, looking over at him. “When did you get this?”

“I went to a boutique after you came back here to get ready. Grace gave me your measurements over the phone, so it

should fit.”

“Why?”

“Why did I get it? Because I saw the way you looked at that dress from your mom. You hate it. I know you’ll be beautiful no matter what, but you deserve a dress that makes you feel as gorgeous as you are.”

I pull the dress out of the box, the fabric rippling with every movement. It’s a stunning gown. If it wasn’t such a faux pas to do so, I’d wear it more than once.

“I don’t know if I can wear it.” The dress pools like black honey when I lay it down on the bed.

“Why not?” Bennett’s brows draw together. I can’t bring myself to lie to him, so I grab the note hidden in my purse and hand it to him.

His expression darkens as he reads, his jaw clenching.

“This,” he grits out, holding up the note, “is nothing but lies and manipulation.” He rips it in half. “Your father *loved* you, Sophie. I know we were young when he passed, but I know love when I see it and he loved you *so* much. He wouldn’t have cared about what dress you wore. You know that.” He drops the note in the trashcan by the vanity.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes, threatening to ruin my elegant makeup.

“I do know that, but I also know what would make Mom happy. If I showed up in that pink dress I might be able to have a night where she doesn’t pick me apart.”

His hand takes mine, a sympathetic smile on his face. “That’s what I’m here for. I won’t let her bother you.”

“It’s more than that, though.” I sigh. “I want to please her, at least a part of me does. If she could look at me and see someone worthy—”

“*No.*” His voice is stern and low. “She doesn’t determine your worth. You can’t let her have that power, Sophie. She’s not capable of handling it, as her reputation has shown.” He pulls me into a hug, my curlers hitting his shoulder. “I know you, Soph. I know that you want a better relationship with her, but this isn’t the way to go about that. You’re going to end up hurt in the end.”

“You’re probably right.” In fact, I know he is. I just don’t know if I want to accept what he’s saying. It would be easy to put on the pink gown and accept her praise.

“You don’t have to wear the dress I got you tonight. I’ll take you somewhere you can wear it another night if you’d like, because I’d like to see you in it.” He leans back and gives me a playful grin. “But it’s your decision.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly and he bends down to press a soft kiss to my lips.

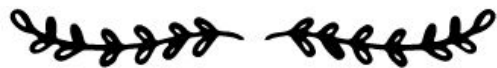
“I love you. I’ll leave so you can get dressed.”

He shuts the door behind him, the lace dress billowing then lying flat against the door once more. I pull the dress from my mom down and lay it next to the black one. It shouldn’t be so hard to choose what I’m wearing.

Bennett's words from the past month roll through my mind like an old VHS tape. He's never forced anything on me, while my mother has repeatedly done so my whole life. He truly wants me to be happy. It seems foolish *not* to choose the dress he bought when I step back and think of all he's said and done.

I shrug off my robe, then slip into the silky black number. It hugs me in all of the right places without being so tight that it's uncomfortable or inappropriate for the ball. There's a small slit near the bottom for my shoes to peek out. It's perfect in every way, even more so because Bennett chose it for me. Not to make me conform to what he wanted, but so I would feel like my best self tonight.

Staring in the mirror, I know that any comments from my mother will be worth it. Because tonight I'm choosing myself.



“Oh no,” I say as Bennett guides me into the large ballroom.

“What? What’s wrong?” He looks around the room.

“There’s a chocolate fountain,” I giggle and he scowls, but his eyes are smiling.

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.” I give him a cheeky smile and his hand on my waist starts to tickle me. I squeal and push him away, stumbling some in my heels, but he keeps a hold of me. Drawing me close, he kisses me to quiet my laughter.

“Come on lovebirds, don’t get carried away just yet. The night has barely begun.” Bennett’s brother-in-law Daniel claps Ben on the shoulder with a smirk.

“Daniel, I love you, but I’m going to have to fight you if you keep interrupting us.” Bennett shoves him and he shoves back, both of them laughing the whole time. They start to wrestle while standing, each trying to get the upper hand. I step back to where Naomi is shaking her head at them.

“A child. I’m married to a child,” Naomi says, giving me a *what can you do* look. I snort and glance down at her hand rubbing her protruding belly, her large diamond ring sparkling in the light.

“In a few weeks you’ll have *two* kids.”

She laughs at my joke then lets out a content sigh. “He’s going to be a great dad though.” She pauses, eyeing me for a moment. “So will Ben.”

“I agree.” I laugh as he messes up Daniel’s hair. Ben will make an amazing dad with his big heart and warm nature. It might be too soon to think about it, but it’s true, it’s just in his character.

Naomi claps her hands together twice, making both the guys freeze in their awkward holds of each other.

“You’re embarrassing us.” She has that ‘mom’ tone I’m sure she’s been practicing for whenever she does have her baby, but she breaks and ends up smiling. They untangle themselves and Daniel holds out a hand which Bennett shakes.

“So weird,” I say with a laugh.

“Not weird,” Daniel chastises me in a playful tone. “Manly.” He practically grunts the word.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” I tell him.

Bennett throws an arm around my shoulders, pressing a kiss to the side of my head. Naomi drags Daniel to the food tables.

“Are you proud to be dating a winner?” Ben asks, puffing his chest up.

“I’m *so* proud of you for wrestling like a man child,” I coo and he pulls me in again, peppering my neck with kisses. I giggle in his arms, half-heartedly pushing him away.

“Sophie Amelia Cunningham.” My mother’s voice sends ice through my veins. Bennett quickly pulls back, settling his arm around my waist in a comforting but appropriate manner.

My mother is wearing a pastel blue sheath dress that makes her look like she’s about to prosecute me in court. Fitting, since she’s likely about to charge me guilty of too many offenses to count.

“Hi, Mom.” I shift from foot to foot.

“Is this how you were raised to conduct yourself? If your father were alive—”

Bennett cuts her off. “He’d be happy because his daughter is happy. He certainly wouldn’t use her grief against her.”

“I’ve kept my mouth shut long enough around you for the sake of your family, but I will not tolerate this disrespect any

longer.” Panic rises like bile in my throat at my mother’s retort. My mother not holding her tongue is not good.

“*Disrespect?*” Bennett lets out a bitter laugh. “You’re one to talk. You’ve been disrespecting Sophie for years, tearing her down until she has nothing left.”

“I’ve given her everything. I raised her on my own and paid her college tuition. And she repays me by becoming a *cook* of all things.”

I press a hand to Bennett’s chest when he gears up to say more.

“That’s enough.” I meet my mother’s piercing stare. “You have given me a lot, Mom, and I’m grateful for all of it. But that doesn’t mean you can treat me like a puppet.”

She scoffs. “If I were some evil puppet master would I let you cater my gala? Or try to introduce you to investors? I’ve helped you in spite of your choices, you’re just too spoiled to see that.”

Bennett’s fingers grip my waist tighter, but he keeps quiet.

“You had me make a deal with you, like we were business partners instead of mother and daughter.”

“How else would I have gotten you here? You are so stubborn! I love you and want what’s best for you. That’s why I do what I do.”

“You’re wrong.” She rears back as if I’ve hit her. “I’ve experienced love.” My voice cracks and I take in a shaky breath. “Love is sacrifice. It’s selfless, not self-seeking. You

don't know how to love me right now, and that's okay, but maybe I need some time apart until things are different." She presses a hand to her stomach, panic widening her eyes. My heart hurts, but I stand strong.

"What does that mean? You're not going to see me anymore?" Her face hardens. "You can't work my gala then and you-you won't find your investors." I think of Sylvie and feel strengthened in my confidence.

"That's okay, I have investors I'm meeting with."

"You think they'll trust you without my endorsement?"

"I wish you believed in me more, Mom." Her face falls, almost imperceptible, but the crack in her armor gives me hope for the future. "I can do this on my own."

"You're going to regret this. You'll come crawling back soon enough. *You need me.*" She stumbles backward a few steps before turning and rushing out the ballroom.

Bennett pulls me into a hug, then cradles my face in his hands, looking into my eyes.

"I am so proud of you, Soph."

"Mush," I whisper, tears in my eyes.

His lips meet mine in a kiss that fills me up until I overflow. He holds me as if I'm fragile, but I know in my heart that he sees me as strong and capable.

This is what love feels like.

CHAPTER 23

Bennett St. James

In the dictionary, under the word *torture*, should be the words: *going to work after a weekend with Sophie*. I'm unfocused and distracted as I walk up to my office building. I have a surgery on an injured basketball player in a few days, and I'm glad I have those days to recover because if it was today, I don't know that I'd remember how to perform surgery.

All I can think about is Sophie. Her kiss, her smile, her laugh. It's as if the replay button in my brain was pushed and then got stuck, and I'm only able to think of moments with her. This morning I was so engrossed in my memories I forgot to put coffee grounds in the coffee pot. I came back to find a carafe full of hot water.

Warm air hits my face as I walk through the building door. I nod to people as I pass them, ready to get to my office and try to get my mind right. Also to use the small coffee pot in there since I still haven't had any caffeine this morning.

My office door is unlocked when I approach, sending up red flags in my mind. There are a lot of important documents—

medical and otherwise—stored in here. If someone broke in, they could have stolen information about several high-profile athletes. I take a deep breath and push open the door.

My face scrunches up when I see a large toy bathtub on my desk. Floating on top like some serial killer calling card is a purple rubber duck. *Sophie*. I walk closer to the desk only to find that the duck isn't floating on water, it's sitting on blue Jell-O. Inside of the Jell-O is my stapler, scissors, and my coffee cup. No idea how she managed to get into my office *and* carry this in here on her own. I pull out my phone, laughing, and take a picture.

Bennett: Really? Jell-O?

Soph: I was watching *The Office* and inspiration struck.

A picture comes through of her looking too beautiful. There goes the rest of my day. Now I definitely won't be able to get her out of my head.

Soph: I'm meeting Sylvie in a few minutes. Wish me luck!

Bennett: You don't need luck. You look beautiful, and you're amazing all on your own. I can't wait to celebrate with you. Dinner tonight?

Soph: I have to work, but dessert at your place after?

Memories of cinnamon sugar kisses and heated gazes come to mind. I pull on the collar of my polo shirt as the temperature rises in my office.

Bennett: Sounds perfect.

I set down my phone and assess the Jell-O monstrosity sitting on my desk. The best idea I have for getting to the bottom of the fake tub is to find a serving spoon. After another laugh at the prank, I walk down to the break room hoping to find something that will make fishing out my office supplies easier.

When I walk in, Sebastian is there watching the expensive espresso machine fill his cup. Whenever it finishes, he presses a few buttons and it starts the process over again. I've used the machine before, and I know that each time it does at least a double shot of espresso.

"Rough night?" I ask him and start to search drawers for a large enough spoon.

"Maddie had a dance competition in Florida. We got back in late last night. I drove three of her friends down to the beach so they wouldn't have to take the bus. A weekend with four preteens is not for the faint of heart. I've survived on espresso and energy drinks."

His face is shadowed by the blue Thrashers ball cap he wears, but I can see the weariness still.

"Yikes, that does sound like a lot. How did she do?"

His grin breaks through his exhausted expression and he looks more like his usual laid-back self.

"Her group dance won second, and her solo won best overall." The pride in his voice is unmistakable. I smile and turn back to my work of searching for a spoon. Sebastian

grabs his mug and takes a step away from the counter, revealing another drawer. “Need something to dig with?” He smirks and my eyes narrow.

“I knew she would have had to have help. How did she even get in touch with you?”

“My assistant told me a woman named Sophie called on behalf of Dr. St. James and I remembered her name from our conversation. I gave her a call back and helped her set up the prank.”

“Can’t trust anybody.” I shake my head, but I’m smiling. The drawer opens to reveal a few cooking utensils, among them a spoon. I grab it then shut the drawer.

“She sounded like a good one when we talked,” Sebastian says before taking a drink from his mug. I stifle a shudder at the thought of straight espresso in a mug. “It’s nice to have someone who isn’t afraid to have fun.”

I chuckle. “Sophie definitely isn’t afraid of that. She keeps me on my toes.”

“That’s good. Don’t let her get away.”

“Oh, I won’t.” Images of engagement rings float through my brain. These thoughts aren’t too fast for me, but I know Sophie may not be ready for them yet. She’s given signs that she’s not opposed to getting married, but I don’t know what the timeline looks like to her.

Standing in front of Sebastian, talking about Sophie, I remember our first conversation about her. He asked me if she

was worth the risk. She was and is. Now I have to evaluate if asking her to marry me early is worth it, too.

I think it just might be.



It's almost nine o'clock before my apartment door opens. Sophie texted me earlier that she got the investment from Sylvie's company, so I went out and bought a cake to congratulate her from a local bakery after work and put it in the fridge. Sophie loves lemon cake, but I hate it. So I got lemon cake.

The sound of the door opening has me scrambling to my feet from where I was watching TV on the couch. Sophie breaks into a run down my hallway and jumps into my arms. She wraps her legs around me and my arms grip her waist. Her soft laugh is next to my ear, filling me up with pure joy.

"I can't believe I did it, Ben." She pulls her head back, looking at me as I hold her up. "I went in there and everyone was so kind. They treated me like a true business owner, and they listened to my pitch liked they cared. Sylvie's son, Dalton, told me that he was impressed and could see Farm-To-Truck becoming a *nationwide phenomenon*. Can you believe that?"

"Of course I can believe it, Soph. You're an amazing chef and you've worked so hard for this."

She smashes her lips against mine with a force that snatches my breath away. Her fingers rake through my hair as the kiss deepens. I walk her to the kitchen and set her on the counter without breaking apart. She holds my face in her hands, but she really holds my heart.

“I love you,” she whispers after she pulls away.

“I love you more,” I say and she pulls me in again, mumbling *mush* into our kiss. We can barely kiss because we’re both smiling so much. Sophie gives up, her forehead falling to my shoulder as she laughs.

“Is this real? I keep feeling like I’m going to wake up and it’s all going to be a dream.” Her words tug at the strings of my heart, unraveling me at the seams.

“I feel the same way. How did I get the most beautiful girl in the world to be my girlfriend?” I ask and she lifts her head, her cheeks rosy.

“Is it your life’s goal to turn me into a puddle?”

I grin and start to kiss down the slope of her jaw until I get to her ear. “It’s a worthwhile pursuit, don’t you think?”

I kiss behind her ear, fire burning deep within me when she sighs, her soft touch on the back of my neck like gasoline on an open flame. The temptation for more is heavy in the air and I have to push away from Sophie, stepping backward until my back hits the cabinet opposite of her. She bites her lip and I white knuckle the marble countertop. *Slow down*, I remind myself. She’s worth the wait.

“Dessert?” she asks, kicking her legs with a look that is far from ignorant of the tension between us. I almost tell her she’s sweet enough for me, but that wouldn’t do well to quell my desire.

“It’s in the fridge.” My voice is raspy and low. She smirks when I have to clear my throat. This woman is going to be the death of me.

I go to the fridge to cool off and grab the cake. It’s frosted in white icing with lavender and yellow decorations piped on top around the words *Congratulations, Sophie*. I set it beside her and she hops down off the counter, a smile playing on her lips.

“I love it, thank you Ben. This is so sweet, pun intended.”

I laugh and grab a knife and fork out of the drawer beside me. She grabs plates from the cabinet behind us and my heart squeezes at how domestic it feels. She knows this place like it’s her own already. It never occurred to me how easy this could be between us. My only regret is not trying sooner, not standing still long enough to see that I needed someone—needed *her*.

I cut a slice and place it on one of the plates, setting down the knife after.

“You aren’t going to have any?” She frowns and I hand her a fork.

“Take a bite.”

She eyes me warily.

“Listen, you can’t poison me for breaking into your office. It was a funny prank and you know it!”

I laugh at her crazy assumptions. “I didn’t *poison* it. You have to quit watching those late night investigation shows. Just take a bite.”

Eventually, she picks up the fork and takes a miniscule bite of the cake. Her eyes light up. “Lemon! You’re the best.”

“It’s really to keep me from kissing you too much. That stuff is nasty.”

She rolls her eyes and takes another bite, this one bigger. “It’s delicious,” she says around a mouthful. A high-pitched ping rings through the apartment and she reaches into her pocket, pulling out her phone and setting down her cake.

Her face falls, some of the color draining out.

“It’s Michael,” she says, shock lining her tone. Her phone screen is bright white with one singular gray message at the bottom when she flips it to show me.

Michael: Can we talk?

A heavy weight settles in my stomach. Another message comes in below it.

Michael: Please.

Sophie turns the screen back, her lips downturned.

“What should I say?”

Tell him he can take his apology and get lost. That he doesn’t deserve one minute—one second of your time.

“What do you want to do?”

She bites her thumbnail, staring at the screen. The weight inside me gets heavier and heavier. “I don’t know. I can at least text him back. Would that be okay?”

“Only if it’s what you really want. You don’t owe him anything.”

She nods slowly, eyes glued on the screen. “I’ll text him back.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want to do.”

My heart has decided that my throat is a better place to live now. Sophie types out her message for an agonizing amount of time—probably a minute tops, in reality—then shows it to me.

Sophie: What do you want to talk about?

Michael replies immediately. My stomach burns at the thought of him waiting for her to text back. *Expecting* her to text back.

Michael: I want to apologize, get some things off my chest.

Sophie looks to me, uncertainty in her eyes. “I guess it might would be nice to have some closure. A phone call couldn’t hurt.”

“You can always hang up and block him when he says something idiotic.”

She smiles and shakes her head at me, no doubt recognizing my use of *when* instead of *if*. Her shoulder touches mine as she

positions herself so I can watch her type. I appreciate her openness. We've never hidden phones from each other, but it's nice to know that doesn't stop now that we're together.

Sophie: I can give you a call.

Another instant reply. This one makes my blood run cold.

Michael: I'd rather talk in person. This kind of thing shouldn't be done over the phone.

Sophie starts to reply right away, and I hold my breath until I see she's refusing him.

Sophie: I don't think that's a good idea.

A typing bubble appears. I really wish this guy was less persistent. He never cared about Sophie while they were together, why now?

Michael: I really want to apologize in person. We were together for a long time. I feel bad about what happened. It deserves more than a phone call.

Sophie doesn't reply instantly this time. She looks up at me instead.

"You're thinking of going," I say, knowing her too well to waste time asking. Michael knows what buttons to push, and it's working. I could try to change Sophie's mind, but would that make me any better than him?

"I think I might go meet him. The worst that happens is I waste my time because he's the same jerk he was last year."

Highly likely.

I must not be hiding my emotions as well as I was trying to, because Sophie meets my eyes and gives me a sympathetic smile.

“Hey.” She reaches up and cups my cheek. “You don’t have anything to worry about. This is just to see if I can get some answers to the questions that have been in my head. Do you want to come? Sit somewhere nearby and hide behind a newspaper?” Her tone is light, but I know she means what she’s saying and that brings me some comfort.

I’m not an insecure man, and I trust Sophie. But it’s hard not to worry at least a little bit about how this could go wrong. He manipulated her in the past, and he could do it again. More than anything, I’m worried that Michael will hurt her and I’ll end up in jail and lose my medical practice. He ran off before I could do anything the last time he insulted her.

“I trust you. Just know I’m a phone call away.”

Sophie wraps her arms around my waist and I return her embrace. She kisses my chest over my shirt and rubs my back. “I love you.”

I release a breath. I know I need to trust her and let her make her own decisions. Everything will be okay. “I love you, too.”

She kisses me and I find I like the taste of lemon cake a whole lot more when it’s on her lips.

CHAPTER 24

Sophie Cunningham

“What do you wear to meet your ex-boyfriend?” I ask as I flip through the clothes in my closet.

“I don’t know, I would never willingly meet one of mine,” MJ replies from where she’s watering the plants in my windowsill. She put plants in all of our rooms for the sake of air purification, but I always forget to take care of them. After the third plant death, she took over caring for mine.

“Yes, well, I *am*, so I need help.” I huff and pull out a pair of faux leather leggings, purse my lips, then put them back. “I don’t want to look like I’m trying too hard, but I also don’t want to look so bad that I don’t feel confident.”

“This is not my area of expertise. I dress for myself, always.” She spritzes an aloe vera plant. “My advice would be to care less. If you want fashion advice, call Lottie.”

“You’ve never dressed a certain way for a date? Never cared what a guy thought of your outfit?” I stop my closet raid and stare at her.

“Not that I can recall. Maybe in high school?” She shrugs. “Seems like a waste of time.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” I say and pull out my phone.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with confidence. I just don’t care enough to please someone else.”

I study her nonchalant expression for a moment and find no cracks in it. She continues spritzing plants as if she didn’t just admit she’s never cared what her past boyfriends—or anyone else for that matter—think of her looks. I get not putting too much stock into it, especially an ex, but to not care at all? No nervous first date jitters wondering if he’ll like what you did with your hair? What’s a date without hoping he compliments the outfit you spent three hours vetting with your best friends?

Shrugging it off, I video call Lottie. Hopefully I don’t disturb her and Callum’s evening too much or interrupt any *newlywed activities*. The phone rings a few times before Lottie’s golden curls and bright blue eyes come into view.

“Sophieeee!” Her greeting lifts some of the anxiety of meeting Michael. Lottie has this uncanny ability to make you feel as if you’re the most important person in the room and that she truly cares about what you’re going to say. She can be sassy—as her husband will attest—but she’s also got a heart made of pure sugar and gold.

“Hey, Lottie, I need fashion advice.” Her eyes light up and her glossy lips spread in a wide grin.

“Are you going on a date with Bennington? Do you think he’s going to propose? If he’s proposing, wear a low heel so your legs look long but you don’t get overexcited and trip.”

I laugh at her giddy nature combined with her use of Bennett’s least favorite nickname.

“It’s not for a date, and I don’t think Bennett is going to propose any time soon.” Lottie looks like she doesn’t believe me. If Ben proposed, it would be fast, but I would say yes. We’ve known each other for twenty years. I feel like I know him better than myself at times.

“So what is it for? Do you have another TV interview?”

I bite the inside of my cheek and MJ gives me a look. When I called Lottie I forgot that I’d have to tell her what I need the outfit for. She’s a protective and loyal friend. I doubt this will go over well.

“Um-so don’t freak out, okay?” She raises a brow. “I’m meeting up with Michael.”

In an instant, her sunny demeanor darkens. “Why on earth would you meet up with that jerk?”

“He wants to apologize.” I toy with the hem of a dress hanging in my closet, avoiding eye contact.

“I’m sure that’s all he wants. Not to manipulate you or treat you poorly.” She sighs and I frown. “Where are you meeting at?”

“We’re getting coffee at The Sweet Bean tomorrow morning.”

“Is Ben going?”

“I told him he could, but he said he trusts me to go alone.”

“Well, I trust you, but I don’t trust Michael. I’m going to go with you and hide in a corner and if he says anything wrong, I’ll dump my coffee on his head.” She pauses, MJ filling in the gap with a rare full laugh. I glare at her, only making her laugh more. “On second thought, he’s not worth wasting coffee, so I’ll get a cup of ice water or—oh! Something extra sticky like lemonade.”

I groan and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Lottie, that’s not necessary. I just needed help with an outfit, not a bodyguard.”

“Too bad, you’re getting both! Wear leggings and one of those oversized band tees you love. But do your makeup up and leave your hair down. A mix of done up and dressed down. What time are you meeting him?”

I sigh, resigned to my fate. “Seven.”

“I’ll see you then.”

—

It’s pouring down rain when I get out of my pickup in front of The Sweet Bean. A spot of pink pops up a few cars down. Lottie brightens the dreary, gray city in her pink pantsuit, holding an umbrella decorated with polka dots and frills. Leave it to Lottie to show up to a covert mission looking like a curly haired Barbie doll.

“Hey!” She grins from under her umbrella when she makes it to me. “Is he here yet?” Her blue eyes dart around the parking lot, as if Michael is going to pop up horror movie style any second.

“I don’t see him or his car. We should go inside before he spots you.” I look her over and she rolls her eyes.

“I have work after this, Sophie. I can’t very well show up in black. People will think someone died.” I snort and walk into The Sweet Bean behind her, both of us dropping our wet umbrellas in the bin by the door.

“Just don’t make a scene, please.”

“I won’t if he doesn’t.”

She steps up to the counter and orders the largest salted caramel iced coffee they offer... and a pink lemonade. I order a chai latte after her, not bothering to wait on Michael. It’s not like I’d let him pay for me anyway.

After a good luck hug, Lottie situates herself in a back corner while I take a small table at the front of the shop, hoping to lower the likelihood of Lottie being spotted. It’s probably not a huge deal if he sees her, but I don’t want him to feel ambushed and it ruin things if he actually is trying to be nice.

Michael walks in three minutes past our meeting time, dropping his navy umbrella in the bin by the door. His ever-present smirk occupies his face, setting my nerves off. He doesn’t look repentant in the slightest, but maybe his face is

just stuck like that from years of schooling it into that expression.

He spots me and immediately comes to sit down, not bothering with ordering anything. Throwing his blazer over the back of the chair, he plops down and sets his dark eyes on me.

“You look pretty today. Is all that makeup for me?”

My stomach sours. “You’re not the only person I have to see today, so no.” I set my face in a scowl, crossing my arms. So far, this isn’t looking like an apology meeting.

“Oh don’t look at me like that, babe. I was just kidding.”

“I’m not your babe.”

His expression darkens at my retort, but he tries to cover it with a sly grin. “That’s sort of what I’m here about. I miss you.” He reaches across the table, his palm up like he expects me to place my hand in his. I almost laugh. Why did I agree to this? I should have known better, or at least listened to my friends. This is what I get for trying to figure out if he really meant what he said that day we broke up.

“The feeling is not mutual. I thought you wanted to apologize?” I’m granted a tight smile and the retreat of his hand.

“I was getting to that. I’m sorry you were hurt by what I said at the wedding.”

He’s sorry *I* was hurt, not sorry for what *he* said. The man must not be adept in the area of apologizing.

“That’s not really an apology, Michael.” Lottie’s presence in the back of the shop is comforting, but when Michael’s jaw clenches I’m wishing I would have brought Ben. I take a sip of my chai, letting the warm spices soothe my nerves.

“What do you want me to say, Sophie? I said I was sorry and I want you back. We can go to your mom’s gala together.” The fact that he’s stalked me enough to know about my mother’s gala is unsettling.

“I want an apology that’s a step up from what a third grader could give. And I’m in a relationship, so I’m not interested in reconnecting.” This was the wrong thing to say, based on the fire that explodes in his eyes.

“I’ve seen your Instagram posts with Bennett. I thought they were just to make me jealous. You can’t seriously be dating him.”

My own anger roars to life. “I have no desire to make you jealous. Ben and I *are* dating. Not only that, we’re in love.” I should have stopped this meeting a long time ago. When he came in with the smirk, I should have grabbed Lottie and left. The anger radiating off him has a dangerous edge to it that has me shifting in my chair.

“I knew you two were sneaking around behind my back!” He growls and my mouth drops.

“That’s not true in the slightest. I am *not* a cheater. We got together after you and I broke up.” I stand up, slinging my bag over my shoulder and snatching up my chai. “I’m done here. Your apology is *not* accepted.”

I go to walk away, but his hand shoots out and grips my wrist. His fingers dig in, sending dull pain up my arm.

“We’re not done here.”

I jerk my wrist to no avail. He’s much stronger. Panic rises like a tide within me.

“Let me go!” Other patrons turn to look at us. I’m attempting to pry his slimy hand off my wrist when suddenly he’s cursing and falling backward out of his chair. His head is soaked, and he’s wiping aggressively at his eyes.

I whip my head to the side and see Lottie, an empty lemonade cup brandished like a weapon in front of her.

“Next time, keep your hands to yourself,” Lottie says before linking her arm with mine. “If you try anything with her ever again, you’ll regret it.”

She walks me over to the barista—who’s failing to hide her laughter—and stuffs a large tip into the jar on the counter.

“For the mess,” she explains, but the barista waves her off. Lottie shoots her a signature pageant queen smile before turning and leading me toward the door. We get our umbrellas, but thankfully the rain has dissipated.

My heart is still pounding when we walk out onto the wet sidewalk.

“Are you okay?” The bite in her voice now gone, Lottie is sweet as candy, pulling me into a soft hug and rubbing my back.

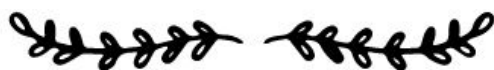
“I think so. I should have listened to y’all. I didn’t think he would do *that*.”

“That makes two of us. I thought he’d be a jerk, but not forceful.” She pulls away. “Bennett is going to freak.”

A different kind of anxiety leaps into my throat. He hated the idea of me going. I’m going to have to lock him in a room to keep him from trying to find Michael. Bennett has always been a sweet, golden retriever type of guy, but he’s also made it clear he’ll hurt anyone who hurts me.

“Maybe he’ll take it better than we think.”

Lottie looks as convinced as I feel. “Sure, just ... hide his car keys before you tell him.”



“He *grabbed* you?” Bennett’s low, growly tone has me grateful that I shut and locked his office door behind me when I came in.

“Ben, it’s no big deal. I’m not hurt, and Lottie was there to help me.”

Bennett stares at me, his arms crossed as he sits on the edge of his desk. His dress shirt is tight over his defined chest. He looks *hot*, but I don’t think he’d welcome my girlish compliment right now, all things considered.

“What if she wouldn’t have been?”

“It doesn’t matter, because she was there.” He looks far from satisfied by my avoidance of his question.

“Where does he work again? Some pretentious real estate company, right?” He walks around his desk and grabs his keys, shoving them in his pocket. “What was the name?”

“Ben, you’re not going to go to his work. That’s crazy.” I lean against his office door, though I know if he wanted to get past me he’d be able to move me easily. He stalks back around the desk.

“What’s *crazy* is that he had the audacity to *touch* you and think nothing was going to happen to him. Even crazier is that you’re trying to stop me from going.” The bite in his tone is unmistakable. I hate that I went to see Michael. All of this could have been avoided if I’d just blocked his number. I would have, if I’d expected he’d be in touch again. I didn’t even think about it.

“Are you going to be mad at me over something he did?”

His eyes soften, his arms dropping down to his sides. “I’m not mad at you. I’m upset that I wasn’t there to protect you.”

I push off the door and stand in front of him. His arms snake around my waist. I realize that I’ve never felt this safe with anyone else. My heart is rubbed raw from seeing Michael. It’s hard to believe I ever thought I was in love with him. Looking back, it’s clear that he was awful to me the whole time we were together. I hate feeling stupid, feeling blinded, but I don’t want to dwell on that. Especially not now that I have someone so clearly good—*my Ben*.

“I’m okay.” I lay my hands on his chest. “It’s all over now.”

Bennett sighs and presses a kiss to my forehead. “All I want is for you to be safe. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you.”

There goes my heart, it’s melted into a puddle along with all the bones in my body. It’s a good thing he’s holding me up right now, or else I’d surely be on the ground.

“I love you. I don’t deserve you.”

“I love you. You deserve everything I have and more.”

We kiss, and it tastes like forever.

CHAPTER 25

Sophie Cunningham

“Could you kill someone with essential oils?” I pick up an amber glass bottle off of MJ’s large wooden stand. The little white label reads *Ravensara* in beautiful cursive. MJ has been into essential oils for a few years now, and while I’m not going to buy my own apothecary any time soon, I do believe they work. Her *Cold Be Gone* blend always helps open my sinuses when I’m sick.

“No.” MJ answers me from where she’s drawing in one of her many sketchbooks. I came to bother—I mean *talk* to her while we wait on everyone to arrive for our get together. All the couples will be here tonight, including Brad and Zara, an adorable couple from Lottie’s work. There’s a giant charcuterie board on the kitchen island ready to be devoured, and the fridge is stocked with drinks as well as cookie dough for dessert later. All that’s left to do is wait. And pester MJ.

“Aren’t some of them poisonous though? Like if you ingest certain ones, couldn’t you die?”

“You could get sick, but you’d have to consume a lot to die.” She looks up from her sketchbook. “Am I going to be implicated whenever you get arrested for murder later?”

I laugh and flop onto the end of her bed. “No, I was just listening to this true crime podcast where they were discussing unlikely weapons and then they had an essential oils ad right in the middle of the podcast. So, naturally, I was curious if the *oils* could be a weapon.”

“Naturally,” MJ says drily.

“What are you drawing?” I ask, rolling over onto my side to look at her.

She flips her sketchbook around to show a large sunflower in shades of gray. It looks as if there’s a soft breeze moving the petals. MJ tends to focus on nature in her art. On the walls around us are paintings of the ocean, forest, our backyard in spring. It’s rare that she does portraits, though I have seen her do some on occasion.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell her, though I know the compliment is overused when it comes to anything she does.

“Thank you. I had a dream last night that I was walking through the sunflowers in my mother’s garden.” A sympathetic smile forms on my lips. It’s rare for her to reveal her emotions, but since we have the shared grief of losing a parent, she sometimes will pull back the curtain on her mind for a brief moment.

“Your mom grew sunflowers?”

A soft smile pulls at her mouth, her attention back on the sketch.

“Yes, every year there would be this large patch of tall sunflowers in our backyard. I’d go out there and lay in the middle of them, staring up at the blooms and the bits of sky breaking through. Most moms would probably hate the idea of their daughter laying down in the dirt every day, but not mine. When I got older, I was smart enough to bring a towel so I didn’t get bits of leaves and soil in my hair, but for a few years she helped pick out those leaves and wash my hair.”

“She sounds like a good mom.”

“She was.” MJ shuts her sketchbook, laying it aside before sliding off her bed. “People should be getting here soon. I’m going to freshen up.”

Annnd there goes our moment. At least I got to hear a little bit before she ducked back in her turtle shell again. I don’t fault her for it, but it’s hard not to want more from one of my closest friends.

“Okay, thanks for letting me invade your space for a little while.”

She shrugs as if she wasn’t bothered by it at all. “I would have kicked you out if I felt like you were invading.”

“That’s a comfort, I suppose.”

Her lips twitch as if she might smile again, but she doesn’t break. She turns and walks away but pauses in the doorway.

Without looking back, she quietly says, “Thank you for listening to the story about my mom.” Then she leaves the room.

Her soft-spoken gratitude reminds me that sharing to her looks a lot different than it does to me. I’ll still keep hoping for someone to crack her fortress, but I can be happy that she chose me to share something so personal with in the first place.



“Sunset doesn’t count! They’re not exclusively orange,” Wyatt says and Lottie glowers at him from across the room.

“It didn’t say name three *exclusively* orange things, it just said name three things that are orange. Sunsets can be orange! I get the point.”

We’re playing Five Second Rule, a game where you have a time limit and each card has you name things in a category with only five seconds to do it. The teams are boys versus girls, except Grace sat out to make it even and keep score. I’m beginning to think that she actually sat out to avoid the drama.

Bennett shoots me an amused look from where he’s sitting with the guys. We’re both somewhat competitive, but Lottie and Wyatt grew up always competing, and Callum has an intense competitive streak as well. They take each game seriously, no matter what it is. Brad and Zara are more chill;

Brad has spent most of the game staring at Zara with so much sugary affection it makes my teeth hurt.

“Callum, tell your *wife* sunset doesn’t count,” Wyatt looks to him, exasperated.

Callum pauses, and for a moment I wonder which will win out—his affection for Lottie, or his desire to win.

He smirks. “Sunset doesn’t count, beautiful. No point.”

If glares could set things on fire, we’d be in a burning room. Grace keeps her head down over the notebook she’s keeping score in. Zara covers her smile. Bennett and I try to control our laughter. All the while Lottie and Callum are in a silent standoff. Wyatt is forgotten at this point, flopping back on the couch with a huff.

Callum keeps his lazy smirk and Lottie tries to hold her glare.

“You’re cute when you’re angry, Mrs. Sterling.” Callum’s words break Lottie’s resolve. She rolls her eyes, but a warm pink blush rises up her neck. Brad shakes his head, like he’s seen this a thousand times. He probably has, considering they all work closely together.

“We’re so fighting as soon as we leave here,” she says, and a laugh escapes me.

“I’m looking forward to it.” Callum winks.

“Oh get a room.” Wyatt shoves Callum’s shoulder. “That’s my *sister*.” He shudders and we all laugh, even MJ. I swear I hear Callum mutter *and my wife*, but I can’t be sure.

“Speaking of rooms,” Bennett says. “How are the renovations coming along, Wyatt?”

Wyatt smiles, looking over to Grace. “It’s going great! Grace has been stocking the library, while I do all the work.”

Grace scoffs and throws a couch pillow at him, which he just catches with a boyish grin.

“I’m *kidding*, Angel.” He winks at her then turns his attention back to Ben. “She’s been helping a lot. We should have the majority of it done by June for the wedding.”

Grace is moving a few hours from Atlanta to live with Wyatt in their hometown, Sweet Oak, after they get married. He bought an old Victorian home to renovate, building a library for Grace before she even agreed to get back together with him. She’s finishing out the school year here in Atlanta, then transferring to teach in Sweet Oak. My heart drops a little thinking of how we won’t be living together in a few months, but I know she’s going to be happier there. She’s not a city girl at heart.

“I can’t believe you’re getting married in a few months!” Lottie squeals and hugs Grace.

“Just last year you were telling us not so much as a fraction of you has feelings for Wyatt,” I tease. “Now look at you, planning a wedding and renovating a house.”

“Says the girl who didn’t even make it two months before breaking her *man ban*,” Grace teases right back and Bennett smirks at me.

“She couldn’t resist my charms,” Ben says and I roll my eyes. He’s unfortunately right. It was impossible to resist him.

“How humble of you,” I say and he gives me a cheesy grin. I take a sip of my chai latte that MJ made me. She makes the best oat milk chai lattes, and she made one special for me since I made her cookies that fit all her restrictions.

“So, when are you two getting married?” Wyatt asks and my chai goes down the wrong way. I cough into the sleeve of Ben’s sweatshirt. Zara pats my back and I avoid Bennett’s eyes. I don’t know what I want to see in his expression. If he’s too casual it might hurt, and if he’s too serious it might scare me. I feel ready for more, but we also haven’t been dating that long.

“Wyatt, it’s a little early to be asking that,” Grace speaks up, an apologetic look on her face.

“They grew up together, it’s not like they just met a month ago.” Wyatt shrugs. “I say, why wait? I’d have married you already if you didn’t have to finish out the school year.”

Grace smiles and shakes her head at him.

My curiosity wins the battle against my desire to protect my heart, and I chance looking at Ben. He’s looking right at me, really right *through* me. The man knows me too well, and when he gives me a sweet smile, I know it’s meant to comfort me. Like a warm chocolate chip cookie, that smile heats me up from the inside out until all my worries drift away. Whatever he says next doesn’t matter, because his answer is for Wyatt, not for me.

“I can’t say, it would ruin the surprise.” He winks at me and I grin.

“What about Brad and Zara? They’ve been together a few months now.” Lottie turns the attention on the last couple without a ring in the room. They got together over a road trip last Thanksgiving and have been inseparable ever since.

“We’re taking it slow,” Zara answers, uncertainty making her voice higher than usual. Judging by the red face Brad is now sporting, it may not be as slow as she thinks. If I had to bet—and I just might with Lottie later—he’s got a ring already.

“Are we still playing the game or what?” Bennett asks, sitting up further in his seat. Brad mouths *thank you* to him and Ben nods in acknowledgment.

The game kicks back off, but I can’t keep my eyes from wandering to Bennett. Our gazes catch almost every time, sending butterflies into flight in my stomach. I even miss an easy category because he smiles at me and my world tips. I love him so much. Like salt on a dish, he makes everything better.

CHAPTER 26

Bennett St. James

May, Three months later

I'm proposing to my best friend tonight. Breathing has become a thing of the past, a fond memory I can look back on and say *remember when you knew how to fill your lungs completely? Wasn't that nice?* I had hoped that working today would keep my brain occupied enough to keep me from stressing out, but that is far from the case.

This morning I had a few post-op check-ups which helped distract me, but as soon as those were over, I was back to second-guessing every choice I made down to the ring burning a hole in my nightstand. I *know* Sophie. There should be no wondering if I got the right ring, or if she'll like the way I propose. But my brain isn't operating on logic right now, so no matter how much I try to reassure myself, I fail.

Lunch comes and goes, and after pacing in my office like a caged tiger, I grab my lanyard and then head toward the practice field. Spring football practice has been underway

since March, and I've gone a few times to watch the players. The Thrashers' indoor practice field is no joke. A full-length football field housed in an air-conditioned facility.

It's massive from the outside, looming overhead as I walk up. I scan my ID and listen for the buzz that indicates I'm allowed in. The large metal door is heavy against my palm as I push my way inside. The cool air washes over me along with a cacophony of coaches' instructions and players' responses.

All of the players are grouped by position for these practices, focusing on learning techniques and plays. Each group has its own coach, and even though Sebastian is the head coach, he likes to help out the DBs—defensive backs—since he played as a safety in college and the NFL. Sure enough, he's standing with a group of DBs and their coach whenever I walk up.

“Keep your hips open, you can't point inside,” Sebastian says, turning his hips out to demonstrate the move. “That will help you cover the receiver better when they go for a deep pass.” He spots me during his explanation, smiling under his white ballcap with the brown Thrasher bird logo.

“You take it from here, coach.” Sebastian slaps the DB coach on the shoulder then tips his head in a direction away from the players. I follow him over to the sidelines where he grabs a bottled sports drink and chugs a quarter of it.

“The team is looking good, Bash,” I say and he grins, wiping his mouth with the bottom of his shirt.

“Thanks, man, I think so too, but don’t tell ‘em I said so.” He winks and laughs. Sebastian is known for his focus on humility and technique as a coach. He doesn’t tear his players down, but he also makes sure they know their place and don’t get big heads from the press or past wins.

“Think you’ll secure another ring this season?”

“I hope so, I really do.” He side-eyes me. “Speaking of rings ...”

I groan and rake a hand through my hair. “I came here to get my mind off of proposing.”

Sebastian lifts his hands in a surrender motion. “You’re the one who came into my office all panicked earlier this week. I wouldn’t have asked if you would have kept it a secret.”

“I wasn’t *panicked*, just concerned.” I was *so* panicked, and very much still am.

“Mhmm, sure,” he says, eyes on the field. “You look about as calm as I felt when Maddie told me about her first crush.”

“So you were calm, cool, and collected?”

“I almost ran the car off the road.”

“Cool.”

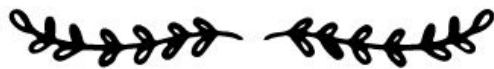
He laughs and throws an arm around my shoulder, giving me a tight squeeze. “You’re going to be fine. The girl is in love with you, she’s not going to say no. And if you’re worrying about being perfect, that’s useless, because no one can be.”

Another coach calls out for him across the field.

“Let me know when she says yes. You’re going to be fine!”
With one final grin, he jogs off in the direction of the offensive line coach.

I take a deep breath and try to let his words sink in.

Everything is going to be okay.



Everything is not okay. In fact, everything is falling apart. Sophie is on a scavenger hunt right now. I left one of those glitter bomb boxes in her pickup truck with the first clue inside. I had to prank her. It was only right after all the pranks she’s gotten away with this year. The clue has instructions for the next location, a love letter from me, and a bonus note to text her best friends’ group chat to have them all alerted to be helping her—as well as keep me updated on her progress.

It was all going according to plan until she got to Sylvie’s house, where our first kiss was as well as the final clue to lead her to my apartment. Except the clue wasn’t on the metal bench when she got there. It must have blown away or gotten picked up by a maintenance worker. So I had to have the girls tell her the next clue to lead her here. So she’s finally on her way, but her pickup truck broke down a few miles away. Now, Callum is handling her truck being towed while Lottie drives her the rest of the trip.

All of this isn't so bad if it wasn't for the cake. The beautiful lemon cake that we're supposed to eat to celebrate with all of our friends afterward is not right. It's supposed to have our names on it, with Sophie's favorite flowers all over the top. It was delivered just moments ago all wrong. *This* cake is a triple chocolate cake, that reads *Happy 3rd Birthday Jackson*, with a dump truck pouring Oreo dirt on top. I have no time to go get a different one.

So now my scavenger hunt has failed, Sophie's truck broke down, and the cake isn't even close to right. All of our friends are messaging me not to panic, but it's hard not to when all of my plans have been set on fire.

The lock on my door clicks and I push the button on the remote that connects to my Bluetooth speaker. I'm standing in the middle of a rose petal heart, and our favorite songs are going to be playing. Except what comes on is *not* our favorite songs. No, it's my *workout playlist*. Loud, intense music pulses through the speakers. Some rapper is yelling about being the best at everything. I fumble with the remote, but the music doesn't change. I rush to the speaker in the kitchen.

"Ben?" Sophie's voice rings out as I'm trying to turn off the speaker. I'm unplugging it when I hear her again. "Ben, is everything okay?"

I spin on my heel. Sophie is standing in my kitchen archway, glitter on her black skinny jeans, eyes rimmed in red, but wearing a smile as bright as a shooting star.

I run a hand over my face and let out a miserable laugh. “Everything has gone wrong today. I’m sorry, Soph. I wanted it to be perfect for you.”

She sniffs, holding up the cards with the clues and love notes I wrote. “These were pretty perfect to me.”

I cross the room and pull her into my arms for a hug. My muscles relax as soon as we touch, her floral scent calming the nerves that have wracked my body all day.

“You didn’t even get the last card. The most important one.” I sigh into her hair. “Your truck broke down, the music is all wrong, and you don’t even want to see your cake. This is the worst proposal ever.”

“You haven’t even proposed yet,” she says into my shirt. Her face lifts and I’m greeted with eyes filled to the brim with adoration and tears. “I don’t care about clues or cakes or any of that. You could have proposed to me on the side of the highway while they towed my truck and I’d still be so happy.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Now, am I getting proposed to today or not?”

Her giggles spur me into motion. I hug her again, suck in a deep breath, then lead her back out to the heart of roses. My legs shake as I kneel down in front of her.

“Sophie Amelia Cunningham.” I look up at her, tears already burning my eyes. “*My* Soph. I have loved you since I knew what love was, but I fell *in* love with you over these past

few months. You are my best friend, the love of my life, and the best chef in the world.”

She laughs, tears flowing down her cheeks.

“You deserve so much more than you think you do. I plan on spending every day for the rest of our lives showing you your worth.” I pull out the velvet ring box and open it. Sophie gasps, a hand over her heart. “Will you marry me?”

She drags me up to stand and throws her arms around my neck.

“Yes. I will marry you. I can’t see my future without you in it, and I don’t ever want to.” Her lips are against my ear. I smile through my own tears and pull back to kiss her. Our kisses are salty and sweet, the perfect balance. My heart is doing backflips. *I get to kiss my best friend for the rest of my life.*

Breaking our kiss, I pull the ring out of the cushion and slide it onto her left hand. She stares down at it, the large oval emerald glinting in the light while the surrounding diamonds sparkle.

“It’s perfect,” she whispers and yanks me by my shirt into another urgent, almost possessive kiss.

When we separate again, breathing heavily, I rest my forehead against hers. “I love you.”

“I love you more.” Her breath fans my face when she speaks. I want to be this close to her all the time. It’s a

marrow-deep craving that has my fingers digging into the dip of her waist.

“Impossible,” I whisper and she kisses along my jawline, her lips like a rosebud brushing over my skin. My eyes close as I cherish her being mine in a new way.

“I have a question,” Sophie murmurs against my jaw and I let out a breathy laugh.

“Of course you do.”

I’m positively dazed when she kisses the corner of my mouth.

“What if we got married soon?”

I blink open my eyes and tilt my head to look at her. “Soon as in?”

“As in next weekend.” She fidgets with the buttons on my dress shirt. “Is that crazy?”

I shake my head and grin. “That’s not crazy, it sounds *perfect*.” An idea hits me. “We can get married in my mom’s garden. I know she would love it.”

She nods, an excited fervor washing over both of us as the idea sets in. “We’ll invite just our close friends and family. Keep it small.”

“Our friends!” I laugh, pushing a hand through my hair. “They’re all waiting in the parking lot right now. Well, Sebastian couldn’t make it, but everyone else is down there.”

“That’s good because I need Lottie’s planning expertise to pull this off.” She pulls out her phone to text everyone but pauses. “We’re getting married,” she says, as if just now realizing it.

“We are. Are you ready for it?”

Her face glows with joy. “More than ready.” We share a chaste, but warm kiss, then she sends the text.

Barely a minute goes by before my apartment door is beaten down by our friends. They rush inside and we’re engulfed in a sea of congratulatory hugs and shoulder pats. All of the smiles and laughter make warmth radiate from within me. *This is real, she said yes.*

“So, we have another announcement,” Sophie says over everyone. The group quiets, anticipation swirling in the air. “We’ve decided to get married this weekend!” Everyone cheers and we’re pulled into more embraces.

“We’re going to need y’all’s help to pull this off,” I speak up. “It would mean the world to us to have everyone there.”

“Of course, we’ll help, man,” Wyatt says and squeezes my shoulder.

“There’s something so romantic about a surprise wedding.” Lottie lets out a dreamy sigh. “I will help however you need me to!”

“You guys are the best,” Sophie says. Her gray eyes are twinkling and she’s bouncing on her toes. I tuck her under my arm and hold her tight, planning on never letting go.



“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” I tell Sophie, studying her gray eyes for any flicker of doubt.

She’s about to call her mom to tell her about the engagement and wedding. They’ve barely talked since their argument at the ball. Whitney did send a text apologizing for some of what she said, which I found ironic since she always gets mad at Sophie for texting instead of calling, but I kept that opinion to myself.

“I know. I want to. She’s my mom, and I love her, even if she hasn’t treated me right in the past.”

As protective as I am of Sophie, I don’t want to be the one keeping her from repairing her relationship with her mom. I want them to have a good relationship. I couldn’t imagine not having one with my mom. So, I’m going to be supportive, while also helping Sophie set boundaries when needed.

“Okay, but if she says something rude, there’s an end-call button for a reason.”

Sophie laughs at me but nods in agreement. “I won’t let her ruin this.” She pulls in a deep breath, then presses Whitney’s contact and places the call on speaker.

“Hello?” Whitney sounds unsure and timid, a rare tone that isn’t lost on me.

“Hey, Mom, how are you?”

“I’m doing well. Is everything okay?” Sophie looks up at me and I give her an encouraging nod.

“Everything is great, actually. Bennett and I are engaged.”

The line is silent for a moment. Long enough for me to open my mouth to comment, but then Whitney speaks.

“That’s wonderful, Sophie. I’m so happy for you, darling.” There’s nothing lively in her voice, not a touch of giddiness, but she’s not cruel either, which is a blessing.

“Thank you.” Sophie pauses, gathers her strength, and begins again. “There’s something more, though. We’re getting married this weekend. Before you ask, I’m *not* pregnant, we just don’t want to wait.”

“Okay.” There’s a pain in Whitney’s voice that makes my heart sink. I wonder if she’s assuming she’s not invited. It wouldn’t be outrageous of us to not invite her after all that has happened, but even in all my animosity toward her, I feel sorry for her too.

“We wanted to invite you to the wedding. It’s going to be at Dee’s house, at 6 PM. We’re going to have a small reception afterward.” Sophie talks fast, throwing the words at the phone like a grenade and then taking cover against my chest.

“I-um,” Whitney clears her throat, her voice thick with emotion. “I will check my schedule, but I believe I can make it.”

“Good,” Sophie replies. “That’s good. I hope I’ll see you there. Goodbye, Mom.”

“Goodbye.”

The line goes silent. Sophie stares at the phone in her hand.

“That went surprisingly well,” I comment.

“Yes, it did.” Sophie blinks a few times, then tips her chin up to look at me. “We’re getting married this weekend.”

I press a heartfelt kiss to her lips. “I can’t wait.”

CHAPTER 27

Sophie Cunningham

The Wedding Day

“I’m not nervous. Should I be nervous?” I ask Lottie as she touches up the curls in my hair. I just had my bridal portraits done by MJ’s family friend, Evie. She happened to be traveling through Georgia at the perfect time to stop in. Bennett’s nana was our backup choice, so I’m grateful she had time. Nana *really* likes the zoom feature.

“Some people are nervous on their wedding day, some aren’t. It’s no big deal.” She flashes me a warm smile. MJ, Grace, and Zara are already downstairs in the crowd. Lottie is here to do my final touches before Bennett’s dad comes to get me. I’m grateful for him because the pain of missing my dad on this day is hard enough without wondering who should walk me down the aisle. Things with my mom might be better, but not enough to ask her to stand in for Dad.

“Thank you, Lottie,” I say after she sprays one last coat of hairspray.

“Of course. I’m going to head downstairs unless you need anything else?” She gives my shoulders an encouraging squeeze.

“I’m good!”

She peeks out the door to make sure no one is around, blows me a kiss, and then slides out in a flutter of pink tulle. I told the girls we wouldn’t do a bridal party, but I wanted pictures with all of them still. So they all chose dresses according to their personalities. Lottie’s baby doll-style pink dress makes her look like a bubblegum princess. It wouldn’t be my choice, but I couldn’t have found a more suitable ensemble for her.

I stand and smooth my hands over the skirt of my dress. There wasn’t a lot of time to go dress shopping, but I managed to find one I loved at the first boutique we went to. It’s a short, v-neck satin dress that cinches at the waist. It stops a little bit above my knee and pairing it with the strappy white heels I borrowed from Lottie has lengthened my legs. My veil is short, going midway down my back.

It’s a different look than what I would have imagined, yet perfect at the same time. Lottie says it’s adorable for a garden wedding, and since she’s the fashionista in our group, I’m going to believe her. When I bought the dress, my mind briefly wondered if my mom would love or hate it. I grabbed the thought, stared at it, then tossed it in the trashcan in my brain. Progress.

“Knock, knock,” Dee’s voice singsongs through the door before she opens it. When her eyes land on me, she gasps.

“Look at you.”

I laugh and hold my hands out to grab hers. “You’ve already seen me today.”

“Yes, but now you have *the look*.” She squeezes my hands.

“The look?”

“Yes, the one that all brides get right before they go down the aisle. It’s this rosy glow like a sun rising in your eyes. You have it.”

“What about Ben? Is he turning into a rose?” My question is in jest, but I am actually curious how Ben is doing. He kissed me goodnight last night and I haven’t seen him since. It was some kiss too ... my skin heats just thinking about it.

“He’s a wreck is what he is.” She laughs and shakes her head. “Not nervous at all,” she assures me. “Just asking me every two seconds if it’s time to go down to the garden yet. As soon as he woke up this morning, he was grumbling about how wedding traditions were dumb and he should get to spend the whole day with his best friend.”

I giggle and feel my heart grow in my chest. I’m marrying a man who doesn’t even want to spend a day without me. “I’ve missed him all day too,” I admit.

Henry, Bennett’s dad, appears in the doorway, Evie right behind him with her camera hanging from her neck.

“Is it time?” I ask, a flicker of nerves sparking to life in my stomach.

“We’re ready if you are,” Evie says and Henry holds out his elbow for me.

“Let’s get you two married so Bennett will quit whining,” Henry says and a burst of laughter escapes me, dissipating the nerves just as quickly as they came.

I hold onto Henry’s bicep and walk through the house toward the French doors that lead out to the garden. Memories float around me as I walk. Bennett and I racing through the hall as kids. Dee letting me sleep in the living room with Bennett after my dad died. Us sneaking snacks in the kitchen, then almost kissing in the same kitchen a few months ago.

When the doors open and my eyes land on Bennett for the first time today, all of those memories swirl together and tears spring up. He’s standing under a wrought-iron arbor threaded with vines and flowers. He’s got on a beige linen suit with a white dress shirt that has a few of the buttons undone. His smile is gigantic, sending my heart on a rocket toward the sun. If I wasn’t holding onto Henry’s arm, I’d run over the cobblestone path and jump into Bennett’s arms. Forget decorum, I just want to kiss him.

But I hold tight to Henry and smile at our friends and family sitting on either side of the path. My eyes catch on my mom, who gives me a small smile and nod. I tip my head toward her with a smile of my own and emotion makes my throat tight. Maybe things are going to get better.

At the end of the aisle, I’m passed off to Bennett, and the moment our hands touch, my tears are loosed. Thank goodness

for waterproof makeup, because I don't think I'm going to be able to stop any time soon.

Bennett lets go of one of my hands and reaches into his suit jacket, pulling out a linen handkerchief. Everyone in the crowd laughs with me as I dab under my eyes.

The pastor starts to speak, but I don't hear a thing. I'm focused on the gorgeous man in front of me. His kind eyes are a vivid green today, rivaling the trees surrounding us. When it's time for vows, I almost miss my cue because I'm so lost in him.

"Bennett." My voice cracks at his name. "My whole life, you've been my constant. When someone was mean at school, you were there. When I won an award, you were there. When my dad died—" Emotion clogs my throat and Bennett rubs a thumb soothingly over my knuckles, tears wetting his face too. "*You were there.* I took that for granted at one point, but not anymore. Now I see your unwavering loyalty for what it really is: *love*. You have loved me through my darkest days, and I'm so grateful for that. I promise to do the same for you.

"I vow to stand by your side through everything that comes our way. To love you and show you just how grateful I am to have you every day for the rest of our lives. Til death do us part."

Bennett steals the handkerchief from me and wipes at his own face, eliciting more laughs from our friends and family.

"Sophie," he begins, his voice husky from crying. "I spent most of my life with my head down, trying to achieve what I

thought were the most important things in life. All the while, I was missing out on you. When I finally saw you for the first time, I mean really *saw* you, it was like someone flipped on the lights after years of living in the dark. Everything changed. From that moment on I knew that I had to show you what we could be, and even though I messed up in the process, you still loved me. Thank you for not giving up on us. So, that's my promise to you: I vow to never give up on us, even when it gets messy and hard. I promise to love you and cherish you and show you just how magnificent you are every day for the rest of our lives. Til death do us part."

"Mush," I whisper, so just he can hear, and he grins.

The rest of the ceremony is a blur of pure, radiant joy. When it's finally time for us to kiss, Bennett dips me back. I squeal right before his lips crash into mine. Our kiss is sincere and agonizingly fast, and when Bennett lifts me back to standing, I'm lightheaded, wishing the kiss hadn't ended. The crooked grin he wears tells me he's thinking the same thing.

We walk down the aisle hand-in-hand, off to make more memories together. I am decidedly the luckiest woman in the world, because I have truly married my best friend.

Epilogue

Meadow Jane (MJ) Carter

Another best friend married. I sip my lemon water, watching Sophie and Bennett dance under twinkle lights surrounded by flowers. It's practically a scene out of a movie, it's that perfect.

There's not an ounce of bitterness in me when I see my two friends making eyes at each other, lovestruck grins permanently twisting their lips. That is, whenever said lips aren't mashed together. That part I could do without.

All of my other friends are on the dance floor with their significant others, too. These moments make it glaringly obvious that I'm the last one without a man. It doesn't bother me personally, but others tend to take it upon themselves to throw their pity at me in the form of arm pats and not-so-subtle sympathetic looks. The whole thing is nauseating to say the least. I don't *need* a man.

Wyatt dips Grace back, her radiant smile flashing at me from upside down before he pulls her back up and in for a kiss. An unbidden ache twists like a knife in between my ribs. I chug the lemon water like it's something stronger, hoping to rinse away the feeling. No, I don't need what they have, but I do want it at times.

Turning away from the dance floor, I fill my glass again. I purposefully pour slowly, so that I can keep my back to the dance floor longer without arising suspicion. Soon I'll have stayed long enough to warrant sneaking away, but that time hasn't come just yet. Once I'm away from everyone, the longing will subside. It always does, even if lately it's taken longer to than usual.

It has to subside because there's no other option for me. I won't give in to the temptation. Because the only thing worse than the burning loneliness is the excruciating pain of losing someone, and I will *never* feel that pain again.



Sebastian Holt

I'm smiling so much my face hurts. Bennett and Sophie deserve the world, and I'm so happy for them. Their ceremony was a tear-jerker—though I won't admit that to anyone—and now getting to celebrate with them has me grinning like a fool. I wasn't sure I'd make it, but I left Maddie with my mom and drove to Savannah as fast as I could.

Weddings usually make me wish for a wife of my own, and tonight is no exception. I'd give anything to be out there with my own beautiful date spinning circles around the dance floor. But until that time comes, I'll smile and nod to my friends as they enjoy their special day.

My eyes lock on a raven-haired woman walking toward Sophie and Bennett. She's petite in stature, but the confident way she carries herself makes her seem taller. The sangria-colored dress she's wearing swishes against her ankles as she walks, revealing gold sandals that remind me of something ancient Greek royalty would have worn. Her lithe arms are covered in bangles that match her sandals, further cementing the idea of her being a princess from another time.

She's the most beautiful woman I've seen in a long, long time. There's something hypnotizing about the way her hair swings back and forth as she walks. I think the only reason every man here isn't staring at her is because they have their own wives and girlfriends.

In short—she's captivating. Sophie throws her arms around the woman, who gives her a hesitant but tender embrace in return. I stand, intent on going over to try and get an introduction. What better way to meet someone than at a wedding? It's a little cliché, but there's a reason those clichés exist. They worked for someone somewhere.

I take a few steps toward the group when my phone starts to buzz in my pocket. My chin falls to my chest. *Maddie*. I pull out my phone and sure enough, her name and face are lighting

up the screen. Stepping to the outskirts of the party, I answer it.

“Hey, Maddie, everything okay?” I ask as soon as I pick up.

“Hey, Dad! Sorry to bother you. I just wanted to know if me and Yasmine could Doordash dessert to the house?”

I run a hand over my mouth, stifling an annoying sigh. “Why didn’t you ask Gram? I told you she was in charge tonight.”

“Yeahhh, I went to ask her and ... she’s asleep on the sectional.”

“Okay,” I sigh, unable to hold it in. “You can order dessert, but you have to wake Gram up when it gets there. Don’t you or Yasmine answer the door. Understand?”

“Got it. Thanks, Dad!” Her cheery voice bats away the rain clouds of frustration that were beginning to form. It’s not like she knows I’m going to talk to a gorgeous woman and is trying to stop me. She’s just a kid having a sleepover.

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow. I love you.”

“Love you too, see you soon.”

She hangs up and I let out a half-laugh. At least it wasn’t a long conversation. I turn back to the reception, scanning the crowd for the mysterious woman. She’s nowhere to be found.

I’m tempted to pinch myself to be sure I didn’t dream this whole thing. With how magnetic and enchanting she was, it

wouldn't be unbelievable if I woke up tomorrow having imagined it all.

I sink into a chair, shaking my head at my loss.

Maybe it wasn't meant to be.



Want to know when MJ and Sebastian's book, *One Last Play*, comes out? [Sign up for my newsletter](#) and get a FREE book as a gift!

You can also find the rest of the [Sweet Peach Series on Amazon and KU](#) if you haven't read all of them yet!

Author's Note

Hello darling reader,

Wow, I can't believe this book is over. I've been dreaming of Sophie and Bennett since I wrote *The Love Audit*. Over the course of the series, their characters changed a lot. Originally I thought Sophie would be the one in love with Bennett and denying her feelings for him because of their friendship. That ended up being not right for them though. In *One More Song*, I found myself loving the idea of Bennett realizing his feelings when it was 'too late'. And being the kind of author who lets the characters go where they want, I went for it! It shifted into having this fake dating element and Bennett pursuing her through it which was so much fun to write.

Sophie's inner issues surrounding her identity and self-worth spoke to me on a deeply personal level. I wanted to show her overcome them on her own, but also show sweet Ben fighting for and with her every step of the way. That's why I had their story continue on after they got together. I was worried about it dragging, but I also knew that Sophie needed

those scenes for her character. I hope you agreed or at least didn't mind haha.

The love in this book was so rich and sweet for me. I loved including the 'mush' lines in here because it's actually something I say to my husband when I don't know how to respond to his compliments or gestures. Having that little piece of reality always helps me ground my books. I don't know that I'll ever write a book without an element from my own relationships or life.

I also played with a little more heat, a little more sizzle, in this book. Not to make everything about me, but I'm changing and growing as an author over the course of this series. A part of that growth is finding my own voice. I believe this book is getting closer to what my voice is meant to be. Being an author is a scary, vulnerable thing because you have to write what you love while simultaneously hoping your readers love it too. So, that's my hope here. That you loved Sophie and Bennett and you'll keep loving my characters for books to come. If you did, please come find me on [social media or my website](#) and let me know!

Happy reading,

Annah

Acknowledgments

My Jesus, thank you for continually showing me what true love looks like.

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Thank you to my cover designer, Stephanie, for working with my changes and timelines and creating covers that people want on their shelves. You're a top notch artist and a wonderful person to boot!

Lastly, thank you to my readers. I'm living the dream, and you're making it happen!

About The Author

Annah Conwell is a sweet romcom author who loves witty banter, sassy heroines, and swoony heroes. She has a passion for writing books that make you LOL one minute and melt into a puddle of ‘aw’ the next. You can find her living out her days in a small town in Sweet Home Alabama (roll tide roll!) with the love of her life (aka her husband), Ryan, and her two goofball pups, Prince and Ella. Most of the time she’s snuggled up under her favorite blanket on the couch, reading way too many books to call it anything other than an addiction, or writing her little hopeless romantic heart out.