



FRIENDS WITH *Boundaries*

Brooke Kane

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To the bestest Bestie in the whole world, who made this book possible. I love you with all of my heart.

&

To my husband who knows all the dance moves to "Bye Bye Bye," and sings Christmas songs all year long. Your support means everything to me. I love you.

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Friends With Boundaries

By

Brooke Kane

Chapter 1

Present Day

“You’re going to have to parallel park,” I say to Arthur. I look over at him, behind the wheel of his 20 year old car, circling the block for the third time.

“On a hill?” He looks over at me. He’s irritated, I can see it on his face. I’m irritated too, and more than just a touch hangry.

“Yes, on a hill.” We left the flat land one hour into our three hour drive here.

“I’m just going to find a parking garage.” I groan internally. I thought I’d prepared him for the parking situation in Monterey, but I guess I didn’t.

“I don’t have any cash,” I tell him.

“Just use a card.”

“They don’t take cards, and it’s a few blocks away, and the fog is rolling in.” I don’t want to spend twenty minutes walking from a parking garage when there is a perfectly good parking space in front of the restaurant. I’d prefer to get to my parents house before the fog gets worse.

“It’s just fog. We have fog at home.”

“Not like this fog.” Now this I definitely prepared him for, the pea soup fog of the central coast as my mom calls it. He’s coming up on the restaurant again and I can see that spot, still open, begging to be parked in. “Just pull up next to the car in front of it and get out. I’ll park the car.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. We’re going to hold up traffic.” There’s basically no traffic.

“Just stop, and trade me places.” I’m snipping. I’m starving. I wanted to drive out here on Friday after work. Arthur said we could come on Sunday. I thought that meant Sunday morning. I’ve been waiting at my apartment since eight this morning for him to pick me up so we could come here, introduce him to my family, and spend the week at the Lantern Festival like I used to do growing up. Like I used to do until four years ago. Arthur didn’t want us to eat before we left, we couldn’t bring road trip snacks, and we couldn’t stop

on the way because we'd definitely get "traveler's diarrhea." I jokingly asked if he was bringing a shovel so he could bury me on the way since I'd definitely die of starvation. He didn't laugh. So I haven't eaten since seven this morning. Did I mention it's after nine thirty at night?

"I don't know."

"Just stop and get out, there's no one around." Arthur pulls up next to the car in front of the empty spot and stops.

"We're going to hold up traffic. People will honk."

"There is literally no one on this street right now, just trade me spots." He's not moving and he's still contemplating trading me, so I just get out and walk around the car. When I reach the driver's side I open the door. He still hasn't moved.

"Are you sure you can do this? I don't want you messing up my car." Ah yes, his precious baby. It's 20 years old with oxidized paint and a scrape on the rear fender that he's "definitely getting fixed." The doors creak with a rusty sound when you open them, and I swear I heard it sigh coming up the first hill. Heaven forbid I bump a curb with a tire.

"I learned how to drive here. I spent all my summers here growing up, I've literally parallel parked here hundreds of times." A car is starting to come up behind him. They're going to honk, and I'm going to get an "I told you so." He reaches for his seat belt. *Yes, please, please let me just park the car so I can get my lamb shank.* Slowly, and I mean oh so slowly he exits the car. The other car is approaching us now. They're going to honk. I can feel it. I hop into the driver's seat, and close the door as soon as Arthur is clear. He takes forever to get to the curb.

I hit reverse and start to back into the spot. My muscle memory takes over from the hundreds of times I've done this. The stupid car honks. *Ugh.* This was not how I envisioned the trip for Arthur to meet my family. We were supposed to have road trip snacks, and stop for ice cream half way here. We were supposed to be singing along to oldies on the radio. I was supposed to be ugly crying to Ozzy Osbourne singing "Mama I'm Coming Home," which should have been the anthem for this trip, because I'm coming home but I'm not the same.

It's been four years since I've been here. Four years since I left and didn't come back, but I really wanted to bring Arthur to meet my family and experience the festival with me. Bringing a boyfriend to the Lantern Festival is on my bucket list and I was so, so excited to bring him. Now I'm just

irritated and starving, and all I want in this world is that stupid lamb shank. I turn the wheels and hit the parking brake. Perfectly executed parallel park job— on a hill. Let's see what Arthur has to say about that. I've got a smug smile on my face when I exit the car.

"They honked." *Yes, yes they honked. Thank you, Arthur.* I walk past him towards the statue outside the pub. "Where is this place?"

"Down here." I point at the door leading down towards the pub located in a basement.

"It's in a basement?" I thought I told him this. I wanted to come here first because I was worried with all the family and events that we wouldn't have time to come and I've been daydreaming about that lamb shank for weeks now— okay I've been daydreaming about it for four years.

We make our way down the steps to the pub. The walls are red and black, there's gold nautical decorations everywhere, and I mean everywhere. Every inch of this place is covered and I love it. Every time I come I spot something new. It's packed with people and it's loud. The tables seem full. There's lots of tourists at the hotel across the street here for the Lantern Festival. I spot two open seats next to each other at the bar. *Oh thank God.* I grab Arthur's hand and drag him through the crowd to the bar. I plant myself in the seat on the left and let out a huge sigh. *Finally, lamb shank time.*

The bartender spots us and walks over with a pad in his hand.

"What'll it be?" The bartender has a British accent. *God I love when the employees have the accent.* It goes with the British pub theme. I open my mouth to order and Arthur leans in front of me.

"What do you have for your well whisky?" He asks over the noise of the bar. The bartender goes to answer and Arthur cuts him off. "Wait, are you paying?" He looks at me expectantly.

"Yeah, I'll pay." Whatever gets this done faster.

"Do you have Macallan?" he asks. *Oh good, reaching straight for that top shelf.* I say a silent apology to my credit card for the meal I'm about to pay for.

"No Mate, I got Johnnie Walker."

"Blue?" Arthur questions, and I swear I hear my credit card weep.

"I got black."

"Yeah, I guess. Make it a double." *Arthur is unimpressed with the whisky selection, I see.* The bartender pours Arthur's drink and turns back to me. *Finally.*

“And for you?”

“She’ll have the lamb shank.” I turn to my left and my eyes meet the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen. Blue like the bay when the fog rolls in. The eyes of the boy who was my best friend my whole life... until four years ago. *Carter. Damn, he looks even better than he used to.* Button up shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, brown hair perfectly in place and a tan that never seems to fade.

Don’t cry.

“Extra mashed potatoes,” Carter adds, not looking at the bartender. He gives me that smile that I used to love. *God, his teeth are gorgeous.* My heart starts to pound, but not in the way it used to when I saw him, not in the way that maybe I might be in love with him, but in that anxiety way when you see someone you didn’t want to see. His mom said he probably wasn’t coming, and I took that to mean he definitely wasn’t coming, but here he is.

Don’t cry.

“No lamb shank.” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. *What are you actually doing right now? Are you seriously saying no?*

“No lamb shank?” Carter questions, and I can tell he doesn’t believe me. I shake my head. “You love the lamb shank.” For whatever reason, it’s more important for me right now to prove to this boy that he doesn’t know me anymore than to get this lamb shank that I’ve been thinking of for the last three hours.

“People change, Carter.” I can hear the sadness in my voice. I turn back to the bartender who's desperately waiting for me to tell him what I actually want. “We were going to split the bread pudding.” I motion between myself and Arthur. Sharing bread pudding with a boyfriend is also on my bucket list, the kind with the tiny gravy boat of caramel sauce. Arthur leans in front of me again, I can see his drink is half gone.

“Actually, I’m not big on sweets.” I look over at him to see if he’s kidding. He wasn’t “not big on sweets” the other day when he finished the Oreos in my cupboard. He’s not kidding. “Can I get another one of these?” He shakes his glass at the bartender who pours him another double. *Awesome, two doubles in like ten minutes, guess I’m driving the rest of the way unless I want us to drive over a cliff in the fog.*

“I can just box up the other half,” the bartender offers. *Great, I’m splitting the bread pudding with a box. Check that off the bucket list.* A plate starts to slide over from my left. Half a bread pudding with a spoon on it,

Carter's hand gently pushing it towards me.

"With caramel sauce," I say to the bartender. Carter likes his plain. A tiny gravy boat of caramel sauce starts to slide over from my left. I stare at it as it slides closer to me, and I start to see this as an olive branch. We can be friends. Friends with boundaries. Carter and I were never good with boundaries. "Water, please." The bartender drops his notepad, and I'm sure he's annoyed. He should be. Hell, I'm even a little annoyed.

I take the spoon off the plate and put it on Carter's napkin. There's a container of utensils on the bar so I reach over and grab a fresh spoon. *Boundary: we do not share utensils or drinks. There, that's a good, healthy boundary.* I pour the caramel sauce over the bread pudding and start to eat it. I'm so hungry I want to shove it in my mouth like I'm in an eating contest, but then I start thinking about that tiny gravy boat of caramel sauce. There's no caramel on the plate. The tiny gravy boat was untouched. This is exactly the way we used to order it when we'd split it. Carter would eat half plain, and I would get all of the sauce on my half. *So why does Carter have the caramel sauce? Habit? Or was he sitting here waiting, hoping I'd come here first? Damn it.* Now I'm looking at this bread pudding and I no longer see an olive branch, I see a trap, and I walked right into it.

I keep eating the bread pudding, which feels like a brick in my stomach, and I turn towards Arthur so my back is to Carter.

"There's a lot of ships on the walls," Arthur says over the crowd.

"Yeah, it's a nautical theme, there's lots of ships."

"I said there's a lot of shit on the walls." *Oh. I like the stuff on the walls.* "So what time is check-in?" Arthur asks.

"For what?" I'm confused, but sometimes Arthur says things to me that he's connected in his brain but not out loud.

"The hotel."

"What hotel?" Now I'm really confused. "Did you get a hotel?"

"I thought we were staying at some fancy hotel." *Now it's a fancy hotel?* I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about. I never once said we were staying at a hotel, especially not a "fancy hotel."

"No, my parents have a vacation house here that they share with their best friends." I definitely told him this, about how my parents and their best friends have shared vacation houses here since I was a kid, that our families spent the summers here all together. The Lantern Festival is the one week out of the year that my dad and his best friend close their business so we can all

be together. I definitely said all of this.

“Is there room for us?” Arthur’s tone is skeptical at best. I hear Carter laugh next to me. *Great, he’s eavesdropping.* Ok, I may not have mentioned how *big* the house is. Carter and I call it *The Manor*.

“Yes, there’s enough room.” He’ll see for himself in a few minutes anyway. I finish my last bite of bread pudding, and leave a nice little demilitarized zone between where my mouth was and Carter’s mouth was. *There, a literal boundary. Boundary: we don’t share food where our mouths have been.* I slide the plate forward so the bartender knows I’m done. Carter reaches over and pulls the plate towards himself. He grabs my spoon and starts eating my DMZ. *Boundaries! He’s literally eating my boundary right now!* I ignore him and turn back to Arthur. “So tomorrow is the start of the festival, there’s a parade downtown. Our dads get into town in the afternoon and they’re usually barbecuing all day.” Another plate starts to slide over from my left. I glance over. Lamb shank, extra mashed potatoes. My stomach growls. *No. No, he is not winning.* I put my hand out to stop the plate from sliding. “Our moms will probably have something planned for breakfast.” Carter leans over so he’s right in my ear.

“Maddie, you’re starving.” I look over at him.

“I’m fine.” He gestures down at my leg which is bouncing like crazy because I am, in fact, starving. I stop my leg, and push the plate back towards him. *No more traps. Boundaries.* I put my arm on the bar top so he can’t push the plate back and I look over towards Arthur... who is gone. He isn’t anywhere I can see. *What the hell?* I pick my water up and start to sip it while I stare in the mirror behind the bar. I’m assuming Arthur went to the bathroom or, hell, maybe he drove home, who knows? He didn’t tell me anything before he walked away in the middle of a conversation.

“Carter Davis? Is that you?” In the mirror I can see a platinum blonde, all done up, tight red dress, boobs pushed up to her neck, approaching Carter, she looks a little tipsy. I look back at myself, leggings and an oversized sweater, blonde hair in a messy bun on my head, fresh from a three hour car ride. *Yikes.* “It’s Bree from college!” Carter is not excited to see her. *This should be good.* I smile behind my water glass. “Do you remember me?”

“I remember you,” he says awkwardly. Oh, he definitely remembers Bree, she tried to hook up with him all through college. She’s leaning all up in his personal space. I’m trying not to laugh.

“I had such a crush on you in college.” Every girl did, Carter was a

football star.

“Did you?” He knew. She constantly hit on him.

“Are you staying at the hotel?” She points across the street.

“No, I’m staying with family.” Of course he’s staying at the house with us. That’s what I need the week I bring Arthur to meet everyone, a boundaryless Carter Davis.

“Well, I’m at the hotel if you want to go over and talk somewhere quiet.” Her hand is on his chest and he’s leaning so far back he almost has a double chin. He looks very uncomfortable. Carter hates aggressive women.

“Oh, no, I have to get back to the house, they’re expecting me.” That’s a terrible excuse.

“Oh... well we could just sneak into the bathroom. I really want to see that python in action.” She’s right in his face. I laugh. I can’t help it. I started the python rumor and it has persisted all through college, and now beyond I guess. Carter’s head snaps towards me like he just remembered I was there. He stands, snakes past Bree, and over to me. He drapes an arm around the back of my chair, his other hand on the bar.

“Hey, Baby.” It comes out smooth and sexy, the way he always said it to me. I hate that my body still reacts to those words. Hey Baby was something we invented in college. It means “someone is hitting on me and I need you to pretend we’re together.” It means “help me.” In college the correct response would have been to say “Hey, Baby” back to him, wrap my arms around him, and pull him in close. But this isn’t college. *Boundary: absolutely no Hey Baby.* I put my hand on his chest. He puts his hand on mine because he thinks I’m playing along. I turn towards him, and I say the meanest thing I’ve ever said to Carter Davis.

“I’m not your baby, Carter.” I straighten my arm to push him away, and I look back at the mirror so I don’t have to see the hurt on his face. He leans down, all six foot five of him, until his forehead is resting on my temple. His breath is on my face.

“Maddie, can we please just talk?” There’s so much pain in his voice. I shake my head.

Don’t cry.

“Carter, I have a *real* boyfriend, who is *really* in that bathroom,” I have no idea where he is, “and he’ll *really* be back any second. We were always respectful when the other person was seeing someone, and this... is not respectful.” I’m right and he knows I’m right. He stands up, but his grip

tightens on my hand, so I pull it away just in time for Arthur to walk back over from the general direction of the bathroom. Mystery solved, I guess.

“Who are your friends?” Arthur asks as he grabs his drink.

“Arthur, this is my parents' best friends' son Carter.” I tried really hard to avoid saying “my former best friend.” Looks like I took the scenic route. *How to introduce Bree?* I turn towards Carter, beaming. “And this is his friend Bree.” Bree looks like she loves that description. She loops her arm through his. Carter’s eyes go wide for a second. He’s hating this. I’m loving it.

“We are so happy to meet you,” Bree says. *We? Oh I bet Carter loves that.*

“Bree, your dress is stunning.” *Stunning? Did Arthur just say stunning?* I don’t think I’ve ever heard him say that. I pull out my credit card and hand it off to the bartender. I’m ready for this night to be over.

“Are you about ready to go?” I ask Arthur. This is my code for “I’d like to go now.”

“I thought we were going to stay and drink with Bree.” Arthur hasn’t learned my codes yet. It’s fine, we’ve only been dating four months. *Also did he say Bree? Not Bree and Carter, but just Bree? Huh, that’s interesting.*

“Yeah Maddie, you said you were going to stay.” Carter is getting desperate. *God this is great.* This almost makes up for the bad day I’ve had. “Didn’t you say you were going to have dinner?” The bartender returns with my card.

“Oh no, I’m stuffed.” Carter’s glaring now. Bree’s running her other hand up and down his chest. “I couldn’t possibly eat another bite.” I lean over Carter towards Bree. I know he can hear me. “Did you know they called this guy The Python in college?” I make a swoony face and fan myself. “You’re one lucky girl. You two kids have fun!” I turn back towards Carter. He’s trying to look angry but I can see the smile he’s trying to hide. He thinks this is hilarious. “So good to see you, Carter.” I wink at him as I turn to walk away, and I laugh the whole way to the car. He totally deserved all of that for trying to Hey Baby me when he knew my boyfriend was here, and it made up for my entire bad day.

Arthur and I walk to the car out front. He starts towards the driver’s door, but remembers I have the keys.

“I’m driving,” I announce without asking permission.

“You’re driving?”

“You’ve had two doubles in less than twenty minutes. There’s cliffs, and fog. I’m driving.” He doesn’t argue, he just climbs into the passenger seat. *Good.*

The drive to the house isn’t long. We pass through the tunnel where we used to hold our breath and make a wish when we were kids. I silently wish for this week to go better than it started. We drive through town, past the beaches, past the cliffs, to the neighborhoods. There’s lanterns everywhere. *God I love this time of year.* People have them all over their porches and houses, there’s tiny ones on strings of lights. The parks have giant ones in the trees. They’re all lit up by flickering battery powered candles. I think it’s beautiful.

“This fog is really thick.”

“Yeah, welcome to June gloom. If it gets close to seventy degrees outside you’ll see people in tank tops on their front lawn hosing each other off.” Where we came from the temperature is in the nineties. Where Carter and our families live it’s probably over a hundred. People from the valley come here to cool down. It can get downright cold though. I look over at Arthur’s outfit, shorts and a t-shirt. “Did you bring warmer clothes?”

“You said we were going to the beach, I brought beach clothes.”

“I said we were going to the coast, you asked if there was a beach, I said yes.” I specifically told him it was cold. Arthur is definitely dressed for a San Diego beach day and not a Monterey fog night.

We turn into the neighborhood where my parents live. Lanterns are lit up all along the sidewalks into the neighborhood. The houses are bigger here, much bigger than the first house they had when we were kids. I loved that house. We have to go two streets over just to come back down the hill facing the right way. The street next to ours is too narrow so we always avoid it.

I pull Arthur’s car in front of the house, park, turn the wheels, and hit the parking brake. I stare up at the house for a minute. Giant lanterns sit on either side of the back door, clusters of them sit on the front porch. They’re all lit up... lighting my way home. Our moms love the Lantern Festival as much as I do.

I’m not sure I’m ready to go in the house just yet. Maybe I should have warned Arthur that this is a bit uncomfortable for me. He goes to open the door.

“Be careful when you open the—” I hear the scrape of the door on the sidewalk. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.

“My car!” Arthur jumps out and starts checking the door for damage.

“It’s on the bottom, you can’t see it. You just have to be careful when you open the doors.” This is why I wanted to bring my SUV, well this and the fact that his car struggled up the hills. Arthur is still crouched down checking for damage. “Can’t we park in the driveway?”

“No, we all have assigned spots. This is my spot.”

“Why can’t we just park in the driveway?”

“Our dads park in the driveway.”

“They’re not here.”

“Right, but they’ll be here tomorrow and we’d have to move the car.”

“What if my car rolls down the hill?”

“I set the parking brake and turned the wheels so it won’t do that.”

Arthur looks unhappy, but I’m not parking in our dads’ spot. My dad hasn’t been happy with me the last four years and I’m not looking for a new way to make him mad. I exit the car, lock the doors and open the trunk. Arthur grabs his two suitcases. They’re huge. Truthfully, I have no idea how he fit them in there. I think he packed more than I used to when we’d come for the entire summer. I pull out my much smaller bag and close the trunk. *Well, here we go.*

Arthur starts towards the front of the house, which makes sense, but we never use that door.

“We use the back door,” I tell him as I start for the door next to the breezeway. Arthur and I enter the back door, suitcases rolling behind us. The door opens to a giant kitchen and dining room, lanterns scattered about. There’s a dim light on, like there always is when someone is expected home at night. It always made me feel loved. “Our parents redid the kitchen during the remodel”. Yes, remodel. They bought this massive house, and then did a remodel. “There was a second living room that they turned into a second master bedroom/bathroom so each of our parents can have a master.” I walk through the dining area to the living room. “Upstairs there are more bedrooms.” And I’ve lost Arthur already. He’s stopped at the built-in shelves around the fireplace in the living room. There’s framed pictures of all of us growing up lining all the shelves. *Well, I guess that’s sweet.*

“Is this your prom?” He’s looking at a photo of Carter and I at junior prom.

“Yeah, Carter took me to prom.” *Because no one asked me.* I laugh as I remember junior prom. “We grew up in a small town. The DJ played

nothing but 90's songs which most people hated, but Carter and I loved because his mom always played us all kinds of different music in the car." I laugh again. "I think he was cheap because he was someone's cousin. Carter and I called him DJ Someone's Cousin." I still think it's hilarious. Arthur does not.

"Did you change your dress?" He's pointing at the picture of senior prom. I'm wearing a different dress and Carter had definitely gained a lot of muscle between photos.

"No, that's our senior prom."

"He took you to both proms?" His voice has a tone. *Judgy. Again, no one asked me.* I got the full promposal and everything, but it wasn't the same as being asked by someone who actually liked you. We were just best friends.

"Yeah, he took me to most of the dances in high school."

"That is so sad." *Sad?* I was pretty sure I hadn't said the part where no one asked me to most of the dances.

"Why is it sad?" Carter's voice comes from behind us. *Damn.* I was hoping to be tucked into bed before he got home. But it looks like he successfully ditched Bree, so I'm kind of proud of him.

"Aren't you cousins?" Arthur waves a finger between us. Carter has a look on his face and since I've known him literally my whole life I can read his face. He's asking if I told this guy we were cousins and if he's supposed to play along. My face replies that I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Nah man, we're not cousins," he says.

"Our parents are best friends." I swear I just said this at the restaurant. The door near the stairs opens and my mom walks out. Her hair is up in what I'm sure she thinks is a messy bun, but it still looks gorgeous. Her highlights are from a bottle now, but it's still just as beautiful. She has her glasses on, and a kimono that I'm definitely going to steal later. She's tired. It's well past her bedtime.

"Mama." I'm really happy to see her.

"Hi, honey." There's so much love in her voice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you." She reaches out to hug me.

"Oh no, I waited up to make sure you got in okay. We expected you this morning." She holds me tight for a moment. She smells like her perfume, and for just a second I'm carried away with the feeling of hugging my mom. I so rarely get to see her these days. I'm really glad she waited up.

"So did I," I say loud enough for only her. She releases me and takes

a deep breath. She's practically falling asleep.

"Arthur, we're so happy to meet you." She's yawning. She'll be sleeping in less than ten minutes. "We have Arthur set up in the office." Carter looks over at me.

"You're not sharing a room?" he asks. I shrug, trying to look casual, but he's found a sore spot in our relationship.

"Arthur likes his space."

"Carter, can you get them settled?" my mom asks.

"Absolutely." She pulls him in for a hug. He leans down, pretty far down because he towers over her. She kisses him on the cheek.

"Thank you, Sweets." I wonder to myself if my mother would ever kiss Arthur on the cheek and call him a pet name. *Would he ever fit into this weird family that we've created?* "Goodnight, I'm glad you made it okay." We all wish her goodnight and start for the office back near the kitchen.

"You're really not sharing a room?" Carter questions as he opens the door to the office. The room is simple: desk, TV, pull out couch.

"Madison and I really like our own space." *Arthur hates sharing a bed.*

"Well, I happen to have it on good authority that our Maddie here is a cuddler." He's the good authority. He needs to stop talking now before Arthur starts asking about the cuddling, but I'm also kind of glad he brought it up because we've had several disagreements about this. Something about your boyfriend telling you you have to sleep on the couch if you stay the night isn't enjoyable to me.

"We just prefer separate spaces," Arthur explains.

"You've really never shared a bed? Never?" *Sweet Jesus, Carter, stop talking. Also, no, never. Ugh, do I want him to shut up or continue the interrogation? I have no idea. Can he continue the interrogation in a way that won't lead to Arthur asking questions about my past cuddling with Carter? That I can get on board with.*

"What's with the cheap poster?" Arthur is pointing to the wall above the desk.

"It's not a poster," I explain. "It's a photo of Carter from college." It's Carter, in his football gear, field in the background, lights shining, crowd going crazy. He's standing there, looking up, with his two hands over his heart. It's my favorite picture. "There was a professional photographer at the game. They took the picture and made sure his parents got a copy. Our moms

had it blown up and framed.” I guess it’s almost poster sized.

“Is that where I’m sleeping?” Arthur points at the pull out couch. Our moms have made the bed up with navy blue nautical bedding, and way too many pillows. Knowing my mom there’s probably pillows with different loft and firmness so she could make sure he had a pillow he liked. There’s a chocolate on the pillow with gold foil wrapping and a custom label that says “Welcome Arthur.” I should probably explain that our moms are like if Martha Stewart and Joanna Gaines had two daughters and then fed them nothing but caffeine. Their attention to detail is crazy. I’m sure they used their fancy label maker to make that custom label. I’m also sure there’s a big box of those fancy chocolates somewhere and Carter and I will be sneaking some later.

“It’s way more comfortable than it looks,” Carter tells him. He laughs. “Better than that one we had in college.” Memories of us on that pull out couch flash through my mind.

Don’t cry.

“You’ve slept on this?” Arthur asks.

“Yeah, last summer some of Audrey’s sorority sisters came for the week. There were two in Maddie’s room. I let the other two have my room and I slept in here.” Arthur’s eyebrows shoot up.

“You had two girls in your bed last summer, and you *slept down here?*” He has air quotes around *slept down here*. *Gross.*

“Nah man, it’s not like that. They’re really nice girls and we’ve known them a long time.”

“So you did sleep down here?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty comfortable.”

“You want to trade me? I mean, if you think it’s so comfortable you don’t mind then.” Is he seriously asking Carter to trade him rooms?

“I’ve been here a while already, I’m kinda settled.” There is a perfectly lovely bed up in my room that I am willing to share. He’d prefer his own bed, but more so his own room, so it’s Couch City for him. If we had come Friday he might have snagged the guest room, but Carter’s cousin Nate beat him to it. “I’m gonna go grab something really quick, I’ll be right back.” Carter leaves us alone in the room. As soon as the door shuts, Arthur is talking.

“That dude has herpes.” *What?! Did Arthur used to work in the medical field? How does he know this?* I can’t really find words right now.

“Carter?” I point at the door he just exited through so we’re both talking about the same person. I’m very confused.

“Oh yeah, big time.” *What?! How does he know this?*

“Carter?” I’m still pointing. *He’s sure?* I’m kind of shocked, and I’m kind of stuck on one word.

“All those guys do.”

“What guys?”

“Cocky football douchebags.” *Okay, cocky maybe, football definitely, douchebag? Carter?* “They sleep with everyone. You heard him say he had two sorority girls in his bed last year.”

“He said he slept down here.” Arthur is looking at me like I’m dumb.

“That guy did not sleep down here. Look, those guys are all the same. They sleep with anyone and everyone.”

“Not Carter.” I’m not sure why I’m defending him.

“Come on.” He rolls his eyes back and puts his hands over his heart like the photo. He’s mocking it. I love that photo. “It’s all an act. I guarantee you he did that to get laid.”

“I was there that night.” I point at the picture. “He didn’t do that to get laid.”

“Were you with him the whole night?”

“Yes.” *Why am I defending him?* “We went to a party together right after the game. I was with him the whole time.”

“I guarantee you he snuck off to a closet or a pantry and got some strange when you weren’t looking.” Suddenly I feel like all the air has left the room and I can’t quite breathe. *Carter?* “Those football assholes are all the same. Back when I played—”

“You played?” I’ve never heard this.

“Oh yeah, I played from sixth grade to like... eighth grade— well, half of eighth grade. I quit halfway through because they only gave field time to the cocky assholes. I quit halfway through seventh grade for the same reason.”

“So, one season and two half seasons?”

“It’s basically three seasons.” Not really. “But I stayed friends with them after football. All those guys were always like that, sleeping with whoever. They don’t even think of them as people, they’re just a means to an end. You’re lucky you’re related or he would have done it to you too.” I feel sick, and kind of like my soul has left my body. There’s this numbness that’s

taken over. I can't really hear him talking anymore.

"We're not related." The words come out without feeling, and suddenly I need to run up to my bedroom and away from this conversation. I walk out in a stupor. I can't remember if we said goodnight or anything else. Carter comes bounding down the stairs just as I close the office door. He's laughing to himself.

"I grabbed you an extra pillow because I know you like to cudd—" His face falls. "What's wrong?" I stare at him, this person I've known my whole life, and I try to reconcile what Arthur said with the person I'm looking at. I can't make the pieces fit, but maybe I just can't see that they do. Was he really hooking up with girls in college? Did he have this whole secret side I didn't know about? His eyes glance over at the office door and back to me. "Tell me what he said to you." *He ruined our entire friendship in two minutes.* I shake my head.

"It's nothing, I'm fine." I try to covertly dab at a tear at the edge of my eye. I think I'm going to vomit or cry or both and I don't want him to see. For a moment I think he's going to try and drag it out of me because that's what he does. That's Carter. He stares at me looking like he's contemplating something.

"Okay." That's all he says. He grabs my bag and I'm grateful because I'm pretty sure I lack the strength to lift it. We make our way up the stairs to my bedroom. He opens the door for me and we step into a room that doesn't feel like mine. It's been redecorated, it doesn't look the same as before, and I'm not sure if I'm sad or relieved. The desk and dresser are different. The bedding is different. "Your mom redecorated. The old bedding is in the linen closet if you still want it." I don't. Too many memories are attached to those sheets.

I look over at the new bedding, dark blue, nautical like Arthur's downstairs. There's a giant white body pillow lying haphazardly across it, with an iron on picture of an eleven year old brace-faced Carter making a ridiculous face on it. I laugh, my stupid embarrassingly big laugh that only Carter can get out of me. Suddenly I'm eleven again and there's nothing in this world that that silly face can't make better. Carter made that stupid pillow the summer we turned eleven when our parents said we couldn't share a bed anymore. I didn't understand why we couldn't share a bed then, but I understand why now. I turn to him, and he's making the face, eyes crossed, tongue sticking out.

“That freaking pillow.” I’m still laughing.

“Please, you couldn’t sleep without that thing in high school.”

“I couldn’t sleep without *you* in high school.” His face turns serious. *I shouldn’t have said that. I need to think before I say things to him.* “Where did you even find that thing?” I’m trying to distract him from what I just said.

“The linen closet. I thought you’d want an extra pillow to cuddle with, and I found that guy.”

“I do not remember having that thing at this house.”

“It probably came over during the move from The Duplex.” The Duplex was the house our parents shared after the first house, The Cottage. After we started to outgrow that one they purchased this one when Carter and I were like fifteen? Fourteen? We’ve been at The Manor ever since.

“God we made each other the stupidest stuff when we were young.”

“How dare you, that stuff was amazing.”

“And I’m sure you still have all of the iron on t-shirts, and the photo collages, and all the other goofy nonsense we made each other.”

“I do.”

“Liar, you threw all of that away a long time ago.”

“I still have every stupid thing we ever made, every note we wrote each other on gum wrappers, every notebook we shared, everything.” *Oh.* The words cocky football douchebag run through my head. *Would someone like that still hold on to all of our childhood crap? Maybe. I don’t know.* Suddenly I feel a need to analyze every part of our relationship. “It’s good to have you home, Maddie.” He turns to leave and suddenly I need to ask him. I need to know if he was hooking up with girls in college.

“Carter?” He looks back at me. I have so many questions, but I can’t push them past my lips. I try to make my face say what my mouth won’t, but he just stares at me. I’m more afraid of the answer than I am of not knowing, so I chicken out. “Close the door on your way out.” He nods and leaves. I lock the door behind him. There’s a vacuum in my chest where my heart used to be. My fingers dance on the photo of Carter and his stupid face. I don’t know what to think or feel.

My shower turns on, and my head snaps over to where the bathroom door is still open. *Noooo.* Carter and I have a Jack and Jill bathroom. *God. Damn it.* I completely forgot about the shared bathroom. I didn’t think he was coming to town, so it never crossed my mind. I can see the mirror from where I am, and I can see a slight glimpse of Carter’s skin in the reflection. *Oh Hell*

no. In college we had an open door policy on the bathroom, if one of us was in the shower the door was open for the other one to use it. If this was college, I'd walk in that bathroom and brush my teeth while sneaking glimpses in that mirror and not think a damn thing of it. *God we had a weirdly close relationship. Boundary: no open door policy on the bathroom.*

I go to close the door and lock him out, but I remember the lock is on the inside. I literally can't lock him out unless I lock him out of the bathroom. I grab the wooden desk chair and walk over to the door to brace it against the knob. *That'll work. Keep your eyes down, do not look in that mirror.* I put my free hand on the knob, and Carter starts to sing. *No. I cannot deal with full nude Carter Karaoke in the next room.* Carter's singing does something to me... in the pants. He's not going to be winning any Grammys any time soon, but that boy can carry a tune. I rest my head on the door. *This was a bad idea. I shouldn't have come here. Lord, give me strength.* I close my eyes and listen to him singing. He starts singing "Don't You Want to Stay," which repeatedly asks about falling asleep with him.

Oh hell no, he's doing this on purpose. He's rubbing it in that Arthur and I aren't sleeping in the same bed. This is payback for leaving him with Bree at the bar. I close the door, I make sure it's not quiet, and I brace the chair against the door. *There, I've locked him literally and figuratively out of my life. And since he's definitely occupied in the shower for the next twenty minutes, I think I'll sneak down to the kitchen for something to eat.* I am far too hungry to sleep. After I take my bra off and throw on pajamas, I tiptoe downstairs.

The house is quiet now, the lights are off and everyone is in bed. The lanterns are still lit up. They're on a timer. It creates a nice romantic glow. There's a giant refrigerator in the kitchen that I'm sure is packed full of food. There's a second refrigerator in the garage guaranteed to be just as full. There were four boys who played football in this house all summer long. There was always a fresh influx of food. I open the door to the refrigerator. I'm right, it's packed. There's probably stuff in here to make a fancy sandwich. I'm trying not to peek around too much because I'm sure our moms are doing something for breakfast tomorrow and I don't want to ruin the surprise.

There's a takeout box from a restaurant right at eye level with my name written on it. *Hello, come to mama.* I open it up. Lamb shank, extra mashed potatoes. It's not even cold yet. *Carter. He's upstairs... I could just eat this, he wouldn't know. I could just leave the box in the refrigerator the*

rest of the week so he doesn't know I ate it. Yes, definitely that. I stand at the island, grab a fork and start to eat at a Joey Chestnut pace. *Slow down, eat like a normal human person.* I take a deep breath. *Ugh, yum. God I was so hungry. This tastes amazing.* Footsteps are coming towards the kitchen from the living room and I freeze with the fork inches from my lips. I'm caught. Carter walks around the corner wearing a towel at his waist. *Only a towel? Really? We don't wear clothes anymore?* Rivulets of water are coming down his chest. *Did he even dry off? He just walked out of the shower all sexy and—nope, not sexy. Boundaries. Eyes above the neck or below the—nope that's just a towel. Eyes above the neck or on my food only.*

He opens a cupboard and reaches up near his head. I don't know why I think his back looks so good. *God he's gorgeous. Food, eyes on the food.* Carter tosses two gold foil chocolates on the island near me.

"How do you always find these?" I look up at him, and make sure to maintain eye contact.

"Our moms are short, so they hide them up high, but it's basically eye level for me. If they really wanted to hide them they'd put them by my feet." I shake my head. Carter grabs a bottle of water from the fridge. "The important thing is that they remove the wrapper so we don't know where they come from."

"They've ensured we're dependent on them for fancy chocolate." I shovel more dinner into my mouth and try not to choke on it.

"I told you you were starving."

"Put some clothes on before you die of hypothermia." He laughs, and as he walks out of the room he's singing again about falling asleep with him tonight. *Lord give me strength.* After I finish the food and eat my stolen chocolates I toss the takeout box because who cares now? *I'm already caught, no sense in pretending I didn't eat it.*

I brush my teeth, and climb into a bed way more comfortable than my own with a giant stack of pillows. I pull out my phone and scroll down, waaay down, almost eight years ago. I have that same photo of Carter that we have downstairs... watching Arthur sleep... let's not read too much into that. I stare at the photo, Carter standing on the field... two hands over his heart... that look in his eyes that melts my heart. I go back to the gallery and pull up another photo. It's the same night, the same time, but from a different angle. It's one a friend sent me from a different side of the stadium. There's Carter, left side of the picture, hands over his heart, and there on the right side is

me... standing in the crowd... two hands over my heart. I always thought this was a beautiful moment between us. After what Arthur said, I'm worried the moment is ruined forever.

Chapter 2

Freshman Year of College

December

Can you get frostbite on your butt? I'm pretty sure you can get frostbite on any part of your body. I should look that up later. These bleachers are freezing. My butt is so cold right now, and the game hasn't even started yet. I pull my hands in the sleeves of Carter's junior high football hoodie. It fits me better than his college one which hangs down to my knees, but it's still a little big. I'm sitting in our usual spot at the goal line. I prefer something in the middle, but it's our parents' favorite spot. It's where they all sat together when they were students. There's a group of sorority girls sitting in front of me. They're all wearing cute outfits with the team logo on them. They look like models for sports team apparel. I have no idea how they're not freezing right now. Maybe their hotness is keeping them warm. They look like a group of Disney Princesses.

"Have you seen Davis's butt?" the one who looks like Cinderella asks.

"Which Davis?" Belle asks.

"What do you mean which one?"

"There's two of them."

"There's two of them?!"

"Yeah, the younger one started this year. Amazing butt." *Carter*. "You really need to come to more games."

"Which one is hotter?" *Carter*. *Definitely Carter*. Don't get me wrong, Nico has his own brand of hotness, but it's Carter hands down.

"Nico." *She's wrong*.

"Oh it's definitely Carter," Ariel leans over to interject.

"Which one is Carter?" Cinderella is very interested

"He's one of the ones who catches the ball and runs with it." I'm

really into Belle's description of football. I'm kinda hoping she keeps explaining the game. It's funny hearing it from someone who hasn't lived the football life I've lived.

I'm eavesdropping on these girls, which I guess is impolite, but they seem to really be enjoying each other's company. I didn't have a lot of female friends in high school. Some of the girls bullied me because they were jealous of the attention I got from Carter. It was just easier hanging out with Carter, our brothers when they'd let us, and Carter's cousin Nate when he was around. The boys were just simpler. I was kind of a tomboy growing up around the guys. Now that we're in college I've lost touch with the few female friends I had in high school. My roommate is the girliest girl, and she's pretty nice when she's not busy with her boyfriend. I'm kinda finding myself buying more pink clothes and skirts now. I went to Victoria's Secret and bought myself a bunch of bright colored underwear with lace on the trim. I never realized there were aspects to being a girl that I actually would enjoy, and now I'm kind of envious of the girls in front of me.

"What about Bishop?" Cinderella asks. *Ooh, they're talking about Carter's cousin Nate now.*

"Ugh, I just want to touch his abs," Belle answers. I'm trying not to laugh, but these girls are a crack up.

"If you're talking about abs we have to discuss Moore." *Ew, that's my brother.*

"I saw them both at a party once but I was too scared to talk to them." I'm so used to the guys. It's so different seeing them through their eyes, girls with crushes too afraid to talk to them.

I check the aisle again to see if our parents have arrived and I see our moms walking towards me. *Oh, thank god.* I know they have snacks and blankets, and body heat to keep me warm. I hope the princesses are done talking about the guys and their abs and butts since their parents have now arrived and will be in earshot. *Should I warn them? No, that's weird.*

"Hi, Honey," Carter's Mom says as she slides past me.

"I'm glad you're here. It's freezing." She smooshes a kiss on my cheek as she sets up her stadium chair. They've got the kind that hook onto the bleachers, they reupholstered them with the team colors and logo. The tutorial is on their blog, it's pretty popular. My mom hooks her chair onto the bleachers and I stand up so she can do mine. *Thank god, let's put some space between my butt and the frozen bleachers.* Carter's mom is pulling out snacks

and blankets when my phone starts vibrating in my pocket. It's Carter. He always calls before the game. Ever since he started playing in college it's become his ritual to call me before. I swipe my phone to answer.

"Maddie cakes!" He's so amped right now.

"Cartigan!" He takes a breath.

"I'm nervous, I need you to calm me down."

"You're always nervous before a game."

"And you always calm me down." I laugh. "Did you grab the hoodie I left out for you?"

"I am wearing it as we speak."

"Good, they said it's supposed to be cold tonight." I sit in my seat and Carter's mom drapes a blanket across all of our legs.

"My frozen butt can confirm that it is, in fact, cold."

"Did our parents make it?"

"Our moms are here." I can hear our dads sliding in behind me arguing over who does a better job parking. "And the dads just arrived." Carter's dad wraps his arm around my shoulders and gives me a hug. My dad rubs his knuckles on my hair. He calls it a noogie.

"Did they bring blankets?"

"Can confirm the presence of blankets." My mom hands me a navy blue paper cup that she's put custom stickers with the boys names and jersey numbers on. The cup is filled with hot cocoa. *God I love our moms*. In high school they'd make sugar cookies of the boys' numbers. "There is also mint hot cocoa." Carter groans.

"The kind with the Andes mints melted in?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny the presence of Andes mints."

"That's a yes. Save me some."

"You win and I'll bring you some." I'll bring him some either way. I glance down at the care package my mom has by her feet. I spy some snickerdoodles. "I'll throw in some snickerdoodles too."

"You're going to bake me some snickerdoodles?" They're his favorite.

"Sure." *Nope*. I'm just going to give him the ones our moms made.

"Ask him if he's coming to family dinner tomorrow," Carter's dad says from behind me.

"Your dad wants to know if you're coming to family dinner tomorrow."

“Do you want to go?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Tell him yes then.” I lean back in my seat and confirm family dinner for tomorrow. “Ok, I have to get going.”

“Alright, win or don’t come home.” He laughs.

“Way to add to the pressure.”

“You love it.”

“I do.” He hangs up.

I’m so much warmer now that our parents are here. Our dads insist on sitting behind us because they say our moms talk too much. Our dads talk as much as our moms do and every one of them leans over me to have conversations. We’ve been coming to these games since my brother and Carter’s brother were in pee wee football together so I’m used to it. It kind of feels like a halo of warmth and love that you’re surrounded by.

The team takes the field and the crowd goes crazy. The stadium is packed with people, the capacity is like 40,000. The town we grew up in has a population of 8,000. It’s still surreal to me that a stadium with close to five times the population of our town is going crazy for Carter. He was a big deal in our small town, and he’s still a big deal here. The game is televised, so there’s cameras, and photographers. This is such a bigger deal than our small town high school football game. There’s lights, and chants, and songs the crowd sings along with. They turn the lights down and play "Don’t Stop Believin’" and everyone in the stadium pulls out their phone and turns the flashlight on. People do the wave. The energy is incredible. This season has been amazing. The last few seasons weren’t very good, but that changed this year with Carter and Nate. I’d like to give some credit to our brothers as well, but truly it’s been those two. Nate and Carter just have this magic on the field. Nate has the arm, and Carter has the speed. Together they’ve been basically unstoppable. They haven’t lost one game, and as the season goes on the crowd gets more and more excited that we may actually have an undefeated season this year.

The game is tied at the half and our dads go get pizza while our moms chat over me about this week’s blog post. They’ve shared a blog called Budget Mom for five years. It’s full of money saving tips and how to raise a family on a budget, there’s crafting and decorating tips. They didn’t have a ton of money when we were young and they budgeted like crazy so they could buy The Cottage at the coast when we were kids because it was their

dream. They got really good at couponing and saving money so they turned it into a blog. It's gotten pretty popular the last couple of years. I think their section on college life has really helped reach a new demographic and really gained them a following. They have paid sponsors and everything.

"Oh Maddie, try these." My mom pulls something out of her bag. "They're rechargeable hand warmers. The company wants us to try them and write a review. They have a coupon code for us to post on the site." She pulls out two pink pieces of plastic the size of a deck of cards. She presses a button and hands them to me. They start to warm up.

"These are really cool!" I didn't think they'd actually work, but I'm pretty impressed.

"You can keep them, they gave us a bunch." I love free blog swag from our moms.

"You can warm up your frozen butt with them," Carter's mom says with a laugh.

"Thank you for that, you're hilarious." Our dads return with pizza, and they're still arguing about who parks better. My dad insists he parks the work trucks better, and Carter's dad begs to differ.

"Maddie, can you answer phones for us tomorrow?" my dad asks. "Patrice went home sick today and I don't think she'll be in tomorrow."

"Yeah, just forward the calls to my phone." I've been answering phones for our dads since I was fourteen. They have a software program for scheduling that I have on my computer so it's easy to take calls and schedule even though we don't live in the same town.

"You want money or gift cards this time?"

"I accept all forms of currency."

"Barrel full of pennies it is."

"I'm sorry, we don't move barrels of mystery items. You'll have to call someone else for that." I'm teasing him because our dads own a moving company. They actually had someone try to get them to move a barrel once and the person refused to say what was inside. They didn't move the barrel.

After the half, the game stays tied up. The crowd is getting so excited that every time we score it's a bigger and bigger reaction. They want to keep up that winning streak as much as the team does, but every time we score the other team does too.

I feel something pushing at my back, and I look to see Carter's dad sleeping in his seat. It must be ten o'clock. Carter's dad falls asleep at exactly

ten o'clock no matter where he is. Wedding, restaurant, standing in line, he's asleep at ten. I'm very curious if he would fall asleep on a theme park ride, but it seems too dangerous to test. My dad nudges him awake.

"Hey, you're sleeping on my child."

"Huh?" He looks around with sleepy eyes. "Well she kind of owes me from all the times she slept on me as a child."

"He has a point, Dad."

"Alright, time for Cinderella to turn back into a pumpkin," Carter's mom says next to me.

"I don't think that's how the story goes," I say teasing. Our parents start to pack up their things. "There's only a few minutes left in the game." I don't really want my halo to leave.

"We'll watch the rest on TV," my dad says.

When everything is packed except my care package and the hot cocoa, they say their goodbyes and my halo of love and warmth leaves. I'm left with empty seats all around, and the coldness seeps back in, but the princesses are still here making conversation, so I guess I won't be bored. When the game is getting close to ending and there's less than a minute left, some guy comes over to sit next to me.

"Madison?" I look over at him, I don't know him. "I sit behind you in Biology."

"Oh yeah!" I passed a test back to him last week. I remember him.

"I missed class this week, did you take notes?" I glance over and see the center snap the ball to Nate. They're pretty far down the opposite side of the field and there's very little time left in the game.

"Uh, yeah." I'm only half paying attention.

"Can I get a copy?" Nate throws the ball to Carter.

"Uh, yeah, sure." I'm not sure what he means by copy, and he's still sitting there. *Does he think I have the notes on me right now?* Carter maneuvers around someone, but another guy is coming for him. He jumps over the second guy, and I'm standing. There's no one even close to him now. He takes off like a shot down the field. People are chasing after him, but they're too far behind. He passes the thirty yard line, and the crowd is already going crazy. As soon as he crosses into the endzone everyone is screaming. Carter slams the ball on the ground, throws his hands in the air and lets out a yell so loud I can hear from my seat. His head turns to my section, he scans the crowd for all of two seconds and finds me standing there, empty seats all

around, except the bio guy to my right. Carter points at me from the field, and he puts two hands over his heart. He's never done this before. I put my hands over my heart and for a moment the whole stadium fades away, and it's him and me, and nothing else in this world. Time is frozen. All I hear is my breathing and my heart pounding in my chest. I can't even hear the screaming of the crowd. He drops his arms and turns to run back to the sidelines. The team crowds around him. I look down before I sit back down and the princesses are staring at me. *Oh hello.*

"Carter Davis just told you he loved you on live TV," Belle says. *Oh shit, the cameras. I forgot about the cameras. Oh shit, our parents probably saw that. That's not weird though right? We've always been close.*

"Oh no, it's not like that. He's my best friend."

"Can I be his friend?" Cinderella asks.

"Yeah, probably." I don't know how to answer that.

"Can you introduce us?"

"I can do that." Belle gets a look in her eye.

"Who else do you know?" she asks.

"Well, Nico, obviously, because they're brothers. Nate Bishop is their cousin, and Bennett Moore is my brother."

"Holy shit you know all the good ones."

"I mean, I know most of the team because they hang out together, but I've known those guys forever. Their parents were sitting with me."

"Their parents were here?" Belle asks. "Oh God, they didn't hear us talking about butts did they?" I laugh.

"No, just me."

"Are you hanging out with the team after the game?"

"I always go to the after parties with them."

"Can you introduce us?"

"I can do that."

"I'll give you my number, text us where you're going to be and we'll meet up."

"Okay."

"I'm Audrey. We're going to be best friends." *I'm never going to see these girls again in my life.* Audrey (formerly Belle) gives me her number and I promise to text her our location after the game. I realize then that Bio guy is gone. I guess he realized I didn't have my notes with me.

After the game I wait by the locker room with the crowd of people

waiting for the guys to emerge. I always feel kind of awkward in the crowd. It's full of girls waiting for their boyfriends, and girls looking for a boyfriend. Every time a guy comes out there's some sort of PDA with his girlfriend. Carter and I usually just have a quick platonic hug. It's not even close to the same. After the first few guys come out, Carter emerges. People cheer, and try to get his attention, but he's scanning the crowd for me. Our eyes connect, and he races over to me, picks me up and spins me around. I hold him close, and I don't know how to explain the feeling I have for him at that moment, it's something like the halo of warmth from our parents. I thought he'd put me down, but he keeps me there, and rests his forehead on mine. This is not our normal hug, but he's on a winning streak, and he's full of adrenaline, and I'm loving every minute of it.

“You're my good luck charm, Maddiekins.”

“That was all you.”

Chapter 3

Freshman Year of College

December

He's here, I'm sure it's him. I'm in the kitchen of a house three doors down from Carter's house. There's bottles of alcohol all over the counter, and a keg on the floor. The music is loud, the lights are low, there's a large crowd dancing in the living room and it is HOT in here. I changed into a tight pair of jeans and a sweater before the party just in case I saw him again, and here he is. This is the third party I've seen him at. We've flirted twice and he hasn't asked for my number. I was really hoping I'd see him tonight, because I really want him to ask for my number. He's walking over here, so I start looking at random things to mix a drink for Carter. I think the guy's name is Dallas, or Dallen, it's so loud at these parties I can barely ever hear him. He said he's an enology major, and according to the internet that is winemaking. I was hoping I could get him talking about wine.

"Hey, it's you again!" he's yelling over the crowd. He smiles at me, his smile is nice, but it's no Carter Davis smile.

"We keep bumping into each other!" *Please ask for my number.* "How is the wine making?"

"Good, we were going over how to check grapes for sugar content today."

"That sounds so interesting." *Tell me more things about wine, and also ask me on a date.* I grab a red plastic cup and start dumping alcohol in it. *Fireball, okay, I guess Carter is getting some Fireball.*

"You look really good tonight." I dump some ice in the cup. *What goes with Fireball?* I search around for something else to mix in.

"So do you." He pushes his hair out of his eyes.

"Hey, I wanted to ask you something." *Yes yes yes, here it comes.* I spy some hard apple cider. *Apples, cinnamon, that's good right?* I dump

some of that in too. “Do you want to get out of here, and find somewhere quiet to talk?” *Ugh.* Carter told me that always means hook up.

“Are you asking if I want to hook up?” I need to be clear in this situation. He has this look in his face like that was obvious.

“Well yeah.” *Damn it.*

“I’m not really the hookup type.” It’s just not my thing. I’m a relationship person, not a hookup person.

“Well, I met these two girls here and they were asking, so I thought I’d give you first dibs.” *Am I hearing this right? Did this guy just say I had first dibs of his penis? I hate college.*

“Did you say two girls?”

“Yeah, they offered me a threesome, but I thought I’d see what you were offering first since we’ve talked a couple of times.” *I cannot believe this is happening right now.*

“I’m gonna hard pass. But thanks?” *Should I be thanking him? What’s the etiquette for someone offering first crack at their junk?*

“Cool, see you around.” He turns to leave. *See you around? There is no way this is real life right now.*

“That guy is an ass.” I turn around and see a girl I’ve never met. “Ignore him, there’s tons of cute guys here tonight. Carter Davis is here. He’s way hotter.” And because I’m a little bit buzzed, and a little bit bummed out over Dallas/Dallen I decide to have a little bit of fun.

“Carter Davis? He’s here?”

“I saw him outside near the fire pit.” I lean in close to her so I don’t have to yell.

“I hear they call him The Python.” I almost laugh as I say it.

“The what?”

“Python.”

“Like the snake?” She looks confused for a second. Then her eyes go wide. “Oh My God! Really?!”

“Yeah, I heard it’s huge. My sister’s friend said she saw it once.” I don’t have a sister.

“Oh my God!” I think I broke her brain.

“I’ll see you around.”

“Good luck with The Python!” I laugh the whole way to the back door. *God I hope that gets back to him.*

Carter is sitting at the fire pit where he usually is at these parties. He’s

on a wicker couch that is definitely a fire hazard since it's next to a lit fire. There's a bunch of guys standing around the patio talking about the game, reliving the touchdown, but the rest of the furniture around the fire pit is empty. I sit down next to him and hand him the red cup.

"What's in this?"

"I dunno some stuff I dumped in."

"You're too good to me, Maddiekins." He laughs and takes a sip.
"This is actually pretty good."

"Well I'm glad something worked out tonight."

"Uh oh, did you see your guy?"

"Yep."

"Doesn't sound like it went well."

"Well, he gave me the option of leaving here with him to hook up—"

"Oooh, you don't do hookups."

"OR what's behind door number two!" I wave my hands like a game show host.

"Oh! The door! The door!" He's getting into it, and it's making me feel better.

"Door number two is him leaving here with two girls he met tonight to have a threesome." His face falls.

"You're messing with me."

"I am a hundred percent serious right now." I grab my bottle of fruity whatever that Carter has been guarding against roofies and take a drink.
"Welcome to my dating pool."

"He did not say that to you."

"Carter, he literally said he was giving me first dibs of his junk."

"You're lying."

"I'm serious." He looks around.

"Where is he?"

"Why?"

"I'm gonna pop him in the face." I start laughing.

"Oh you're gonna pop him in the face, like you just punch people in the face now."

"I'm gonna pop him in the face." He's doing an Italian accent. It's a horrible accent but it's really making me laugh. He pulls me close to him and kisses my temple. *Ooh, Carter's getting handsy.* There's different levels to Carter's drinking, handsy is one of the levels. I like handsy. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be.” I am a little bummed, but it’s not like I even knew him. “I didn’t even know his name. It’s fine.”

“One day you’ll find someone who deserves you.” He plays with the ends of my hair. I take a deep breath and try to let go of my disappointment. His breath is warm on my face, and it’s making me feel a little tingly.

“Thank you.”

“Oh my God you two are so cute! I want a boyfriend!” We both turn to the voice at the same time and say:

“We’re not together.” *It’s the princesses!* And they brought two more friends with them. Apparently Jasmine didn’t get the “we’re just friends” memo. They sit in the empty seats around the fire pit.

“Hey, you made it!” I texted Audrey a while ago, but I didn’t think they were actually coming. Carter looks at me very confused. “These are the girls I met at the game tonight.”

“She said she’d introduce us to some guys,” Audrey tells him. “That was pretty smooth out there on the field tonight, Carter.” He takes a drink, and he seems to be enjoying the taste.

“It’s not like that, we’ve always been close,” he explains.

“So why don’t you two just go for it and date?”

“Carter, do you want to explain to these lovely girls why we can’t date?”

“Maddie, I’d love to.” We’ve done this so many times we’re like a damn Who’s on First skit now, with newscaster voices and banter. It’s a whole production. “Reason number five why we can’t date.” I hold up five fingers for him. “Our brothers are best friends.”

“Who cares about their stupid friendship, Carter?”

“Not me!”

“Oh this is like a whole thing,” Audrey says waving her hand around us. *Yup! Buckle up!* Carter ignores her and continues.

“If I even so much as thought about crossing a line, her brother would beat me up.”

“So what? You could use a punch in the face.” I added that line last time. I think it’s hilarious.

“I sure could.” I try to hold in my laughter. He’s never said that before and I think it’s funny. Carter is hilarious.

“So your brothers are friends? That’s a bad reason not to be together,” Mulan says.

"That's why it's reason number five," Carter continues. "Reason number four." I hold up four fingers. "Our fathers are best friends."

"Best friends since second grade."

"In college they started a business to pay for their tuition, maybe you've heard of it— Two Guys and a Truck."

"No way," Arielle says. "They moved my stuff here!"

"Me too!" Cinderella says.

"Us too," I say laughing.

"So after college," Carter continues, "they were doing so well that they just kept the business going. Maddie and I are business majors so we can join the family business after college. Which brings us to reason number three." I hold up three fingers. "Our moms are best friends."

"You're making this up," Audrey says.

"We're not."

"So you're like a family of best friends?"

"Oh, I hate his stinking guts, but everyone was paired up already so I got stuck with him," I tell her with a smile.

"How dare you." Carter shoves me playfully. "Our moms were college roommates. They went on a double blind date with our dads and they've been together ever since. They started a blog together four years ago."

"Five," I correct.

"Thank you, Maddie. Five years ago. It's called Budget Mom."

"Oh my God. I'm on their email list," Mulan says. The other girls look at her. "They have a whole section on cheap college living and one for copycat recipes!"

"That's Carter's mom! She can copycat anything." I'm really proud of her.

"They call her the Copycat Queen. She's amazing. Her brown sugar cinnamon latte last month was life changing," Mulan tells the other girls.

"That was for Maddie! She's got a cinnamon addiction!" Carter's so proud of our moms.

"I do not have a cinnamon addiction."

"That brings us to reason number two." I hold up two fingers for Carter. "Our mothers have had one fight."

"Just one," I add.

"It was so bad our dads picked sides."

"Carter's dad left the business and started a rival moving company."

"So how did they make up?" Audrey is invested in this now.

"Our mom's bumped into each other at the doctor when they were pregnant with our older brothers and they said they realized they didn't want to raise their kids without the other person in their life."

"That is so sweet," Jasmine says.

"Our dads," Carter continues, "took some convincing."

"It wasn't even their fight! So if we had a fight or broke up they would choose sides and break the business apart."

"We hold grudges in our family. We hold them tight, until they turn into diamonds, and then we wear them."

"Carter, you're ridiculous."

"And that brings us to the number one reason we can't date. Maddie—" He always makes me say this part.

"We just don't feel that way about each other." I shrug. Audrey slow claps.

"Bravo. That was amazing." I do a little bow in my seat.

"Thank you, we'll be here all night." I take a sip of my drink.

"Well, if you two aren't together let's go dance and meet some guys."

"Audrey brought jungle juice," Cinderella says. *Ugh, I love jungle juice.* Sugary fruit juices with chunks of fruit floating in it and tons of alcohol you can't taste? Sign me up.

"Pre-roofied jungle juice?! My favorite!" Audrey gives me a look.

"Maddie has a fear that someone will stick a handful of roofies in the jungle juice, so she'll only drink it when it's fresh."

"Well, let's add that to my list of fears," Audrey says. Carter turns to me with a finger wagging at me.

"No more than three cups or I'll have to carry you home."

"You're strong, you've got this." Audrey grabs my hand and pulls me inside. We head to the kitchen where she serves us some jungle juice from a little pink cooler on the counter. It's bright orange with fruit floating on top. *Yum.* I could drink waaay too much of this very easily. Carter's right, three cups only because this stuff is *strong*.

I lose two of the princesses to the first two guys I recognize before we even get to the dance floor. Audrey, Jasmine, Cinderella and I make it to the dance floor. There's some guy playing DJ, he's doing a half decent job, better than my junior prom. The music is high energy and so are the people. Girls

are grinding up on guys. My brain is trying to figure out who is with who but everyone keeps switching around so I guess it's a free for all. It gets way too hot after a few songs so I take my sweater off, and I'm left in just a tank top. It's freezing outside and incredibly hot inside. There's no in between. At some point Cinderella refills our drinks, and we all yell "TWO!" They're actually pretty fun girls. We lose Cinderella to one of the linebackers, and Jasmine to the kicker. I've almost done my job. I just need to find someone for Audrey. It's after one in the morning when I spot Nico. I grab Audrey's hand like she'd grabbed mine and drag her towards the kitchen where he's getting a drink.

"Nico!" I'm yelling, partially because it's loud and partially because I'm mostly through my second cup and a little tipsy. Suddenly Audrey gets a little shy. It's so funny to me how these guys make women lose their minds. *How do I get them talking?*

"Little Moore! Are you drunk?"

"I am not drunk, Sir, I am tipsy at best." *Okay, I'm definitely tipsy.*

"Did my brother ditch you? Do I need to kick his ass?" Nico gets just a bit flirty at times, not enough to cross a line, just enough for me to be into it. He doesn't mean anything by it, he's just Nico.

"He's here, he's outside."

"I should have guessed." If there's a party, Carter is probably outside.

"Have you met my friend Audrey?" I gesture to her. Nico's eyes light up just a bit. Audrey *is* pretty. Nico seems like he might be into her.

"I haven't. Audrey, do you play Texas Hold'em?" She smiles at him shyly. She wasn't this shy a few minutes ago.

"I do, but I should warn you I'm kind of amazing at cards."

"Then you must be unlucky in love."

"I sure am." Nico smiles at her with that killer Davis smile. *Oooh, this is promising.* Nico and Audrey take off to the dining room where there's cards going and I've officially fulfilled my promise to introduce them all to boys. I'm feeling a little proud of myself as I sip my jungle juice in the kitchen and survey the crowd. All the princesses seem to be enjoying themselves.

"Hey, Baby," a voice cuts through the music.

"Hey, Baby," I respond before I turn. *Oh. Not Carter. Oops. That's not good. Do I have a Pavlovian response to the words "Hey Baby"? That's probably a bad thing.* The guy is tall and lean, smaller than Carter but bigger

than me. *Is that a unit of measurement? I should tell Carter about that. Or is that just the jungle juice giving me ideas?* He's wearing a red baseball hat from the college and his hair is curling out from under it. I think he's drunk. "You want to get out of here and talk somewhere?" *Ugh, no.* I don't do hookups.

"No, I'm cool." Quick, easy brush off.

"Come on." He's leaning into me. "You look like you have a lot to talk about." He reaches out and touches my arm which is bare because I took my sweater off. I pull away.

"I'm here with someone." That's true, Carter and I came here together. Easy, truthful explanation.

"That guy outside?" *Is this the only guy on campus who doesn't know who Carter is?*

"Yes."

"You're not with him." *What?* I have many times been accused of dating Carter, but I've never been accused of *not* dating Carter.

"He's my boyfriend." *Oh, we're putting a label on this? Not sure that's a good idea.*

"That guy is not your boyfriend. Quit playing." He's still leaning in my space.

"He is, and he's probably wondering where I am." I turn to walk away, and he grabs my arm.

"Come on, I'll show you a good time." *Ew!* I yank my arm away from him and walk towards the back door to find Carter. As soon as I walk outside I put my sweater back on because it's freezing. Carter is still on the fire hazard couch. All the seats are full. *Great.* There's a brunette next to him leaning towards him. I can hear her talking as I approach. I'm pretty sure the red hat guy is following me out here so I walk straight to Carter's side.

"I just want you to unleash the python," the brunette is saying to Carter. *Oh my God!! This isn't the girl from before!* This is someone else. I stand next to Carter since there isn't a seat. *Did she say 'unleash the python' what does that even mean? This is amazing.*

"The what?" Carter seems confused. He glances over at me and he looks relieved. "Hey, Baby!" he says excitedly and pulls me onto his lap. It would be weird because it's Carter, but he said 'Hey Baby' so I know it's just for show. It doesn't mean anything. He wraps his arm around my waist and holds it tight.

"Hey, Baby." I lean into him.

"Uh, hi, we were talking," the brunette says kind of rudely. *Is this not conveying that we are "here together?" Are we getting bad at this?*

"Looks to me like you're hitting on my boyfriend."

"He can talk to whoever he wants to. Why don't you give him some space? You seem a little clingy." *What did she say to me?* The closer it gets to two am the more desperate and bold people get for some action. Maybe she should go find the red hat guy. They can be aggressive to each other.

"Stop trying to bang my boyfriend." *There I'll just call her out.* He's clearly not interested. *Why am I so bold when it comes to Hey Baby, but so timid when it's a guy hitting on me? Why can't I just tell him no and walk away?*

"We're just talking," she turns towards Carter, "Does she always control who you get to talk to? Sounds like you need a new girlfriend." The nerve of this girl.

"I'm very happy with the one I have," Carter says. *Oh, that's sweet.* If I was his girlfriend I'd probably kiss him. The brunette gets up to leave with a huff. *Yeah, you better leave. Wait, what do I care? He's not my boyfriend.* Carter slides his thigh up where she vacated. There's still another person at the end of the couch talking with the other people here. I'm still on Carter's lap, but I'm leaning on him a little more. "I almost lost it when you said 'bang my boyfriend.' Who are you right now?" He's laughing and I can feel his chest moving up and down beneath me.

"Well, she was acting all innocent like she was just talking to you when I clearly heard her talking about your junk."

"Is that what the python thing was? I had no idea what she was talking about."

"I may know something about that."

"What did you do?"

"I may or may not have told some girl that people call you The Python."

"You told her what? Why would you do that?"

"I thought it would be funny."

"Maybe to you, but now I got some girl wanting to unleash the python. I'm getting you back for this."

"I'd like to see you try and talk about my parts to someone without getting all red faced embarrassed Carter." I peek over to see if I can see the

red hat on the other side of the patio.

"What are you looking for?"

"This guy from earlier."

"You like him?"

"No, he was kind of a creep."

"What did he say to you?" I think I see him, but I'm not sure. The school colors are navy and red so there's tons of it everywhere. I turn back so the back of my head is resting on Carter's chest.

"It's not what he said, it's what he did. He wanted to hook up. I told him I was here with you and he didn't believe me."

"Really?"

"No one's ever *not* believed me before."

"They usually assume we're together."

"Right? So I told him I was here with you and I tried to walk away. He tried to call me out on it and he grabbed me."

"He grabbed you?!"

"Not like that. He didn't hurt me or anything, it was just kind of aggressive."

"Where is he and what does he look like?"

"No, Carter, I didn't tell you this so you could go beat him up."

"Sometimes people need to be called out on their shit, Maddie."

"And you don't need to be the one to call him out. You have a football scholarship that's paying for your whole life right now. That's more important. Just sit here with me so he leaves me alone." The person on the end of the couch leaves and Carter swings both his legs up on the wicker couch. I'm fully lying on him with my back on his chest and I can feel it rise as he breathes.

"Tell me what he looks like." *Ugh*. Carter has such a hard time letting things go.

"He's wearing a red hat and that's all I'll tell you." I can feel him twisting and looking around for the guy. The fire pit is dying out and no one is moving to get more wood. I burrow myself into Carter's chest, and he wraps his arms around me.

"Is that him?" I turn my head slightly so I'm not obvious. My cheek is resting on his chest. I see a red hat with curly hair under.

"Yeah, I think so." Carter's face is really close to mine and I can feel his breath on my mouth. My heart is starting to beat a little faster and I swear

his is too. I can smell Fireball on his lips, and his cologne. *God, he smells like a hot guy. I should kiss him. No, I definitely should not kiss him.* That's a terrible idea fueled by jungle juice, and me being a little tipsy, but I can smell the Fireball on his lips and I just want one little taste, just one.

"Hey, Baby." His words come out breathy and sexy.

"Hey, Baby," my answer is almost a whisper. I sound sexy. *When did we get sexy voices?* And then his mouth is on mine. Just one quick kiss— just one. Okay, one more, just a little more open. Okay, last one. He sweeps his tongue in my mouth. He tastes like Fireball and sweetness. I just want to slide my tongue in his mouth for just a second. Okay, seriously, last one. We separate, and I put my cheek on his chest. *That's fine, right? We're just friends who got drunk at a party and kissed one time. Okay, I'm not drunk, and I'm pretty sure he isn't either, but we'll just say we were if we ever talk about it, which we won't, because it's not a big deal. We're not dating, we can't date, we're just friends. Oh, damn it, why didn't I bite his bottom lip? I had one shot at this and damn that lip is so biteable. Of course I wasted my opportunity.* His hand slides up my back to my neck. His fingers are scratching at the hair at the base of my head. It feels nice. He feels nice. His hand slides down my jaw, to my chin, he tilts it up towards him, and his mouth is on mine again. *Oh, God, yes.* I turn in his arms so I'm lying on my stomach on top of him, and his tongue is in my mouth again. I slide my hands up to his head. One of his hands is in my hair and the other is on the back of my upper thigh. I'd really like those hands to start roaming. *Are we making out right now? Holy shit, I think we are. It's fine, it's just one drunken makeout at a party one time. God, he tastes so good, and he smells amazing.* I bite his bottom lip, and he lets out a groan. *Was that bad? Should I not have done that?* It seems like maybe he liked it because he's gripping me tighter and kissing me harder.

He pulls his mouth away and rests his forehead on mine. We're both out of breath.

"We should go," he says, his chest heaving. Spell broken. Moment over. *Bummer.*

"Okay." *What else am I supposed to say? Stay right here and makeout with me until we light this couch on fire from how hot this is?* I move off of him and help him up. As I turn to leave he wraps his arms around my torso and rests his chin on my shoulder. We walk out together with him holding onto me. As we reach the front door, people notice that he's leaving.

“Hey man, leaving so soon?” someone asks. It’s after two in the morning. There’s way less people than were here before. People clap him on the back and say good game, and nice touchdown, and all those other football pleasantries that men exchange. We open the front door and there’s more people on the porch.

“Cater Davis, my man!” Someone goes to shake his hand. “I didn’t know your girl was here.” I don’t know this guy, I think he lives here. “I would have let you use my room.” My eyes want to go wide, but I don’t let them. *Is that a thing? Do people just use other people’s bedrooms like that?*

“Oh, no, we’re heading out, but thanks.”

“You need a ride?”

“I live a couple of houses down.” I’m staying at his house tonight so we could both walk to the party and drink.

“Well, goodnight then, good game.”

“Thank you, thank you.” We pass through a gauntlet of people patting him on the back and congratulating him. *Is this what it’s like to be Carter after winning a game?* We finally make it past all the people and start down the sidewalk towards Carter’s house. He pulls me inside his coat, wraps it around me, and we do a sort of Frankenstein walk with me tucked into his chest.

The lights are off at Carter’s house. He lives with his cousin Nate and two other guys I don’t know very well. They’re also on the team, but they’re not home often. He releases me from his coat and closes his front door behind us, and damn I wish I was still wrapped in that coat, because it’s freezing in this house. We make our way upstairs to Carter’s room. He throws an old high school gym shirt and sweatpants at me. It’s what I usually sleep in. Neither of us have talked since we left. *Am I being weird?* I decide I need to break the silence.

“Carter, it is *freezing* in here.”

“Get under the blankets.” The blankets are just as cold. The utilities are included with their rent but they feel bad running the bill up for the owner so they just don’t use the heat. They also don’t use the AC in the summer I hear, but Carter and I won’t be around to find out. I pull the blankets over myself and try to change my clothes underneath. Carter turns his back to me and changes into shorts and a t-shirt without leaving the room. I look away at first, but, damn, he’s in such good shape, and his back is so gorgeous. I toss my clothes on the floor and pull the covers up to my chin. His shirt and

sweatpants are cold on my skin. He turns the lights off and climbs into bed. "Come here, I'll keep you warm." He drags me over to him so my side is touching his front, and he wraps his arm around me. He is so warm. I'm pretty sure I can feel his heart beating in his chest. *Should it be beating that fast? Is that right?* The room is dark, I can barely see him in the moonlight. I think he's staring at me, but I can't tell for sure. "Hey, Baby." His words come out sexy again. *Hey Baby? In this room, with no one around to see it?* I want to see where this is going.

"Hey, Baby," I breathe. The words are barely out before his mouth is on mine again. He rolls on top of me and some of his weight is on me. He smells like fire pit and hot guy, and he tastes like Fireball and forever. His hand runs up the front of my leg until it reaches my waist and he grips onto it. *God, he is so hot. Please just run those hands all over my body. Why am I wearing pants?? Why didn't I do that sexy girl thing where you just wear a t-shirt and no pants? Then his hand would be on my skin. I want his hands on my skin.* He breaks our mouths apart for just a moment.

"Baby, you are so hot," he breathes in the space between us. We're already out of breath.

"So are you." He grips my hip and brings his mouth back to mine. *Holy shit, I can't believe I'm making out with Carter.*

The sun comes up and we're still there making out in his bed. At some point we fall asleep in the middle of kissing. Usually when we share a bed his back is to me by morning and we both just ignore the... python in the room.

When my phone rings at nine the next morning we're completely tangled up in each other. I grab my phone to see who the hell is calling me when I'm trying to sleep.

"Hello?" My voice is thick with sleep.

"Uh, hi, is this Two Guys and a Truck?" *Oh shit, I'm on phones today.* I try to make my voice sound like I wasn't asleep two seconds ago. Carter is waking up next to me. Our eyes meet.

"Uh, yes, clearly I haven't had my coffee this morning, how can I help you?"

"I have some farm equipment I need moved and I was hoping to get an estimate."

"I am so sorry, we don't move heavy machinery. Try J & L, they do heavy machinery."

“Do you have their number?”

“I sure do, give me one minute.” I start snapping my fingers at Carter, and he pulls it up on his phone. He turns the screen towards me and I read off the number to the woman on the phone.

“Thank you so much.” She hangs up and I sigh loudly.

“Are you on phones today?”

“Yeah, I forgot about that.”

“You want some breakfast?”

“That would be great.” *Is this weird? Is it going to be all awkward between us?*

“What do you want?” I’m nervous so I just throw a bunch of words together.

“Cinnamon roll pancakes.” *Is that a thing? Did I just make it up?*

“Cinnamon roll pancakes it is.” Carter gets out of bed, and I step out from under the blankets.

“Holy shit, it’s cold.” Carter grabs a hoodie and a thick pair of socks from his dresser. He pulls the hoodie over my head and hands me the socks. The hoodie hits me mid thigh and it smells like his laundry detergent. I want to stay wrapped up in it forever. *This is normal right? We’re being normal.* He heads downstairs to the kitchen and I follow behind him. I take a seat at the counter, and pull on his giant socks. He presses some buttons on the coffee maker, types something on his phone and then starts rummaging around the drawers and cupboards. *Is he making me breakfast? Has he ever made me breakfast before? This is kind of sweet.* When the coffee is done he makes a cup, walks it over to me, kisses the top of my head, and puts the cup in front of me. No weird, no awkward, just Carter. I take a sip and groan. “That cinnamon creamer I love.”

“There’s a giant bottle in the fridge if you want a second cup.” That is my favorite creamer. Carter prefers the vanilla, which is fine. When we’re sitting at the coffee table working on homework there is usually a travel mug full of coffee between us to share, and the person who makes the coffee usually picks the creamer. Carter doesn’t normally keep my creamer here.

“That was really thoughtful, thank you.” He smiles, checks his phone, and starts dumping ingredients into a bowl. A few minutes later he’s pouring batter into a hot pan and adding a cinnamon swirl to the first pancake. *This looks totally legit. Are these already a thing? Did I not just invent something awesome?* The first pancake comes off and it looks half decent.

“Baby Baby Baby,” Carter turns to me, using the spatula as a microphone. *Yeess!! Ladies and Gentlemen it’s time for Carter Karaoke. You know that thing where you’re starving and you take a bite of something amazing and you make this sound like “ugh yum”?* That’s how I react to Carter Karaoke. Carter has a half decent singing voice and he can carry a tune, but his lyrics are kind of all over the place. Usually he starts off strong, and he keeps the tune going, but in the middle the lyrics start to fall apart. By the end he’s completely off the rails and just making stuff up. I absolutely love it. I think he’s just started “Tell Me It’s Real” by K-Ci & JoJo, which is not the song he started off singing.

“Nope, that’s a different song.” *Not off to a strong start.* He continues with the correct lyrics. *Okay, sticking to the same song, at least there’s that.* “Tell me what to feel.”

“Nope, that’s wrong.” I’m laughing now, and Carter comes over to me with the grace of a dancer in a boy band and tugs me off the seat.

“Tell me how you feel.”

“Not even close.” He’s smiling and we’re dancing. He pulls me into him so we’re slow dancing in the kitchen, but I’m pretty sure he’s still using the spatula over my shoulder as a microphone.

“Tell me how to feel, Maddie cakes.” His mouth is right at my ear.

”I’m very sure my name is not in that song.” He’s laughing. “You had it and you lost it.” His arms are around me and I don’t give a shit if that pan catches on fire right now. I want to bottle this moment and keep it forever. I want to take nips of it when we’re older and our lives and spouses have taken us far far away from this. I want to sit on a porch when I’m old and sip on it and remember this moment. Footsteps pound down the stairs and we split apart like we’ve been caught by our parents. I hop back into the chair at the counter, and he pours more batter into the pan. His roommate, Gary, bounds into the kitchen. God I hate that guy. He grabs the pancake off the plate and starts eating it.

“Hey, that’s Maddie’s.” He flips the second one in the pan.

“I don’t see her name on it.”

“Don’t be an asshole.” Carter takes the second one out of the pan as more footsteps come down the stairs. Nate rounds the corner into the kitchen and grabs the second pancake off the plate. Carter hits him with the spatula like our moms used to do to him. *I guess it’s payback for all the times he stole food.*

“Carter, these are so good,” Nate says. “You gonna cook for us every morning?”

“Those are Maddie’s.”

“I don’t see her name on it.” *Oh sweet Jesus, these boys.* Carter manages to get one on a plate and walk it over to me. "Maddie" is written on it poorly in cinnamon swirl. I reach out to grab the plate but he grips onto it. I look up and our eyes meet. I can see worry on his face.

“Is this okay?” He doesn’t mean the pancakes. He means "was last night okay?" Are we okay?

“It’s perfect.” He smiles. There’s no weirdness at all. We’re just us. It’s like the switch has been flipped off and Hey Baby is over and we’re back to us again.

Chapter 4

Present Day

The sun hasn't broken the horizon yet when I wake up the next morning. I was up most of the night thinking about college and Carter, and our weird relationship. I don't feel any better than I did last night. The door into Carter's room from the bathroom is open. As I reach for the door I stop for a moment and stare at him while he's sleeping. Carter doesn't do hookups... right? No... no, that was me. I can't remember him ever telling me his thoughts or feelings about it. All this time I just projected my morals onto him. I have no idea how he felt about it. Why do I even care? Why am I fixating on something that hasn't mattered to me in four years? Carter doesn't matter to me anymore. We're not friends. We haven't spoken in four years. Arthur matters. Arthur drove all the way out here with me to meet my family. That's what's important. Let go of the things that aren't serving you. That's what they say in my yoga class. And this— this is not serving me. I gently close the door and lock it as quietly as possible so I don't wake him.

All my stuff is laid out on the left side of the sink, like always. Carter's is on the right. His hot guy cologne is sitting right there, and I avoid making eye contact with it. *Do not smell that bottle.* I brush my teeth and throw on some leggings and a chunky sweater with a thick pair of socks. I make my hair wavy because there's no sense in blowing it out, it'll just get messed up by the humidity and the wind. I tiptoe down the stairs and into the kitchen. They have this fancy coffee maker here, and I make myself a cup as quietly as possible. When I was a kid I loved this time of day, the time when the house was quiet and everyone was sleeping. With a house full of rowdy boys it was often the only time you got peace and quiet. I call it the golden hour, that magical hour where everything is still. As an adult I like to sip a cup of coffee at the patio table outside and listen to the ocean waves as I read.

There's large baskets of throw blankets placed throughout the house. The blankets are neatly rolled up inside. Everyone has their favorites. There's

a basket by the back door and I start digging to find my blanket. It's gray and made out of some synthetic material that looks like fur. I like to imagine it's what a baby seal feels like. Carter and I always argue which of our blankets is warmer. It's mine. Buried way down towards the bottom is my blanket. I guess that's what happens when you're not around, your blanket gets buried at the bottom.

I take my coffee, my tablet, and my blanket out to the table on the back patio. The sun is just starting to rise. The lawn stretches out from the house about an acre, maybe two, then drops off at a cliff. Below the cliff is a beach only accessible from the neighborhood. There's stairs leading down from our property to the small beach. You can't see the waves breaking on the sand from up here, but you can hear them. There's a group of rocks in the distance that protrude from the bay like an island where the seals and sea lions like to sun themselves. Otters float by holding hands and sleeping. The kelp beds sway with the current. It's overcast, June gloom is in full swing today. The salty ocean breeze whips my hair around my face and I try to tuck it behind my ears, but there's really no point, it's just going to be everywhere. Here in this moment, in the quiet golden hour, with just me and the ocean, I finally feel like I'm home.

Someone drops a kiss on my head and an arm snakes around my left and grabs my coffee. I look over and see Carter, my mug in hand. He pours the contents out on the lawn.

"What the hell, Carter?" He nods back towards the table. There's another mug in front of me. It was a distraction. The mug is blue and says "you're my favorite." I look over at him. "What is this?"

"Peace offering."

"You only offer peace when you're at war. We're not at war."

"Then what are we? Because it feels like we are." There's so much in that question that I'm not sure how to answer it. He's right, it feels like war.

"We're friends... friends with boundaries."

"We were never good with boundaries." *I thought the same thing.*

"Well, we're going to have to start trying."

"Fine. An apology, then."

"For what, the bar or the shower?"

"All of the above. You were right, we were always respectful when the other person was seeing someone and that wasn't respectful. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted." He gestures at the mug and I pick it up. *Why is*

he being weird? As soon as I taste it I know.

“The cinnamon creamer.” He seems so happy. “Carter, they stopped making this three years ago.” I lower my voice. “Are you giving me rancid creamer?” He shakes his head.

“My mom.” There’s pride in his voice.

“Your mom.” I’d thought about asking his mom to copycat it when it got discontinued, but if I asked her for something it would open up a Pandora's box of questions about why I left, and I just couldn’t deal with it. “Thank you, this was really nice of you.”

“Can friends with boundaries read together?” I don’t even need to think about it.

“Yes.” We’ve read together since we could read, and before that we’d just stare at the books together. “But no touching.”

“We can’t touch?”

“No we can’t touch. I have a boyfriend, who’s inside the house, that’s inappropriate.” He sits in the chair next to me, and I know he’s struggling as much as I am. Normally when we read together we share a hammock, or a couch, or the sectional in the conversational patio set in the corner. We’d face each other and put our feet up in each other’s personal space. We’d share blankets and drinks. *Boundary: No touching while reading.*

I angle away from him and put my feet on the chair to my right. Carter angles away from me and does the same. *See? We can do this.* I open the book on my tablet, Carter pulls his up on his phone, and we start to read.

“Is that the new Meghan Quinn that came out on Saturday?”

“Sunday night, it was delayed.” I start looking for my place I lost when he started talking. “Wait, how do you know that?”

“I had an alert for when her new books came out so I knew I wouldn’t see you that day.” Looks like he never took the alert off. “So what’s new in the Quinnaverse?”

“The third brother finally got a book.”

“It’s about time.” We both laugh. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know anything about this and he’s just playing along.

“You almost nailed that title.”

“What’s it about?” I almost don’t want to say.

“He’s in love with his best friend.”

“Wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Me neither.” I go back and re-read the paragraph because I was half

reading, half listening.

“Want to trade when you’re done?” That’s a phrase I haven’t heard in four years. *Trading books is fine, right?* I want it to be fine, because I’m really interested in what he has to offer.

“What are you offering?”

“A sci-fi adventure with romantic undertones.” *Hmmm... I’m interested.*

“How romantic are these undertones?”

“They’re on a planet sharing a tent.”

“You have my attention.”

“The tent is *very* small.” He looks over and raises his eyebrows at me.

“Deal.” He smiles that killer Davis smile at me. Carter reaches over and takes my coffee. *Ugh, no drink sharing.* He takes a sip and puts it back. I move the mug so it’s too far for him to reach. A few minutes later he reaches over me to grab it. I move it further away. “Boundary: no drink sharing.”

“We can’t share drinks? We always share drinks.”

“Carter, it’s weird,” I gesture between us, “we’re weird, and Arthur isn’t going to understand it or be okay with it.”

“That sounds like an Arthur problem.”

“If you had a girlfriend and she was sharing drinks and cuddling with another guy reading books would you be okay with it?” He stares at me for a moment.

“Fine, no drink sharing.” I turn back to my book.

“Bet you wish you didn’t dump my mug out onto the lawn.”

“I was being theatrical.”

“You were being melodramatic.”

We’ve finished our books and traded before anyone else comes outside. I hear the back door and I straighten up a bit expecting Arthur.

“Oh look at you two, just like when you were kids. Where’s my phone? I need a picture.”

“Your mom,” I say to Carter.

“My mom.” There’s still pride in his voice. She walks around the side of me and reaches out for a hug. I haven’t seen her in years. I feel a little guilty, and a lot weird, but I hug her anyway. She smells like her perfume and I almost want to cry. I’ve avoided most major holidays so I could avoid the Davis family since I knew Carter would be there. That means I haven’t seen Nico or their parents in years either.

“Oh, honey, I’ve missed you.” She releases me from the hug and I want to grab her and pull her back. I want to smell her perfume and hold onto that moment when I go back home. I’m going to miss her when I’m gone. I haven’t just been avoiding Carter, I’ve been avoiding the feelings, the questions, the guilt, all of it.

“I missed you too.”

“So we’re doing a welcome brunch for you and Arthur.” *I knew it.* “Mimosa bar, bloody Mary bar.” *Oh God, I forgot about the bloody Mary bar at Easter brunch.* I haven’t had a good bloody Mary in four years. They buy this special mix and load it up with garnishes. Audrey loves a good garnish. She’ll make it look like a salad on top. “Is there anything special you want us to make?”

“Cinnamon roll pancakes,” Carter chimes in. He looks up from my tablet and waits for my reaction. It’s a loaded question.

“I don’t eat those anymore.” I’m glaring at him.

“You used to love when I made you cinnamon roll pancakes.” There’s a hint of cheekiness in his voice.

“People change, Carter.”

“Not that much, Maddie.”

“No requests, but I do need help with a gift basket for a raffle we’re doing at work. I joined the employee club and we’re raising funds for the end of year party.”

“You joined the employee club?!” She is so excited right now. Our moms ran all the parties and fun stuff for our dads’ business over the years. I knew she’d be into this. “Do you need a basket?!” She’s a basket hoarder. There’s a whole cabinet in the garage full of them.

“I do.”

“You want me to make a big fancy bow?” She’s getting really excited.

“That would be great.”

“Great! I’ll start working on it after brunch!” Perfect, this is exactly what I wanted. She makes this excited little sound. “I can’t wait to tell your mom you joined the employee club!” This is a very proud moment for them, probably more so than when I graduated college. Crafting, baking, parties, this is their jam, and me telling them I’m doing it now, too, is going to make them over the moon. She takes off back into the house with a little skip in her step.

“You did that on purpose,” Carter accuses not taking his eyes off my tablet.

“What do you mean?” I’m faking innocence.

“You waited to tell her until you saw her. She’s so excited, you just erased four years of her being mad that you weren’t around.”

“Yeah, I did.” He laughs and shakes his head.

“God, I missed you.” *Boundaries— no, that’s fine. You can tell a friend that you missed them.*

“I missed you too.”

I’m a good chunk into Carter’s sci-fi book when our moms start setting up for brunch around us. Buffet tables are being set out, linens are being draped. *Is that the good china?*

“You should come home more often, I think this might be their biggest event of the year.”

“Christmas is bigger.”

“This is bigger than Easter for sure. They didn’t break out the good china for Easter.”

“I thought that was the good china!” My mom starts cooking bacon at the outdoor kitchen and the smell is wafting over. Carter’s mom comes over to us and sets a box of napkins down for us to fold.

“Do you think we should do an omelet bar?” she asks.

“There’s a lot of food already, I’m not sure we need an omelet bar.” It seems a bit over the top, but this seems to be a whole production already.

“I dunno, Maddie cakes, I do love a good omelet bar.”

“This is not for you, Carter.”

“It’s really no trouble, we have meat, and veggies, and cheese, and oh! We could do crepes! You love crepes!” Carter’s mom is so excited.

“Crepe station or omelet bar Maddigan, you choose.” He looks at me with puppy dog eyes and I know he wants the damn omelet bar.

“Fine, Carter, you can have your omelet bar.” He does a little celebration in his chair, and damn it I think it’s cute.

“Bacon and ham please, oh and those little crumbled breakfast sausages... just bring all the meats.”

“All the meats? Just all of it?”

“A good omelet bar needs all the meats.” *Oh lordy.*

“Great! I’ll go set it up!” Carter’s mom heads back to the house as his cousin Nate comes jogging in from the side gate and snags some bacon from

the plate at the outdoor kitchen. My mom smacks him with the spatula and I laugh. I see he hasn't changed. Nate heads into the house eating his bacon.

"Okay, Mads, how do you want these folded? I can do a pumpkin or a bat."

"Neither of those sound appropriate for a welcome brunch. Can you do like a lantern theme for the festival?"

"How am I supposed to lantern theme napkins, Maddie?" He's acting like I'm being ridiculous.

"How do you do a pumpkin, Carter?"

"I'm glad you asked, because I have been promoted to head napkin folder in your absence, and I have been in charge of napkins for not one but two Halloween parties."

"So you can do Halloween napkins?"

"And nothing else."

"I'll show you how to fold them so you can tuck the silverware into it, that's a mom approved napkin." He looks over at me, very seriously.

"Pumpkin or bat?"

"Carter!" I'm laughing now.

"Pumpkin or bat, Maddie?" He has a big smile on his face, the one that makes his eyes look happier, brighter even. I have missed that smile so much.

"I hate you so much." He's waiting for me to give him an answer. "Show me both so I can decide." He grabs things out of the box and turns his back to me.

"Oh, I can't even see you do it."

"I'm being theatrical, you need a big reveal." *Oh, sweet Jesus.* He's really getting into the napkin folding, and pauses... more than once to laugh to himself. "Okay, here we go." He reveals what is clearly a bat... and a crumpled ball of napkin.

"Carter Davis, that is a blob, not a pumpkin. You're being demoted." I'm getting tears in my eyes.

"You do it better and you can have your old job back."

"Pull up the tutorial."

"I *am* the tutorial."

"Oh you're going to teach me?" He points to himself.

"Head napkin folder."

"And so humble. I don't recall having such a big head when I was

head napkin folder.” Carter grabs a napkin and a ring out of the box. “You cheated and used a napkin ring.”

“Shh... head folder secret.” He winks at me. “Okay, so you pull the middle through the ring, and then tuck the corners in backwards.

“It’s just a square with a stem.”

“We are not done folding yet! Now take the new corners and pull them in too.” I follow along. He finishes his pumpkin, which again looks like a blob and holds it out to me. “Like, follow, and subscribe!” I finish my pumpkin which looks less blobby and more pumpkin. I set it next to his.

“I am so much better at this than you.”

“That is not, in any way, better than mine.”

“Fine, we’ll call everyone over for a vote.” I turn towards the moms like I’m going to call them over but I know he’s going to give in.

“Fine, I am promoting you to head pumpkin napkin folder only.”

“You can do the bats.”

“Pumpkins *and* bats, bold choice.” I’m laughing to myself as I fold these stupid pumpkin napkins when my brother walks up with a stack of plates.

“You’d think the pope was in town with how over the top this is. Can you imagine what they’re going to do when you get married?” Bennett sets the plates down and reaches for a half hug. I haven’t seen him since Christmas... I haven’t seen any of my family since Christmas. Christmas Eve they spend with the Davis family, so I come home for Christmas Day only, and immediately leave so I don’t have to stick around for our annual day after Christmas lounge around with Carter’s family. Avoiding him has become exhausting. “You really should come home more often.” Bennett says.

“I know, I know.” I hear it from all of them every time I see them.

“Alright, I have to go get the plates.”

“I thought those were the plates,” Carter says.

“Oh no, these are the chargers, there are also dinner plates and salad plates. They have to break out the good stuff for Pope Maddie over here.” Bennett makes two more trips with plates while I set the table.

Nico arrives at the table with a mug of coffee and a box under one arm.

“Little Moore!” He comes over to me and gives me a big bear hug and a sloppy kiss on the cheek. “God, I missed you.”

“You didn’t even notice I was gone.”

“I definitely noticed.”

“That’s very sweet, thank you.”

“I was specifically told that we are to do all the setup and you are not to do a thing, so sit your pretty butt down and let us do all the work.” *The boys are decorating? This should be good.* Nico starts emptying the contents of the box, a table runner, and a bunch of lanterns. “Carter, what the hell are you doing?”

“Folding napkins.”

“Those look like turds.” He points at the pumpkins I was making. I look over at Carter, and I’m laughing so hard I’m going to cry.

“You’re fired,” Carter says. He’s laughing too, in that adorable way where he can’t get his words fully out.

“Are those the Halloween bats? What is the theme? Turd bats?” I’m falling over because I’m laughing so hard. Carter starts placing the napkins on the plates.

“Turd or bat, Maddie?” He can barely say it because he’s laughing so hard. I’m actually crying right now.

“Bat, please.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you, we fired the girl who made those other ones. They’re kind of horrible.”

“I hate you so much.”

“You hate me? I’m the one who chose the theme for your brunch. Without me there would be no theme. I rescued you from a theme-less brunch.”

Bennett returns to the table and starts helping Nico with the lanterns.

“What the hell are those?” He points at the pumpkins.

“They’re pumpkins.” Carter and I are laughing.

“You two are so weird.” Audrey arrives at the table with two bloody Marys piled high with garnishes. It looks like a salad on top. She’ll probably eat half of my garnishes. She hugs me without spilling any.

“Hey, Bestie, I hope you’re in the mood for day drinking!” She hands me a drink and drops a kiss on Bennett’s cheek.

“How’s your head?” he asks as he rubs her back.

“So much better.”

“I was trying to be quiet so you could sleep in.”

“I really appreciate that.” *God, I want what they have.* “Okay...” she looks around the table. “I’m sensing some sort of theme here.”

“Turd bat,” Nico chimes in.

“They are pumpkins,” I correct.

“They look like... crumpled up balls of napkins. Carter, I assume this is your doing. These look like the napkin balls from Halloween.”

“Audrey, we hired some sub-par help. Mistakes were made, people were fired. I think we’re back on track now.”

“With the bats? We’re doing, like a... Halloween themed welcome brunch? In June?”

“Precisely.”

“Fantastic.” She raises her glass to cheers mine. “Happy Halloween, Maddie. Welcome home.” I clink my glass with hers. Nate finally makes it to the table. His hair is wet and his clothes are changed. He’s got a bloody Mary with just a celery stick on top.

“Carter’s doing napkin balls again,” he says. “You know those are really annoying to pull apart? You could just fold them in half like regular napkins.”

“Yeah, Carter,” I chime in. “Your crappy napkin balls look bad.” He shakes his head at me.

“The napkin folding has really gone downhill since you’ve been gone, Maddie,” Nate says as he takes a drink.

“I have noticed that.” My mom comes over to the table.

“It’s almost eleven... everything is kind of ready to go. Should we go wake Arthur?”

“No, no, it’s fine.”

“Should we wait? What time do you think he’ll be up?”

“No, don’t wait for him. We can just start. He’ll catch up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely.” I’d sent Arthur a text a couple of hours ago telling him to let me know when he was up. He hasn’t replied yet.

Everyone goes through the buffet line and makes a plate. Carter gets his omelet with all the meats. Finally we’re all at the table, moms and all. The moms are rearranging the lanterns in a more visually appealing display.

“Carter, I see you were in charge of napkins again,” his mom says.

“What is it? Is it like a Batman theme? There’s a bat and a... is that a tire?” Our moms have jokes today.

“Maybe Audrey should be in charge of napkin folding from now on.” Carter’s mom is trying to take his napkin folding gig.

"Audrey just folds them in quarters and shoves them under the plate," Carter says. Audrey fakes like she's offended.

"I drape them over the edge of the table. It's classy and elegant, and it's a mom-approved napkin."

"Gotta go with a mom-approved napkin," I add.

"Sweets, you are good at many things, but napkin folding is not one of them." My mom, telling it how it is. I look over at Carter's plate.

"I missed the mini cinnamon rolls." Carter holds his plate out and I grab one of the three he has piled up. Crispy, flakey, frosting drizzle, they're absolutely amazing.

"Audrey, how is your stupid-visor?" my mom asks. She groans. I'm trying to keep up, but I feel a little behind on everyone's lives.

"He got in a fight with Blaze again."

"FAKE NAME!" All the boys yell. I jump back a little and look around the table. Clearly I've missed something.

"What's happening?" I ask. Audrey waves her hand dismissively.

"Oh, it's just something Carter started in our group chat." *Group chat? Guess I wasn't invited.* "Anytime someone has a name Carter thinks sounds fake he yells 'fake name' and now they all do it. My coworker's name is Blaze Killian."

"That is the fakest name I've ever heard, Audrey," Carter says. "I don't think he exists." She laughs.

"You guys have a group chat?" I'm trying to be casual.

"Uh, yeah." Audrey seems a little awkward. "We've had it for a few years now." *Oh.* I feel a little left out, but what are they supposed to do? Start a second one with me and not Carter and repeat all their inside jokes? I blocked Carter four years ago so he couldn't contact me.

"Honey, do you think maybe Arthur is sick?" my mom asks. The boys have finished their first round and are ready for round two.

"I'm sure he's just sleeping."

"Maybe he has *traveler's diarrhea*," Carter says in a mocking tone. My head snaps towards my mother and I stare at her with accusing eyes.

"You told him."

"I didn't tell him! I told her." She points at Carter's mom. "I'd never heard of it, so I asked her if she had." I move my accusing gaze to Carter's mom.

"I didn't tell him!"

"I told him," Nico says.

"How did you find out?"

"I was there when they were talking about it. Maddie, you should know there are no secrets in this family."

Do not look at Carter. Eyes down. Do not look up. Stop acting weird. Am I breathing normal? I can't remember how I used to breathe.

"Maybe we should make him a little care package." My mom is stuck on the sick angle.

"No, you're not making him a stomach illness gift basket." They would.

"I'm into that," Carter starts. "Homemade Pepto in a mason jar with a custom label. Imodium artfully arranged in a visually pleasing way. Homemade crackers and ginger ale. Artisanal Gatorade in a swing top bottle." He thinks he's a comedian.

"You can't make Gatorade," Bennett says.

"It's just salt and water and some flavoring," Nico tells him.

"No, it's salts in water, not salt water. It's two different things."

"It's the same thing."

"You can home make anything," Carter says.

"Your moms can home make anything, not everyone can," Audrey says. My mom is typing away on her phone.

"You are not taking notes right now," I accuse.

"I'm looking online to see if homemade Gatorade is a thing."

"Artisanal Gatorade is not a thing." She holds her phone up.

"Oh, it is." I turn to Carter.

"You've created a monster."

"I've created a million dollar industry of artisanal get well baskets. Your stomach will thank me next time you're sick."

"Arthur's fine, his stomach is fine, he'll get up when he feels like it."

"Maybe we should just wake him, he's sleeping his day away." My mom is all about being productive.

"Don't wake him up, he gets grumpy and he can be mean about it."

"Maddie, that doesn't sound good," Audrey says. *Maybe I should have phrased that better.*

"Sounds like Arthur is a bit high maintenance," Carter says. I turn to him.

"Carter Davis, I submit to you that you are high maintenance." I raise

my eyebrows at him. He sits up a little higher in his seat.

"I'm high maintenance?"

"Yes."

"Okay, take your best shot."

"Practices, away games, two a days, training camp, special diets, gym during the season, gym during the off-season, that gallon of pink liquid you took with you to the gym." I take a breath. "Your pre workout drink, your post workout drink, your protein shake that I had to make you every day because you said I made it better." He shakes his head with a big grin on his face and leans forward.

"You only like hot cocoa on nights that it's cold, not a little cold, a lot cold, but only sometimes when it's raining. You won't drink the stuff from the packet, only the homemade kind like our moms make, only with whole milk, only in a latte mug, and only if you don't feel fat that day." *Oh it's on now.*

"When you're sick you like tea, but only green tea, and only in that black mug. It has to have caffeine. You like one spoon of honey and one spoon of lemon juice. The lemon juice has to go first." I look over at Audrey who is laughing. "And he will ask if you put the lemon juice first." I look back at Carter. "The honey has to be the raw kind from the beekeeper, not from a store. The water has to be microwaved for exactly one minute thirty five seconds. If you're congested, you like two spoons of honey and two spoons of lemon. You call it The Sick Special. Well guess what, Carter? I just put the water in the microwave and press the beverage button twice. You never knew the difference. High maintenance!"

"Madeline"

"Not my name"

"Beulah."

"Not my middle name."

"Lisa-Marie."

"Not even close."

"Jameson"

"That's *your* middle name."

"Moore"

"One out of five."

"Never in my life have I felt so betrayed." Audrey is laughing pretty hard now, so I turn to her.

“You won’t eat onions if you have a date– the next day. High maintenance!” Nico and Bennett are starting to laugh. I point at each of them. “*You* won’t eat meat on Thursdays, *you* won’t eat carbs on Fridays. High maintenance!” I look over at Nate. “You are always on a football diet. High maintenance!” I’m like a damn one man show up here. Our moms are laughing now, too, so I turn to them. “You don’t like dishes in the sink. You don’t like dishes on the counter. Where do the dishes go?” Everyone yells together.

“In the dishwasher!” I circle my finger around in the direction of our moms.

“High maintenance!” Everyone is laughing now. “We’re all high maintenance. He’s not sick, he’s sleeping, let the boy sleep.” I take a sip of my bloody Mary. Audrey claps.

“I dunno,” she says, “I like the shows where you and Carter banter back and forth better.”

“Should we at least make him a plate?” my mom asks. Honestly every time I’ve tried to do that I haven’t correctly guessed what he would want, so I just tell her not to bother. He can pull the leftovers out of the fridge.

By one o’clock our moms are packing up brunch and there’s no sign of Arthur. I texted him again and told him we were leaving at one thirty for the parade. Now I’m actually wondering if he’s sick or something. Just as we’re all about to leave for the parade he emerges from the room. He doesn’t look sick.

∞∞∞∞

“Is this it?” Arthur asks from the seat next to me on the curb. The sun is out now, so he’s not cold in his shorts and tshirt. The breeze is gently blowing.

“It’s like the opening ceremonies of the olympics... if it were dogs... in tutus,” Audrey explains from my other side.

“There’s other costumes, too. It’s the pet parade,” I tell him. Arthur stands up and walks back to the sidewalk. Carter sits down in the spot he just vacated and takes a sip of his milkshake.

“I hear the Manuszak’s grandbaby is going to be riding their Great Dane.” Audrey’s excited. I’m excited. I don’t think that baby can sit up yet, I

want to know how that's going to work.

"It's dogs... in costumes." Arthur has that tone again—judgy. *I like the dogs in costumes.* "I think I'm going to find something to eat." Arthur starts looking around. *There was plenty of food at the brunch he slept through.* "Nick, did you say there was a golf store around here?" *Did he give Nico a nickname or did he get his name wrong?* He doesn't like going by Nick.

"Yeah, it's over on Pine. I can take you if you want, and we can get you something to eat." *Is he leaving?* "Carter, do you want to come check out that driver I was telling you about?" I turn towards him. *Is he leaving? Are they all leaving?* He glances at me for a second.

"No, I'm gonna stay." He turns back to me. I smile. He shrugs. "I wanna see that grandbaby." Audrey perks up.

"Wait, where on Pine?" she asks. Nico sighs.

"Otter or whale?"

"Whale, definitely, you get more cookie." *Oh!! The bakery on Pine. The one with the giant decorated sugar cookies!*

"Maddie, don't act like you're not going to ask me for a cookie right now." Nico's got my number. "Otter or whale?"

"Otter." Audrey gasps like she's shocked.

"Maddie, the whale is a bigger cookie."

"But the otter is cuter."

"Maddie likes to eat its face first so it can't watch her eat its body," Carter adds because that's completely necessary.

"When I was a child." Okay, I still eat the face first. I don't like those eyes watching me.

"Carter, otter or whale?" I look over at him like it's an important decision.

"Whale." I gasp.

"How dare you."

"It's a bigger cookie, Maddie."

"Team Whale." Audrey reaches over me to high five Carter. I shake my head at him. Nico and Arthur turn to leave.

"Bring cookies or don't come back," I call after them. Nico waves over his shoulder. I turn back to the parade. Audrey nudges me on the shoulder.

"Don't be mad at him."

“I’m not mad.”

“You’re upset.”

“I’m not upset.” I am upset. I haven’t seen him all day and this is literally the first thing I took him too. “You guys, is this lame?” Audrey says no at the same time Bennett says yes from the other side of Audrey. I put my head in my hands. “Is this whole thing lame?” Again, Bennett says yes as Audrey says no.

“For your family, it wasn’t just about the town events, it’s about spending time together as a whole family. Not just your moms, but your dads too. Is it a kegger at a frat party? No. It’s family friendly events for the whole town. You can’t expect a man to want to sit here.” I look around at the crowd of people where there are tons of men.

“There’s men everywhere.” I point to a couple walking down the street holding hands. “I just want that, why is that too much to ask for?”

“Maddie, no self respecting guy is going to sit at a pet parade when he didn’t grow up here. You have to account for childhood nostalgia,” my brother adds.

“Audrey is here and she didn’t grow up here.”

“Audrey is a girl who loves things in costume. If this was a parade of babies in costumes she would also be excited to be here.”

“Wait, a baby parade? Is that a real thing or are you making this up right now?” Okay, he may have a point.

“I watched way too much of March Madness with him. He can’t sit through one parade? It was a month! Of madness!”

“Ooh, solid point,” Audrey says. I lean back behind Audrey and Bennett.

“Nate, can you weigh in on this?”

“Oh it’s definitely lame, but Ben is right, it’s childhood nostalgia. If I hadn’t come here as a kid I wouldn’t be here.”

“But if you had a girlfriend who brought you here, would you sit here?”

“If your girlfriend drags you to the pet parade, you sit and watch the pet parade.”

“I rest my case.” I’m definitely a little bummed. Okay, a lot bummed. Carter nudges me and hands me his milkshake.

“The corgis are coming.”

“I like the corgis.” My voice is pouty. I take a sip of his milkshake,

peanut butter fudge. *Damn, that's a good milkshake.* They only make them once a year for the festival. "I like when they look like other dogs, but they're shaped like corgis." I'm still pouting. I hand the milkshake back to Carter.

"I know." He takes a sip. "Look, there's six of them dressed like Star Wars."

"I like a good group costume."

"You do." He hands the milkshake back. I take a long sip.

"That big dog has a cone, and they made it look like a flower!" I hand Carter back his milkshake. "And his little friend is a bee!" *God I love the pet parade.* "Carter!!" I grab his shirt sleeve and shake him. "That one is a sea captain and he has a fake beard! He has a tiny treasure chest!" Carter's laughing.

"I think that's the dog's actual beard." Audrey leans over.

"I like non-traditional pets."

"A person holding a lizard just isn't the same, Audrey."

"But look, there's a man dressed as a pirate and he has a parrot on his shoulder. Oh my god! There's a tiny horse!"

"It has little shoes!!"

"Oh! I see the grandbaby!" Yep, there's the grandbaby on the Great Dane. The baby's dad is holding it on the dog. I'm not sure what I expected. Carter hands me the milkshake back, and I'm drinking it before I realize we're sharing a drink. *Damn it, Carter. I just said a few hours ago no sharing drinks.* I hand it back to him. "No sharing drinks."

"It's not a drink, it's a milkshake."

"We're drinking it, it's a drink."

"You were sad, I was trying to cheer you up." I rest my head on his shoulder for a second. He still smells like a hot guy.

"Thank you." He hands the milkshake back to me and I take it.

"Look, it's Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield." Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield are the stars of the Lantern Festival. They're played by two high school kids, usually the highest ranked academically. They're in a convertible car, waving at the crowd. They usually end the parade, like Santa at the Thanksgiving parade. Mr. Butterfield is usually in some version of a sea captain's uniform. Mrs. Butterfield is in an old-timey dress. There's different options for costumes, and the kids get to add their own accessories.

"Mr. Butterfield is really into it this year," Audrey says.

"I prefer a surly Mr. Butterfield. I like when it looks like the kid

didn't want to do it, but his parents made him," I tell her.

"Remember steampunk Mr. Butterfield?" Carter asks.

"That sounds amazing," Audrey says over me to Carter.

"He got in trouble."

"He didn't get in trouble," I explain. "They asked him for less steampunk and more Butterfield."

"People like Butterfield," Carter says with a shrug.

"Carter used to be hot for Mrs. Butterfield," I tell Audrey.

"Don't make me sound pervy, I was like thirteen, and they had a bunch of pretty girls playing Mrs. Butterfield."

"I love Mrs. Butterfield."

"You love the story."

"Of course I love the story. She loved him more than anything in this world. You'd be lucky to have someone love you like that." I get a little teary, because I just love it so much. Carter leans over me to talk to Audrey. "Maddie always wanted to be Mrs. Butterfield."

"I did. I had the grades for it too, but you had to live in town to be eligible."

"You should have asked your mom to live here for a year so you could have done it. She would have said yes."

"I thought about it, but I decided not to."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to be without you for a whole year." And here I am without him for four years. He nudges me.

"That was really sweet."

"I had to say something nice so you wouldn't be mad that I finished your milkshake."

Chapter 5

Present Day

Our dads are at the outdoor kitchen barbequing when we get home. I walk over to them to say hello. My dad ruffles my hair, Carter's dad pulls me into his side and holds me there while we talk. Our dads are so different. If something bad happens to you and you want sympathy and love, you go to Carter's dad. If you want someone to fix it, you go to my dad. That says everything about their personalities. They're different, but they complement each other.

Our moms have already set the table for the pope, and Audrey has been put in charge of napkins. Plates are grabbed, food is piled up. Our dads are still grilling what will probably be way too much food, and moms are working on desserts. This is the first time Arthur's actually sat down with us. I really want them to get along.

"Audrey, your sweater is lovely," Arthur says as he sits next to me. *Did Arthur just say lovely?* He's sure full of compliments lately. I can't remember the last time he complimented me. He turns to me. *Oh, is it compliment time?* "Your hair looks weird." *Huh. Interesting.* I leave my hair in wavy curls when I'm at the coast because everything else just gets ruined.

"It's Maddie's beach hair," Carter says as he reaches over and ruffles my hair. I glare at him. *No touching.*

The boys start talking about cars and I'm only half listening at first until Arthur starts talking about looking for a new car. My ears perk up. His car is getting a little ragged.

"I mean, when you're talking Porsche versus Mercedes there really is no comparison. A Porsche just handles better," Arthur says. I had no idea he was looking at expensive cars.

"I dunno, that air suspension is pretty nice. It's a smooth ride." Nate loves talking cars.

"I had been looking at the Aston Martins but the paddle shifters were

a big turn off.” I think Arthur may have lost me at this point.

“Paddle shifting is a mode you can turn off and on. It’s like being able to switch from automatic to manual. You don’t have to use them.”

“Oh, then I might go back and look again.”

“A Vantage is like a hundred and fifty K,” Carter says. *What?! Now that I understand. Does Arthur have money I don't know about?*

“Yeah, but I mean... it’s just money right?” I have never heard Arthur use the phrase “it’s just money.” When we met, we bonded over the fact that I grew up with three boys and he had three brothers. Neither of our families had money when we were kids. My family has money now, but Arthur’s doesn’t. I didn’t think he cared about things like six figure cars. “I was also looking at a Mercedes. I’m not in a big hurry, so I can take my time and really find something I like.”

“There’s a Mercedes in the garage if you want to check it out,” Nico says.

“Really? Whose is it?”

“It’s the house’s car,” I say, laughing. That’s the joke in the family that the house owns the Mercedes. Arthur looks at me confused.

“It’s their Monterey car,” Nico says. “It just stays at the house for them to use when they’re in town.”

“Can anyone use it?” *Uh, I’m not sure I like where this is going.*

“I mean, our parents share it.”

“But they wouldn’t mind me test driving it, right?” I don’t know why this is making me kinda uncomfortable, but it is.

“I mean, they’d probably be fine with you taking it around the block, you’d have to ask them.”

“You could ask for me, I’m sure they’d be fine with it if *you* asked.” *And I’m officially uncomfortable.* Let’s just veer off to a new subject.

“Nate, how is the off-season treating you?” I ask. Sports, there’s something men can bond over.

“I’m definitely enjoying my time off, but I do miss the guys on the team.”

“Nate is a professional football player.” I don’t think I’d mentioned this to Arthur.

“I’m so excited for the next world cup,” Arthur says.

“No, American football,” Nate corrects.

“He plays in the NFL.” *Okay, maybe that’s more clear.*

“Oh! *That* football. I don’t really watch much American football, or I probably would have recognized you. What position do you play?”

“Oh, I’ve been keeping that bench warm for four years now.” Nate is the backup to the backup quarterback. Whatever, he makes way more money than me sitting on a bench. I’d take that much money to sit on a bench. “Carter could have been sitting right there with me.”

“I am perfectly happy bench warming my couch at home,” Carter says. *Did I just step on a landmine? I feel like there is something there... tension? Can we please find a topic that isn’t bad?*

“So, can someone explain the lanterns?” Arthur asks. *Oh good, a neutral topic.* Audrey looks surprised.

“You didn’t explain the festival to him?” *How do I say this in a way that conveys that, yes, I did tell him, and, no, he didn’t listen... but in a nice way that won’t start a fight?* Because I don’t like how these conversations have been going.

“I can tell it again.”

“The whole story is some bullshit thing the town made up,” Nico starts.

“Okay, *you’re* not telling it.” I interrupt him. “Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield—”

“There’s a version where they’re not married,” Bennett interrupts.

“How can they not be married? They don’t have first names.”

“They do,” Nico says. “His name is Asa.”

“Asa Butterfield is an Actor. That’s not his name.”

“Her name is like Diane or something.”

“Diane? Mrs. Butterfield’s first name is Diane? It’s old-timey, I don’t think Diane is old enough.”

“Becky,” Carter says with a laugh.

“Becky Butterfield? That’s the worst first name for an old-timey character.”

“Kylie,” Audrey says, laughing.

“Okay, so Asa Butterfield the actor, and Kylie Butterfield are married, and it’s the 1800’s somehow.” I’m laughing. “You guys are so stupid.” I rub tears out of my eyes. Arthur isn’t laughing. I take a breath. “So, Mr. Butterfield was away at sea. His wife was at home and missing him terribly. She knew he was due home that night, so she was waiting up for the ship to come in when the light in the lighthouse went out. It was a really foggy night,

and she was afraid the ship would crash into the rocks. Mrs. Butterfield goes full Paul Revere and starts knocking on all her neighbors' doors, because it's not just her husband on the ship, there's other people too. She tells all of them to get every lantern they can carry and bring it to the shore. It spreads through the whole town, and everyone comes out."

"Really, everyone?" Nico asks. "Not one guy was like 'that crazy Butterfield lady is at it again,' then rolled over and went back to sleep? Not one?"

"None. None people went back to sleep." I shoot Nico a look. "So *everyone* brings their lanterns out and they light up the shore right as the ship is coming in. The ship sees the lanterns and avoids crashing into the rocks."

"He would have survived." He doesn't love this story like I do.

"That's not the point, Nico! It's about how she loved him more than anything, and she did everything she could to save the man she loved, and it's about the lanterns..." I don't know how to explain it.

"Lighting your way home," Carter says. I look over at him, I see something in his eyes, and I turn away.

"Thank you, Carter. It's about a town coming together to light your way home, and it's beautiful, *Nico*." I look at Arthur. "So every year in June for a whole week they cover the town in lanterns. There's events every day, and at the end of the week they do a full pageant out on a stage at the beach where they have honors students, and drama kids perform the whole thing. Everyone brings lanterns to the beach, and they light up the beach for Mr. Butterfield. It's absolutely beautiful." Carter's still staring at me, and I'm avoiding looking at him. I can feel his eyes on me.

"Oh," Arthur says. *Oh? I just poured my heart and soul into that and it's just oh? Well that's a bummer.* I look over at Arthur's plate.

"I missed the mini beef skewers!" I love those. I reach over towards Arthur's plate to grab one. He pulls his plate away and throws an elbow up to protect it.

"What are you doing?" I avoid looking at him and I look down at my plate.

"Sorry." Suddenly I'm not very hungry. The guys always let me grab from their plates if I forget something and I just didn't think about it. It didn't occur to me that someone wouldn't be okay with it. Carter holds his plate towards me like he always does. "No, I'm fine." *Boundaries.* I look up at Nico, and silently beg him with my eyes to do anything to end this moment.

He has a look on his face that I don't like, so I look back down. He and Audrey get up from the table and walk over to the outdoor kitchen where our dads are. *Damn it, Nico, I need you to save me from the awkwardness. Bennett? Nate? Someone?*

Nico and Audrey return to the table. Nico has a plate piled high with mini beef skewers. He drops it on the table with a little more force than necessary.

"There's always plenty of food, man." I look up at him and try to force a smile. It's my fault, I shouldn't have assumed. I'm used to Carter just offering his plate to me. *Am I completely screwed up now?* Suddenly I'm very conscious of where my hands are, afraid they'll venture too close to Arthur's plate. *What did I do with my hands before this moment?*

"You guys want to hit the beach after dinner?" Audrey asks. *Thank you, Audrey.*

"I don't really feel like driving back to the beach," Arthur says.

"No, I mean the one right here. " Audrey points to the little beach at the bottom of the cliffside.

"You have a private beach?" Arthur perks up a little. Audrey found the good topic apparently.

"It's not private, but it's only accessible from a couple other houses and no one else really uses it."

"If it's just right there, then yeah." Well, that seemed to fix things. *Thank you, Audrey.*

Dessert is finished and so is the grilling, and our parents finally join us at the table. I've felt kind of awkward with my parents the last few years, especially my dad. I went to college to study business to help with his business and as soon as I graduated, I left. Our parents bought Carter and I fancy cars when we graduated. They said it was because they didn't have to pay for college since we both had full scholarships. I always felt like it was also because we were coming to work for them... but then I didn't. That car makes me feel so damn guilty sometimes that I've seriously contemplated giving it back. It feels like a promise I made but didn't keep.

Our moms are talking to me about the employee club. *Is my dad staring at Arthur? He's not, right? I'm just being sensitive, right? Is he blinking? Okay, yes, there's a blink.* My dad starts talking to Arthur about his job, and his plans for the future, and I'm only half listening to our moms.

"So, Arthur, how do you feel about moving to the valley?" *Shit.*

Really? Really, he had to go there?

"Like right now?" I swear I hear Arthur's voice squeak.

"Yeah, why not?"

"Uh..."

"Dad." Why is everyone being so difficult right now? Why can't we just have a nice meal? My dad turns to me.

"It's a valid question."

"It's not." I never said I wanted to move home. *We just started dating four months ago!*

"Your family is there, the business is there. It's a valid question."

"I'm not there, and I don't plan to be any time soon."

"Then when?" *When? When I stop feeling weird around Carter, but I can't say that now can I?*

"Dad." I just want him to stop.

"We had a plan, Maddie." Here it is, the inevitable conversation that comes up every time I see him. The "when are you coming home," and "we had a plan," conversation. Well plans change, but he won't get that no matter what I say to him. And I definitely don't want to get into a fight right now in front of Arthur. All his family does is fight, and I promised him my family was different. They were different... four years ago.

"Stop. I am not having this conversation with you again." I push my chair back from the table... and I just walk away. What else am I supposed to do? Sit there and let him make me feel worse? And in front of Arthur? *I shouldn't have come home.*

I keep walking towards the cliffside until I reach the cement stairs that lead to the beach. When my foot hits the first stair it slips out from under me, and I catch myself on the rail before I fall. I forgot the sand makes the stairs so slippery you have to death grip the rail.

The beach isn't huge, but our family is really the only ones who use it, so it's plenty of room for just us. The sun is going to set soon. There is a group of Adirondack chairs around a small bonfire. In the corner there's a picnic table if you want to eat out here. A tree from my parents' property hangs over the cliffs. They installed a pulley with a rope and a basket on the end to lower bigger items so you don't have to carry them. I sit down in one of the chairs facing the water and I just stare at the seals sunning themselves on the rocks. *Maybe I should just go home.* Arthur isn't having fun. Now that my dad is here I see he clearly has an agenda. Apparently I brought Arthur to

experience some lame childhood nostalgia that no man would want to come to.

I'm still debating staying or leaving when a blanket drapes over my shoulders. I expect my mom or Arthur, but when I look down and see the emerald green of his blanket I know it's Carter. He doesn't say anything, he walks around me and hands me his phone. He's pulled up the sci-fi book I started this morning. It feels like a long time ago. I take the phone and Carter kneels down to light the fire. This is what I need, when life gets too hard I need a book. Tell me about problems that are worse than mine so I'll feel better. I tap him on the shoulder and hand him my phone with my book pulled up. Neither of us is talking, and that's what I need.

Carter takes a seat across the fire from me. We sit there for a long time, not talking, just reading. The sun starts to set. The smell of bonfire hits me and I start to think of old memories I probably shouldn't think of.

"Don't cry," he says.

"I'm not crying." I'm definitely crying.

"What part are you on?"

"They landed on a new planet, Sara just fell down a cliff and she's hurt."

"Sara will be fine."

"You promise?"

"Yes." I almost skip ahead to make sure, but I decide to trust him. "How long have you been fighting with your dad?" I'm sure he knows the answer, but he wants to hear me say it.

"On Saturday, it'll be four years exactly." The morning after the pageant. The anniversary of the day I left.

"I'm really sorry."

"I know." I take a breath and just push the next words out. "I'm sorry for the way I left."

"I understand why you did." I don't know why that cuts like a knife, but it does. "You want to talk about it?"

"Nope." *Not even close.*

"Okay." That's it, no "tell me," no pushy Carter having to know everything. Just okay. I look at Carter and I realize he's changed too. We both have.

I hear the squeak of the pulley before I hear Audrey descending the stairs. The basket lands in the sand just as she reaches us.

"Oh good, the fire is already going." She grabs the items from the basket as Nico and Arthur arrive. Nate follows a few steps behind. Bennett comes down a few moments later.

"This is all yours?" Arthur asks.

"Not ours, but no one else ever comes out here," Bennett says.

"It's pretty big." Audrey hands me a drink. I recognize it as her fourth of July berry lemonade which I love. Audrey makes the best drinks.

"I put extra vodka in because I thought you'd need it."

"Thank you." I set Carter's phone down and sip my drink. Arthur sits to the left of Carter. Audrey rubs my back for a second.

"I'm sorry about your dad."

"It's my own fault." I don't want to talk about it. This is why I walked away from the table.

"I know you had your reasons." I did. Audrey takes the seat next to me and the boys fill in the rest. I see our dads' bottle of Macallan next to the leg of Arthur's chair. There's some missing and he's got a cup in his hand. Our dads save that bottle for Lantern Festival week. Looks like I'll be getting them a new bottle. Carter's phone lights up as a message comes through.

Beth Ann: I really need it. I can come to you and you can give it to me real quick.

My stomach drops. I glance over at Carter who's talking to Nico. *Is Carter seeing someone? Why does that make me feel so awful? I have Arthur, why do I care if Carter is seeing someone?* I drink half my drink in one big gulp. *Okay, grow some guts and ask him.* I grab his phone off the arm rest and walk over to him. He stops talking to Nico as I hold it out to him.

"You got a message." *Ask him.*

"Oh, thank you." He gives me my phone back, glances down at the message and types out a response. *Is he planning to meet up with this girl to hook up? Why do I care?* It doesn't matter if Carter is seeing someone, but suddenly it's all I can think about. I go back to my seat across the fire, and I can't stop staring at Carter. I keep sipping on my drink as everyone chats around me. After a while the talking dies down and it's just quiet. You can hear beach waves crashing, the fire crackling, but otherwise it's silent. Audrey takes a sip of her drink and then she starts to sing the first few lines of Michael Buble's "Home."

No one in our family can resist a good sing-along. Carter definitely can't resist. Nate joins in at the verse, and I look back to Audrey just in time for the last line about missing you. She reaches out and grabs my hand. There's sadness in her eyes. Audrey fit so seamlessly into our lives when she came along. She was like a puzzle piece we didn't know we were missing. Nico and Bennett join in for the next verse about keeping all the letters he wrote, and I'm still waiting for Carter. The next verse starts and I hear his voice singing about deserving more. I look across to him, and I feel like we have a moment. Tears start to come.

Don't cry.

I drop my gaze to the fire. When the chorus starts, I join in and belt out the word home. There's definitely tears now. I accidentally make eye contact with Carter when we get to the part about being too far, and I make my eyes move back to the fire. Everyone keeps singing and I stare at the fire. *When? That's what my dad asked. When am I coming home? Am I ever going to be okay with Carter again? How do I sit there and watch him date, and fall in love, and get married? Am I ever going to go home? Or am I stuck in a city I don't love hiding from a boy I did love?* The tears are sliding all the way down my cheeks to my chin now, and I stop singing before the end of the song because I know how it ends, he says he's going back home, and right now, I don't know if I ever can. I finish my drink, and Audrey pours me more.

"Arthur, you don't sing?" Audrey asks him.

"No, I have a terrible voice." She laughs.

"We all have terrible voices. The only one who can sing around here is Carter." That's not true, Audrey has a beautiful singing voice.

"Uh, I have the voice of an angel," my brother chimes in. He does not.

"This is a safe space," Nico says mimicking his mom and we all laugh.

"When we were kids our mom dropped us off at school and Nico and Carter's mom picked us up," Bennett explains. "She'd play all kinds of weird music."

"It wasn't weird, it was eclectic," I correct.

"80's music, 90's music, obscure British boy bands no one has ever heard of. She'd crank the music up and we'd all sing along on the way home. No judgment, just singing."

"Your mom is the best," I say. It was a really fun way to let your frustrations of the day go and just be happy together.

"And now I know all the lyrics to boy band songs. Thanks for that, mom," Nico says with a laugh. I'm still staring at the fire and it's like there's this gaping wound in my chest. How much life am I going to miss with these people?

The night drags on, and I'm starting to get tired. Too much alcohol, and sadness, and maybe some exhaustion from not sleeping the night before.

"I'm going to bed," I announce to the group.

"Already?" Audrey seems disappointed.

"I didn't sleep much last night."

"Something on your mind?" Carter asks. I try to avoid looking at him and just shake my head. "Usually if you can't sleep it's because there's something on your mind." I just avoid answering him all together.

"Goodnight, everyone." I slowly make my way back to the house. Carter's right, I usually sleep terribly when there's something I can't stop thinking about. Maybe I won't be able to sleep tonight either.

When I reach my bedroom, I gather my things to get ready for bed. I didn't get a shower last night. A nice hot shower sounds amazing to wash away the day I had. Carter's still down at the beach, so I pull the bathroom door to his bedroom closed and triple check that it's locked. I turn the knob and give it a good yank. Once I'm satisfied that it's secure, I start gathering my clothes. There's a drawer that warms towels built into the vanity. I like to use it to warm my clothes too. Nothing like freezing cold clothing to shock your system. After I put my towel and my clothes in the drawer I strip down, and turn the water on. I crank the handle to that nice sweet spot where it's hot but not too hot, and step in the shower. It's the clear glass kind that you can see through, Carter's stuff is in here, along with my shower stuff and my lotion bar. *What the Hell, Carter? This doesn't go in here.* I left it on the counter where it belongs. This is the second time he's put it in here.

The water isn't very warm. It's lukewarm at best. Maybe I've forgotten the sweet spot. I turn the handle more towards hot, but it's still barely warm, so I turn it some more. Eventually I've turned it all the way to the hottest setting and it's still barely warm. *Ugh. Someone must have used all the hot water.* No hot shower tonight. Since the water is so cool I try to speed through my shower. I wash my hair and condition it, I soap down my body. The water is getting colder and it's a beat the clock situation.

Suddenly, ice cold water is blasting me, and I scream. My muscles tense up, and all I can think to do is hold a hand up to block the water from spraying me. I think I'm still screaming. My brain is kind of broken. The door to the bathroom busts open and Carter comes running in.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" He reaches for the handle and turns off the water. I'm left standing there soaking wet and freezing. I slap my arm across my chest, and one hand over my... lower parts. "Carter! Get me a towel!" He's staring. Now he's the one whose brain is broken.

"Jesus Christ, Maddie, is that what you look like now?" My mind flashes back to the first time he said those words to me.

"Carter!" He's still not moving, and he's in my way.

"I thought you were hot back in college, but damn..." He doesn't finish the sentence.

"Carter Davis! Get. Me. A. Towel." He shakes his head.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to... Fuck, I'm sorry." He grabs my towel from the drawer and wraps it around my shoulders. It's warm and soft, and he's staring in my eyes. I grab the lotion bar from the shelf and shove it at him to try and change the subject.

"Stop putting this in the shower, it doesn't belong in there!" I whisper-yell.

"It's soap, it goes in the shower!" he whisper-yells back.

"It's not soap! It's a lotion bar!"

"What the hell is a lotion bar?!"

"It's lotion— in a bar! It's self explanatory!" He grabs the metal tin, unscrews the top, and smells it.

"That's what that smell is?!" *What?!* "Oh hell no! Boundary: you can't wear this!" *What?!* He puts the lid on and holds it out to me.

"Carter, that is not a boundary! That's you being controlling, telling me what I can and can't wear!" He takes a step towards me and lowers his voice.

"Every time I smell this all I can think about is throwing you on that bed." *Oh... shit.* My body seems very interested in this, and I have to tell it to shut up. I reach out and take the tin from him.

"Fine! Boundary: no wearing that cologne of yours!"

"Boundary: no wearing leggings."

"Boundary: no wearing a towel!"

"You're wearing a towel right now!"

"I was taking a shower when you broke the door down to see me naked!"

"I thought you were hurt!"

"I wasn't hurt, I was cold!"

"Well I didn't know that until I got in here!"

"Fine! Boundary: put a shirt on!"

"Boundary: put a bra on! I can see your nipples!"

"Boundary: no sweat pants! I can see *the python!*"

"You can see it in all my pants!"

"Then wear a skirt!"

"Why are we yelling?!"

"I don't know!"

"I'm going to check the hot water heater!" Now he's just doing it to be funny.

"I'll help you!" I grab my clothes from the drawer and put them on in my bedroom. We head downstairs to the hot water heater. My hair is still soaked and freezing. Carter crouches down and starts checking it. "I'll get my dad."

"No, don't. The pilot light went out. We just have to relight it." I'm surprised he knows this.

"Do you know how to do that... without blowing us up?" He looks at me.

"Yes. I know how to relight the pilot light. I've done it before at my house." He's serious.

"You have a house?" I hadn't heard about that.

"Yes, I bought it a couple of years ago." Wow. Carter is like an actual adult now. "Grab me one of those lighters our moms use for candles." I go to the kitchen and grab a long lighter for Carter.

"You're sure you're not going to blow us up?"

"I'm sure." He holds his hand out and I give him the lighter. He does something to the hot water heater and it seems to come back to life. "There." He stands. "Give it at least thirty minutes to warm up before you try the shower again."

"I think I'm just going to bed." Forget the hot shower, forget everything. I just want some sleep. For the second time tonight I'm staring at him. I wanted him to think he didn't know me anymore, but I feel like I don't know him anymore.

"Night, Maddie." He walks away and I want to chase after him. I want him to hug me like he used to and tell me about everything I've missed for the last four years. I want to slow dance with him in the kitchen while he sings in my ear. I want everything to be the way it was before. Instead I stand there and stare, a hollow feeling in my chest, as I watch him disappear up the stairs.

Chapter 6

Freshman Year of College

January

Do I look weird? I'm staring at myself in the mirror of the hotel bathroom. I just changed out of my hiking clothes and into a dress. I didn't know how to dress for a wedding in Yosemite during a record breaking winter. I went with a long sleeved dress with a peacoat over it. The coat isn't very warm, but it looks great, and the reception is inside. It'll be fine. Right? I should ask Carter. Ugh, but he'll just say something nice and not tell me if I actually look weird. I fluff my curled hair and add more lip gloss. Good enough?

I exit the bathroom just in time for Carter to walk back from the men's room where he was changing. Damn he looks good. That boy in a suit looks like the cover of GQ. He has some tailored suit he breaks out for special events and it fits him perfectly. He stuffs his hiking clothes in my oversized bag.

The wedding is on the balcony of the hotel overlooking Yosemite Valley. We were going to drive the hour and a half for the wedding, so we decided to make a day of it and see Yosemite before.

"Do you think it's too early to find our seats? Should we just wander around the hotel?" I ask. We're driving home after the wedding, so we don't have rooms to hang out in.

"It just started snowing."

"It's snowing?" We live in the valley where it never snows. I see snow less often than I see Carter in a suit.

"Yeah, do you want to find a window and—" Carter's phone starts ringing. He pulls it out of his pocket. "Hey, Dad..." he's staring off in the distance. Our families are meeting us up here for the wedding. "Yeah, I'm safe. Why?" *Uh oh.* "Yeah, Maddie's here with me. We're at the hotel." He holds his phone between us and puts it on speaker phone.

“They’re together and they’re safe,” I hear Carter’s dad yell to someone in the background.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s snowing.”

“Yeah, it’s a light dust of snow, they said it should stop within an hour.”

“Well, where we are you can’t even see the road.” *What?*

“You’re serious?”

“We’re all turning around. We just saw three cars pile up and another one spin out and get stuck. We didn’t bring chains because it said there was a zero percent chance of precipitation.”

“It was beautiful when we got up here.” It was beautiful thirty minutes ago when we got to the hotel to change.

“Well, it ain’t beautiful here.” I look over at Carter with wide eyes. We’re supposed to drive home tonight. “Do you two have rooms?”

“No, we planned to come up for the day and head home after the wedding.”

“Well, I have tomorrow off, so we were planning on spending the night. Your mom and I have a room. Stay there tonight, if it’s not cleared up by tomorrow we’ll pay to extend the stay.” *Oh, thank God.* Carter and I do not have money to stay in a hotel, and I’m scared to try to drive home.

“Thank you.”

“I’m just glad you two are safe.” I love yous are exchanged and we hang up.

“Well,” Carter looks at me with a serious expression. “I guess we’ll be able to take advantage of that open bar now that we’re not driving.”

“Carter, we’re not legal drinking age yet.”

“Like that’s going to stop us.” He holds his arm out and I take it. “You look beautiful, by the way.”

We start walking towards the balcony where the wedding is supposed to be. There’s a small group of people huddled inside peeking out the windows. Some of them have their phones out taking pictures and video. The chairs set up for the wedding are getting snowed upon and a woman in a pants suit on a walkie talkie is looking a little nervous.

“I need three people to come clear off the chairs, the bride says we’re still a go for the balcony.” The woman releases the button on the walkie talkie with a beep. I look over at Carter. *We’re still doing an outdoor*

wedding?

“You’re fuckin with me,” a voice with a twang answers through static on the other end.

“I am not, in fact, fucking with you,” the woman says into the walkie talkie.

“Fine, I’ll send some guys, but it’ll be a few minutes.” The woman sighs heavily.

“Guests of the Bride and Groom,” she announces to the group “we’re going to start with drinks and hors d’œuvres while we wait for more guests to arrive.” Carter looks over at me with a grin.

“Carter, they’re not going to serve us.”

“Stay here, I’m going to check out the bar situation.” He walks away while I go to the window and stare with the other people at the snow. The gentle dusting has picked up just a little bit. It’s really beautiful. The whole Yosemite Valley is covered in several feet of snow from the previous weeks, and you can see it from up here. It looks like a winter wonderland. Carter returns a moment later.

“Good news.” I smile and shake my head. “There is apparently a very lax ID policy at this hotel. See, each place card comes with this fancy wristband. He holds up a small blue bracelet. Blue means you’re old enough to drink, white means you are not.”

“And our place cards just happened to come with those blue wristbands?”

“Oh God no Maddie cakes, we’re too young to drink. But Dr. and Mrs. Chase are of legal drinking age.” I stare at him.

“You checked in as ‘Dr. and Mrs. Chase,’ really?”

“You heard my dad on the phone. If they’re not here by now they’re not coming. Why should we let these wristbands go to waste?” A tray of green cocktails floats by.

“What are those?” I ask the server.

“Signature drinks. There’s three different kinds. Would you like one?” *Would I like one?* I look over at Carter.

“She’d love one.” He holds out the blue wristband. “Wouldn’t you, Dear?” I shrug and take the wristband.

“Why not? You’re not on call tonight.” And just like that, Carter and I became Dr. and Mrs. Chase. Have you ever been to a wedding where the alcohol started before the wedding? Some people will be hammered before

the ceremony begins. *Before.*

About ten minutes prior to the new start time for the wedding, they usher us into our seats which are now covered in towels because the melting snow will definitely make your butt wet.

“After you, Doctor,” I say to Carter as I hold the door for him.

“I’m supposed to hold the door for you.”

“No, no, can’t risk hurting those delicate hands,” I wiggle my fingers at him, “they save lives, you know.”

Carter and I huddle together in two seats near the back. He pulls me into his side and tries to wrap his coat around me. A girl in front of us turns around. I’ve never seen this girl before in my life. She’s definitely drunk. Her long dark hair is perfectly curled and her dress is gorgeous.

“I’m going to object when they ask.” I look over at Carter with wide eyes, then back to the girl. “I’m going to be real loud about it, too, you should probably back up.”

“Why do I need to back up?”

“I’m really loud.” I look back at Carter, and mouth “what is happening?” There’s a guy sitting next to her.

“Is this your date?” I point to the guy next to her.

“This is my boyfriend.” She waves her hand around.” Well, ex-boyfriend, we just broke up.”

“Right now?” This conversation is extremely interesting.

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?” She seems completely fine, except for the objecting thing.

“I’m fine, I’m just gonna try and get my last boyfriend back.” She glances over at her now ex. I think she’s gauging his reaction.

“And who’s that?”

“The groom.” *Ah yes, now the objecting part makes sense.*

“Um, good luck with that.” This seems like it might be a terrible idea, but who am I to get in the way of love... or whatever this is. Revenge maybe?

“Thank you!” She seems genuinely excited as she turns back around to the front.

“Uhh, Madigan?” Carter asks.

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Have you looked around?”

“Not really why?”

“Do you know anyone at this wedding?” I look around. Half the seats are empty. I don’t see anyone who even looks remotely familiar.

“Not one person.”

“I don’t even know the bride. She’s Darrell’s niece, but I don’t *know* her.”

“I don’t really even know Darrell.” Darrell is an employee of our fathers’. They’re very close. Our dads know his niece. That’s how we got invited. The only people I knew at this wedding were my family and Carter’s family.

“Is Darrell here?” We both look around. There’s probably a hundred people here and none of them is Darrell.

“He must have gotten stuck in the snow, or turned around. Is this weird? Should we leave?”

“Well, we have two options: go spend the night in a free hotel room and get snacks from the hotel mini mart, or attend a wedding where we don’t know anyone, eat free food, and drink free booze.”

“Doctor Chase, you know I love a good mini mart.” He laughs and pulls me in closer. “Alright, alright, you talked me into it. Free food and booze.”

The music starts from a speaker... held up by the officiant. It’s one of those wireless ones and he’s awkwardly holding it towards the audience like he has no actual plan for what to do with this thing. *Does he plan to hold it the whole time? Will he be picking it up and putting it down as necessary? Should we pass it around like show and tell?*

By the third poem reading we’re getting really cold, the snow has started to come down harder. The bridesmaids are starting to look uncomfortable. One of the flower girls is dancing around trying to warm up. The girl in front of us shoots up from her seat. Carter catches her chair before it falls on me. *Maybe I should have backed up.*

"I object!" *Nope, not the right time.* The groom pinches the bridge of his nose with his hands and shakes his head. The now ex-boyfriend is tugging her coat trying to pull her into her seat. I'm kinda entertained, but I'm also kinda freezing.

"Would you two like to speak privately?" the officiant asks. The drunk girl says yes as the groom says no.

"Anaya, it was sixth grade, get over it."

"Dr. Chase, this is the best wedding I've ever been to," I whisper to Carter.

The ceremony continues and Anaya sits down... eventually. She stands for way longer than expected before she does. Finally, after my toes are numb and my hands have worked their way between Carter's arms and torso, they pronounce them Mr. and Mrs. something I didn't hear, because there's no microphone, and the officiant plays them out by holding the speaker out towards the audience.

Carter and I race inside to the warmth of the reception where he rubs my arms vigorously for several minutes while I try to warm up. We make our way over to the bar. The bartender is getting a drink for someone. Carter turns to me casually.

"So, I tell the patient he doesn't need *two* lungs," Carter says to me

"Oh, God no, one is plenty." The bartender looks over at us, Carter casually flashes the blue wristband and orders us two drinks. The bartender starts the drinks without batting an eye. *Okay, this was kind of genius.* She returns with two glass mugs of hot chocolate with whipped cream and caramel on top. Carter grabs the drinks and starts towards our table. "I thought the point of this was to get alcohol, not hot chocolate." He sits down at our table and hands me one.

"Oh, Maddie, this is the best of both. It's alcohol and hot chocolate. It's on the hotel drink menu." I reach out and grab one.

"How do you know that?"

"I was looking over their drink menu during the ceremony." I take a sip. It's really good. Hot chocolate, way too much caramel, alcohol. *I need too many of these.*

"This is so good."

"It's just the thing to warm you up."

"Ok, so there's three singles tables at this wedding. Each with ten seats. That's thirty singles—"

"There's two of us."

"Minus us. So, twenty eight singles for us to meet and greet and see if there's a love connection."

"You really think you're going to meet your person at a wedding?"

"People do it all the time." Guests start to fill in, and I pretty quickly realize we're not getting three full singles tables. I also quickly realize that Nico, Bennett, and Nate were on that list as well. At best we're looking at

twenty five, but it's looking more like eight. Five guys and three girls. *There's still hope though, right?* "I think we're going to have to weed out the duds."

"That one's a dud." Carter points to one of the guys.

"I think we have to actually talk to them."

"Pass. I'm in this for the food, and the booze, and nothing else."

"Fine, I'll call you when I meet my future husband." I leave my empty mug of boozy cocoa and walk off to mingle with the strangers. I grab a purple drink from a passing tray, and some hors d'oeuvres while the DJ plays a compilation of break up songs. *That's normal for a wedding, right?*

Carter was right, that first one was a dud. The next two aren't great either: hung up on his ex, and lacking in social skills. I'm down to two options thirty minutes into cocktail hour. I glance over at the table, and there's a girl sitting next to Carter talking to him. She's got short brown hair and big glasses. Kinda nerdy, but Carter might be into that. Part of me wants to go rescue him, but he seems fine... almost happy, even. *Did Carter find a love connection at the wedding? I guess I should be happy one of us did.* I grab a plate, load it up with appetizers, and head back to our table.

"But the biggest drama of all is her older sister's loser boyfriend. The family hates him. They can't wait until they break up. They're pretty sure at this point that he's just staying with her so he doesn't have to get a job," the girl is saying to Carter.

"Maddie, meet cousin Millie." Carter says, indicating the girl sitting next to him. "Cousin Millie knows all the good family gossip."

"Cousin Millie, family black sheep," she says, holding her hand out.

"And our new best friend." I shake her hand. "hors d'oeuvres?" I set the plate down on the table in between them.

"If we weren't already best friends we would be now."

Cousin Millie fills us in on all the best family gossip while we eat coconut shrimp and caprese skewers. Carter rolls his eyes back.

"God, I love coconut shrimp."

"I know you do, that's why I got you a big plate of them." He smiles at me in a way that makes me feel something inside that I can't quite explain.

"You're the best."

"Thank you, Doctor."

The bride and groom are announced, and again I don't catch their last name, because our friend Anaya joins us at that exact moment, and she has

accurately described her loudness. Trailing behind her is her now ex-boyfriend. I guess we have two more singles. *I wonder if the new ex is a dud.* Anaya has brought the third signature drink, the blue one, and she hands me a glass, which I happily drink as I listen to her tell the story of her and the groom... in sixth grade.

Carter and I end up at the bar where he orders Fireball, and I start thinking about the last time he drank Fireball. I remember the taste of his lips and the way his tongue felt in my mouth. Okay, so Carter and I *may* have kissed a couple of times since that last time. The groom comes over to get a drink. He's a decent looking guy, a couple years older than us. He orders a drink and turns to us when the bartender leaves to get it.

"I am so sorry to bother you, but are you Carter Davis?" *The groom knows Carter? Damn.* Carter glances at the bartender who is out of ear shot. He holds up the blue wristband.

"Uh, no, Dr. Chase." The groom raises his eyebrows like he understands.

"Ahh... well, if you have a chance to catch a game next season Davis is a great player." The bartender returns with his drink. The groom gives us a wink as he turns to leave. "Have a good night, Doctor."

Carter and I return to the table in time for toasts. Cousin Millie and Anaya's ex are getting more appetizers. *Maybe there's a love connection there.* Anaya is sitting at the table. She's still drinking.

"You're hot," she says across the table to Carter. She's still drunk. "What's your deal?" Carter grabs my hand off the table and holds it up. "Ahh... figures." She goes back to sipping her drink, and she starts scanning the room. The maid of honor gives a speech where she says she's known the bride for two entire months and she seems like a really nice girl. She toasts the new Mr. and Mrs.... and she blanks on their last name.

"Carter, what is their last name?"

"I have absolutely no idea. We may have to just make one up."

The best man gives a speech where he tells a bunch of embarrassing stories about the groom that don't really seem to connect together, and then he just kinda stops talking. The groomsmen have a small pyramid of beer cans on the table. Beeramid? That might explain the rambling. They leave the microphone on a stand and open it up for whoever wants to make a speech to the bride and groom.

People start going up to the microphone and it kinda becomes a roast

of the groom. Some are telling embarrassing stories, someone says he owes them twenty bucks, one guy really lays into everything he thinks is wrong with him. I actually start to feel bad for the guy. A man stands up and goes for the microphone. He has a beer bottle stuffed in his back pocket. I look over at Carter.

“This is going to be good.” He gets up to the microphone stand, he’s drunk, and a little blubbery.

“I know we haven’t always been eye to eye.” *I don’t think that’s right.* Cousin Millie leans over to us.

“That’s the sister’s boyfriend.” *Ooohhh. This is making some sense.* Now I’m very interested.

“And I’m sorry about that time that I ‘stole’ your car.” Stole is in air quotes. He pulls the beer bottle from his back pocket and takes a sip before returning it to the pocket. “And I know I owe you a lot of money for that.” I glance over at Carter again.

“What happened with the car?!” Cousin Millie leans back over to us, she doesn’t take her eyes off the guy.

“Oh, I’ll tell you all about it later.” *Yes!!*

“But can I marry your daughter?” He’s looking at the bride’s mom. I grab Carter’s sleeve and start shaking his arm.

“Carter, this is the best wedding I’ve ever been to! I’m so glad we stayed!”

“Me too,” he says laughing. The bride’s mom shakes her head slowly. The guy runs from the microphone stand. Actually runs. He runs through the doors off to the side and out towards the balcony. Except all the doors are glass and we can still see him. Two women chase after him. You can see them talking to him outside. One of the women returns a moment later and yells out to the bride’s mom.

“He wants to talk to you!” The bride’s mom holds her hand up to the woman, and shakes her head slowly. Carter and I look at each other, put our hands up and slowly shake our heads. *This is amazing.* The next guy goes up to the microphone, and the roast of the groom continues. Carter gets up and Anaya sits in his seat.

"Girl, I need to find a man." She’s searching the room. "Help me find someone." I look around the crowd and I spot Carter at the bar. He grabs two drinks, one of those fancy hot chocolates and something else. He walks over to the head table and hands the hot chocolate to the bride, and the other drink

to the groom. Then I realize the drink is the same one the groom ordered earlier. That's just so Carter to notice that and take them drinks. He talks to them for a minute, and they all start laughing. The bride hops out of her seat, walks over to Carter and gives him a hug. I realize in that moment that one day he'll make someone so happy.

“How about him?” I point to the guy Carter called a dud.

The guy at the microphone finishes yet another roast of the groom. Carter walks over to the microphone and picks it up. *Oh no.* He starts by greeting the crowd and then launches into a ridiculous story about how he and the groom have known each other forever, how one time he was choking on a bagel and the groom had to give him the heimlich. He's so into it, he's putting his whole body into it, miming the choking, and the heimlich. It's so different seeing him like this. Growing up he was kind of shy. We called it “red faced embarrassed Carter.” His parents put him in football to try to build his confidence. We watched his confidence on the field grow, but it never quite translated to real life. I haven't seen the red face in a couple of months. Maybe he's finally getting his confidence. Carter wipes a fake tear from his eye as he talks about how the groom saved his life. The crowd is eating it up. He finishes the story, we all toast the bride and groom. The groom gets up and hugs him. Carter points at the guy and the crowd cheers, he has the biggest smile on his face. He seems so happy. No one else roasts the groom the rest of the night, everyone starts talking about how great he is, and I think it's the sweetest thing I've ever seen.

Dinner is served, and Carter gets two steak dinners because half the guests didn't make it, and, well, the bride and groom are kind of in love with him now. The bride and groom dance their first dance and the DJ asks if anyone has any requests. Carter gets up from his seat, he turns back towards me as he walks backwards to the DJ booth while he gives me two finger guns. *Oh, God. I know where this is going.* Carter loves awkward song dedications. It started when we were younger. Every year at the Lantern Festival they do dancing in the street and someone would dedicate Sweet Caroline to their daughter. We all thought the part about touching you was so awkward. Now Carter likes making fake awkward requests. He talks to the DJ and comes running back with a smile on his face. Anaya is still sitting pretty close to me. The song changes and the DJ dedicates the next song to Carter's daughter Maddie, and the first line of “Baby Got Back” starts playing. Some people are making shocked faces at each other. Some people

are laughing. Carter is cracking up. Right as he reaches the table, I turn to Anaya. I'm going to get him back for this.

"Did you know they call this guy The Py—" Carter covers my mouth with his hand before I can spread the python rumor to Anaya.

"Dance with me, Maddie." He pulls me out to the dance floor where we dance to a song about loving large butts. Carter has some moves, but he also has some dorky dance moves that I'm equally into. Cousin Millie joins us and she and Carter have a robot dance off. He does the full Nsync "Bye Bye Bye" dance, and I think every girl in the room is in love with him. We sing "Sweet Caroline" at the top of our lungs, we do the YMCA, and we dance until we're out of breath and need a break.

Carter and I go to the bar to grab more drinks, and a couple starts to tell him how wonderful his speech was. They're probably our parents' age.

"I didn't catch your name," the woman says.

"Dr. Chase," Carter tells her. "And this is my wife..." He turns to me and smiles "Chartrusa." I look at him wide eyed. *Really, Carter?*

"Like the color?" she asks me. *Uh, sure.* "Or the alcohol?"

"Yep, my mom's family used to make the alcohol." Carter's got a fake story, I can have one too.

"I thought monks made it." The husband looks at me confused. How come Carter gets to be a doctor and no one says anything and I tell one lie about booze making and I get called out on it?

"Yep, Mom comes from a long line of monks." *Really? I don't even think that's a thing. Monks can't have kids right? I've really painted myself into a chartreuse corner.*

"That is so interesting, I'd love to hear all about it. We visited the distillery when we were in France." *Of course they did! Of course Carter picks a random name of a thing that this couple knows all about.* Carter pulls his phone out of his pocket.

"I'm so sorry, my phone is vibrating. It's the hospital. I've got this patient who has a foot where his hand should be— it's a whole thing, if you'll excuse us." He acts like he's answering his phone and grabs our drinks as we walk away from the bar.

"A foot where his hand should be?" I whisper.

"It's a whole thing." He waves his hand dismissively.

We arrive back to a table that now has a tray of desserts. There's a big selection, but there's these pretzel rods that have caramel wrapped around

them and white chocolate. And maybe it's because I'm kind of drunk, but these things taste amazing. Not long after we'd returned to the table, our pretzels have all disappeared. We start looking around at the other tables trying to see if there are more pretzels. Since there's several empty tables, we split up and go to two of them and snag their pretzels. We meet back at our table after the heist to hide our loot, then immediately leave for new tables to sneakily steal more pretzels. We're laughing and probably being far more obvious than we think we are. There's a ziplock bag in my oversized purse and I have literally no idea why it's in there, but suddenly it's filled with stolen caramel pretzels.

Carter goes back to the DJ booth and leaves smiling. *Oh, sweet Jesus, how is he going to embarrass me now?* He stops by the bar and returns with two hot chocolates. I'm a little drunk at this point, so that's not the best idea. He sets one down in front of me and starts sipping on his. There's caramel dripping down the side of the mugs. I pull my hand back, sticky from the mug.

"There's kermel on my hand." Carter starts laughing.

"Did you say kermel?"

"No Kerter, I did not say kermel." He doubles over laughing. I love when he laughs that hard, it's kinda dorky and it's one of my favorite things. I'm laughing so hard there's tears in my eyes. It's probably not even that funny, but we're open bar drunk, and drunk off the wedding, and everything seems a little extra—extra funny, extra delicious, extra beautiful. He runs his finger up the side of his mug and gets caramel on his finger.

"I have kermel on my fings." I'm laughing so hard I can't breathe.

He points his caramel finger at me, and I'm open bar wedding drunk, so I lean forward, I look in his eyes, and I suck his finger into my mouth. I run my tongue along his finger, licking up all that delicious caramel, and a little Carter too. I release his finger when the caramel is gone. He's staring at me. *Was that weird? Am I being weird?* He runs his finger back over the drip of caramel on his mug, and dabs a drop of caramel on his bottom lip. That pouty, biteable bottom lip of his. He's staring. I'm staring. My heart is pounding in my chest. I haven't kissed that lip in over a week and I'm dying for just one taste. Remember how I said we may have kissed a couple of times? So it's more like we definitely have... about a half dozen times... and it was more like making out. *That's fine right?* We're just friends who sometimes make out, and it's fine. Every time it happens we wake up the

next day, Carter makes cinnamon roll pancakes, the switch is flipped off, and we're us again. Right now though, I'm thinking about flipping that switch back on.

I lean towards him. We're not breaking eye contact. I'm trying to be sexy, but I'm not sure if I'm being successful.

"Hey, Baby," I say in a low, seductive voice. *Okay, I'm killing it. If he doesn't say it back this stops, right? If he's not into this, I walk away, back to the dance floor, and I dance the night away with Anaya and cousin Millie. No hard feelings.*

"Hey, Baby." His voice is smooth like butter and sexy as hell. I slowly close the space between us and I lick and suck the drop of caramel off his lip. I linger there a little after the caramel is gone because, damn, his lips are soft... and sweet... and I just want one more taste. When I'm finished, I start to pull away. He reaches for the back of my head and pulls me back towards him. His lips are on mine, slow, gentle, then deeper. His tongue is in my mouth. He tastes like chocolate and caramel, and a snowy winter wedding. His hand slides into my hair and my fingers find the button of his dress shirt and rest there.

"This song goes out to Mrs. Chase from Dr. Chase," the DJ announces. Carter pulls away, breaking our kiss, and I start to laugh. His face is less than an inch from mine and he whispers into the space between us.

"Dance with me, Maddie." He stands up and starts to pull me towards the dance floor. I'm reluctant because I would like to stay there and kiss some more, please, but then I hear the harmonica and I know immediately what this song is. It's John Mayer's version of "XO," so I let him pull me to the dance floor. He draws me close, we sway to the music as he sings the wrong lyrics into my ear, and I think this might be the best night of my life. His fingers trail up and down my back and my body feels like it's on fire.

John Mayer tells me that we don't have forever, and suddenly my mind starts thinking about how one day we won't be dancing together anymore. One day he'll be dancing at his own wedding with someone else and we won't have this anymore. I pull him tight towards me as John Mayer says I better kiss him before time runs out. If all we have is just this moment in time to dance and kiss, then I'll enjoy every moment of it, and hold onto it when it's gone. His fingertips dig into my skin and I wonder if he's feeling the same way I am. The song ends with Carter singing to me that he loves the lights out. A new song starts, upbeat and dancy, we're still slowly swaying on

the dance floor. I pull back enough for our eyes to meet, which is much easier tonight because I'm in heels and closer to his height. We're staring and swaying, and we're nowhere close to the rhythm of the song. There's only two more songs before the end of the night and we stay just like that, wrapped in each other, staring, until the reception ends. I feel a little sad because I want to live in this night forever, just me and him, with caramel on our lips, and the wrong lyrics to the songs whispered in my ear.

Carter and I stumble up to the room after we pretend to be sober long enough to get the key. They had tooth brushes and basic necessities, but we don't have clothes to sleep in since we expected to go home. We're laughing a little too loudly, and shushing each other when we reach the room. There's one bed, obviously, because it was his parents room. Whatever, we've slept in the same bed a million times. I drop my giant purse on the nightstand and start to dig through and assess what we have to wear to bed.

"Kerter, I don't have jammies." He's laughing and grabbing bottles of water from the mini bar. He hands me one and starts to unbutton his dress shirt. *Hello, Magic Mike.* I'm not looking away. I'm drunk, I have an excuse. I sip the water as he undoes all of the buttons like he's completely sober. He slips the shirt off. It should be illegal to be this hot. *Seriously, how is one person so sexy?* His chest is perfect, he has more abs than I think is humanly possible, and that gorgeous deep v. *Lord, give me strength.* He hands me the shirt.

"Sleep in this." *Uh, hell yes. You don't have to tell me twice.* He takes his pants off. *Oh, we're going full Magic Mike tonight?* I wobble as I try to kick my heels off and he grabs my shoulders to steady me. Our eyes meet. *We're kissing more right? We're not just going to sleep and waking up tomorrow without more kissing... that can't be all.* I turn around so my back is to him.

"Can you unzip my dress?" I could barely get it zipped up by myself when I was sober. He finds the zipper. I think his hands are shaking, and oh so slowly he slides the zipper down. His fingers glide over my bare skin as he pushes the dress over my shoulders. It falls at my feet and I'm standing there in my bra and panties. Suddenly I realize we're both in our underwear... we've never seen each other in our underwear. He takes an unsteady breath near my ear.

"Jesus Christ, Maddie. That's what you look like?" His words are a whisper in my ear. I turn around to face him. The full Magic Mike...

Michaela? *I'm drunk, I don't know.* I picked out a nicer bra and panties for tonight since it was a wedding. The look on Carter's face is not making me regret that. He closes his eyes and leans his forehead on mine. "I had no idea you looked like that under there." He reaches for the dress shirt in my hands. *Is it kissing time? Underwear kissing time?* We've never done that, but I'm full of boozy hot chocolate and I feel like making bad decisions. He wraps the shirt around my shoulders and buttons two of the buttons. *Oh. No bad decisions from him, then.* I slide my arms in the sleeves. Carter is kind of a giant, so his shirt hits me mid thigh. "Goodnight, Mrs. Chase." *Oh. No kissing, then.* Probably not a good idea with how drunk we are.

"Goodnight, Dr. Chase. I had a lovely evening." He kisses my forehead, then climbs into bed all the way at the edge with his back towards me. *Oh. No cuddling either, then.* I chug half my water then climb in on the other side of the bed. I lay there for a long time, hoping he'll make a move, but eventually I hear heavy breathing coming from his side and I know he's sleeping. Then I drift off to sleep.

At some point in the middle of the night it gets cold and I wake up. I groan and reach over to look for Carter.

"What's wrong?" he mumbles, voice thick with sleep.

"Carter, I'm cold."

"I already turned the heat up." It's definitely not getting warm in here. "Come here, I'll warm you up." I groan again and try to find him in the dark. He rolls towards me so we're facing each other. I can feel his breath on my face. His arm wraps around me and he pulls me towards him. Our torsos are touching. He runs his hand up and down my back. I'm starting to wake up a little. He's so warm, and he smells so good. My heart starts to race. *I could just kiss him. We've kissed before. We kissed tonight. It's no big deal. So why does it feel like it is?*

"Hey, Baby." His voice is still thick with sleep.

"Hey, Baby." My voice sounds less sleepy. His mouth finds mine in the dark. *God, I love kissing him.* He's soft and sweet, one hand on my back, the other on my cheek.

He rolls us so I'm on my back and part of his weight is on top of me. The hand on my back moves to my bare thigh. *Yes.* I have wanted those hands to roam since the first time we kissed. He gently slides his hand up my thigh, under the hem of his dress shirt, until it reaches the soft underside of my cheek. He leaves his hand there, just shy of grabbing my ass, and he

tightens his grip. All I can think about is that hand, where it's going, what it's doing, what I want it to do. Attached to that hand is my best friend, and I'm trying desperately to ignore that and stay in the moment. *This is fine.* We've been making out for weeks and nothing has been weird. I slide one of my hands in the back of his hair. I love the way it feels between my fingers. He's not wearing a shirt, so I let my other hand trail down his muscular back, gently, slowly. I want to grab his butt so badly, but that seems too far. I can feel his body heat through his dress shirt and I want to feel it on my skin. I want to feel his skin on mine. I want to feel his full weight on my body.

He deepens his kiss, less gentle, slightly more desperate. He's an amazing kisser, not that I have a lot to compare to, but this... this is so hot I think I might throw these blankets in the snow and live like this forever. He shifts on top of me, and then I feel his hardness on my leg. *Oh my god... is that Carter's... nope, not Carter, it's Hey Baby. It's fine.* It just never occurred to me that he could enjoy this *that much.*

He shifts more and the softness of the tip finds its way to my heat. My entire body comes to life. I grip him tighter. He shifts on me, it's creating friction right where I want it. *Does he know what this is doing to me?* He moves his hips, and it feels amazing. I'm trying to stay quiet because I'm scared that if I make a sound he'll realize what he's doing and stop. *God, I don't want him to stop. I want more.* A quiet moan escapes into his mouth and he freezes for a moment that feels like forever. *Oh God, don't stop.* He takes his mouth off of mine. *No. Don't stop.* He kisses down my jaw and continues on. He starts kissing and sucking on my neck. *Yes, more of this. I like this.*

"You like that, Baby?" He whispers in my ear and I think my body might explode. *Don't be shy.*

"Yes, Baby." *Shit that sounds sexy.*

"You want more?" he asks between kisses.

"God, yes." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. He lets out a quiet groan and shifts his hips in just the right way. *Yes. Don't stop that.* All I can think about is this feeling and how incredible it is. I bend my knee and wrap my leg around him so he can fit in closer. His hand slides up and down my leg. My body is getting tense, and I think I might actually explode. Another moan escapes me, and I dig my fingers into his skin.

"I love your sounds," he says as he keeps kissing and sucking on my neck. He sounds out of breath, and I feel out of breath. He keeps grinding against me, and a moment later I feel my release. I grip onto him tightly, and

I wonder if anything will ever feel this amazing ever again. I let out a soft squeak. He pulls away to look at me. "Did you just?" I nod, because I'm a little embarrassed. It's Carter, and we've definitely crossed a line. "You are so hot." *Me?* His mouth returns to mine, and he's kissing me frantically. *I'm hot? He's hot.* He barely has to touch me and I get wound up. We kiss for a while, then fall asleep, tangled up in each other. I love the way we sleep now. I love feeling him there next to me.

I wake in the morning to a knock on the door. Carter is in the shower. I answer the door in what probably looks like a walk of shame outfit and find room service. The employee rolls a cart in and places coffee and plates on the table. Cinnamon rolls and pancakes. I laugh. *Only Carter.* I thank the guy and he leaves. Carter's still in the shower, so I start without him. After a while I hear the shower turn off. The door to the bathroom opens and he emerges in just a towel. He walks over to me and drops a kiss on my head. He's so close I could touch him. *No. Switch off. Carter and Maddie, no Hey Baby.*

"Is this okay?" he asks, not just about the food, about last night. He hasn't asked since that first night we kissed, but last night was different. We crossed a new line. I look up at him, he's damp from his shower. Gorgeous, perfect, Carter. I smile at him.

"It's perfect." No weirdness, no awkward conversations.

"The snow stopped, so we can go home after they plow the roads."

"Sounds good." I sip my coffee and stare at him. Nothing has changed between us, but something has changed in me. I look at him differently. I think about him in ways I never did before, and I wonder a lot to myself if any girl will ever be good enough for him.

Chapter 7

Present Day

My second night at The Manor is just as bad as the first. I was up most of the night thinking about Carter, and college, and I still don't know what to think. He had plenty of time to be hooking up with people. I go to the bathroom, the door to Carter's room is broken from where he busted in last night. It won't stay closed, so I have to prop it closed with my chair. I do my make up, fix the waves in my hair, and throw on some yoga pants and a crop top.

It's after sunrise, but no one is up yet. I take my tablet down stairs, make a coffee and grab a yoga mat from the garage. Maybe I just need a nice calm yoga class to zen out and soothe me. The page is already up, so I sign into my account on my tablet, and pull up the class from last Wednesday. The tablet has a little kickstand so I can prop it up. I unroll the mat on the grass facing the ocean. The breeze gently blows my hair. *Ocean view yoga is probably a thing here.* It's way better than my view of the studio wall. Sometimes I hear the cars driving by at the studio and I pretend they are waves crashing. Here there are actual waves crashing.

I'm about six minutes into the one hour video when I hear the sound of feet on the grass. We're still warming up so I'm on my hands and knees doing cat/cow. A yoga mat unfurls next to me. I look over. Carter. *Of course.* He's wearing a t-shirt and gym shorts.

"Carter, what are you doing?" I pause the video.

"If you got *that* body from doing *this* I want in." He doesn't need any help in that department.

"I'm not sure you can keep up." He gives me a look.

"I'm an athlete Maddie, I can keep up."

"You *were* an athlete." He raises his eyebrows.

"I run half marathons." *What? How do I keep learning new things about him?*

“Since when?”

“Almost four years ago. Nico said exercise was a good way to deal with... feelings.” *Heartbreak, devastation, the feeling like you’re no longer whole without the other person? I can relate.*

“Yeah, he told me that too. That’s when I started yoga.”

“Then let’s get this going so I can beat you at it.” He’s a little cocky and I can’t wait for him to get his butt kicked by this.

“You can’t beat me at this, that’s not a thing.”

“I can definitely beat you at this.”

“Yoga is about doing the best you can, and not comparing yourself to other people.” I look over at him. “Plus I’ve been doing this for four years, I’m definitely better than you.” I just did this class last week, I know this is a harder one. I press play on the tablet, and they continue with the warm up.

“You think this is hard?” He’s on all fours next to me.

“This is just the warm up, wait until we get to proud pigeon.”

“Did you do this class already?”

“This is my morning class, they record them so if you miss it you can do it at home later.”

“This is really your class?” *Why is he surprised by this?*

“That’s me right there.” I point at the screen. You can see my messy bun floating in and out of frame.

“You go to the old people class?”

“This is not an old people class!”

“Maddie, that woman is ninety.” I’m laughing.

“Irene is eighty five.”

“You do old people yoga.” I’m having a hard time balancing because he’s making me laugh so hard.

“It’s not old people yoga! It’s the six am class!”

“Maddie, why does that woman have a chair?”

“Because, Carter, her balance isn’t the same after her hip replacement.” We’re both laughing, and not really paying attention anymore.

“*She’s young.*” I point to the girl three mats over from me.

“*She is Amish.*”

“*She’s not Amish, she’s Mennonite... I think.*”

“*She has a bonnet and a handmade dress on.*”

“*She’s wearing pants under the dress, Carter.*”

“*You got in shape doing yoga for ninety year olds.*”

"She's eighty-five!"

They've finished the warm up during the time Carter has been making fun of my class. Now the harder stuff begins. We do our first downward dog and he keeps his knees bent pretty far. "Having trouble?"

"How do you get your knees straight?"

"You gotta... pedal your feet." I demonstrate for him so he can see.

"What?"

"They call it taking your dog for a walk."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying!" I laugh. "Just stretch your calves out." The instructor has us put one leg up for three legged dog. "Carter, you're behind."

"I'm not behind." He lifts a leg, barely, but his knee is still very bent.

"You look like you're playing Twister. Right hand red Carter." The instructor has us hop forward, but her hop is more of a handstand.

"Holy shit, did she just do a flip?" I'm laughing. Now he's seeing some harder stuff. She stands and does mountain pose. "She did a flip and now she's standing straight? I can stand straight." He stands at the edge of his mat. "I am so much better at standing than you are." The instructor switches to tree pose. I put my foot on my thigh and hold my hands together. Carter's wobbling as he tries to get his foot on his leg. "Help me Maddie." I drop my leg and stand in front of him.

"There's three ways you can do it. The first way is just to put your foot at your ankle like a kickstand."

"No, which one is the more badass one? I want that one."

"There isn't a badass one." I'm laughing again. He puts his hands on my shoulders. He lifts his leg and puts his foot on his knee."

"NO DON'T DO THAT!" He drops his foot to the ground. "I'm sorry." My heart is pounding. "I didn't mean to yell at you."

"It's okay." He's looking at me like I'm crazy.

"You're not supposed to put it on your knee. You can hurt your knee doing that."

"Oh." He's realizing now why I freaked out.

"I'm sorry, I guess I'm still sensitive about your knee." He looks down at it. I can still see the faint scars. It looks better than last time I saw it.

"It doesn't hurt anymore." He's still holding my shoulders. His hands are warm, and I miss the way they felt on me. "I never thanked you for all of that."

"You don't need to thank me."

"I do. You were really there for me when I needed you."

"You were my best friend. I would have done anything for you." We stare in each other's eyes for probably way too long. This wasn't a good idea.

"Okay, show me the more badass one."

"The one where you put your leg on your thigh?"

"Yeah that one." He uses one of his hands to lift his foot to his thigh.

"Well, that's one way to do it." He's still using me for balance and he's pretty wobbly. We're both laughing. They've already moved on to other poses, and we're behind.

"I thought you weren't going to wear leggings anymore." I give him a look, because he can't possibly be serious about that conversation we had earlier.

"These are yoga pants, and I don't see you wearing a skirt."

"I tried to order some, they're on backorder."

"So are the jeans." I shrug.

"All of the jeans are on backorder?"

"All of them." He drops his leg to the ground. "Now hurry up, you're going to miss proud pigeon."

"What is a proud pigeon?" I lean down into a low lunge, drop to the ground, and bend my front leg. "Bullshit."

"Bullshit? You are literally watching me do this with your own eyeballs."

"I can do that."

"You can't do this." *This is going to blow his mind.* I lean over my front leg until my torso touches it.

"Bullshit."

"Carter, you can't say bullshit when you can see me doing it." I sit back up, bend my back leg towards the sky and lean back until I can grab it.

"Jesus Christ. No more yoga." He shakes his head and looks away.

"Control yourself, Davis." I un-contort myself.

"Fine." He starts for the low lunge, which he's actually good at. He drops his back leg. "Hmm..."

"A little harder than you thought?"

"I got this." He groans... like an old man. He reaches out and I grab his hand without thinking. He's wobbling pretty badly.

"Carter, you're going to hurt your groin."

"Okay, just help me up." He puts his weight on me, and he wobbles over until he's falling. I start to fall too. I could catch myself, but I don't bother. We both fall down laughing onto the grass. "Fine, you're better than I am." We lie in the grass on our backs staring up at the sky for a long time. "Do you ever miss it?" I turn my head to look at him. He looks over at me.

"Miss what?" He raises his eyebrows at me.

"Carter!"

"Our friendship, you perv." He pushes my shoulder. I look back towards the sky and take a silent moment to try to form an answer. "I'll take your silence as a no." He sounds hurt, and I don't want to keep hurting him.

"It's not that, I'm just not sure how to put it into words."

"Then talk it out." This is a thing we used to do when we had a hard time figuring something out. You'd just talk out loud until you come to a conclusion.

"You and I were born into a family of best friends... and I think we were destined to be best friends..." I pause because I'm already getting teary and I don't want to cry. "You were my best friend every day of my life... and then you weren't." *Don't cry.* "And when we were apart... I felt like I was missing not just a piece of myself, but something more... like a limb, or..." I don't know how to put it.

"Air in my lungs." I look over at him.

"And it hurt to just..."

"Be alive." I nod. I mash my lips together because I'm trying desperately not to cry. He looks back up to the sky and I'm still staring at him. "Thank you. I needed to hear that... I just needed to know that I mattered to you as much as you mattered to me." It breaks my heart all over again. I thought he knew how much he mattered to me, but maybe I need to be brave and say it out loud to him.

"Carter." He doesn't look at me. I reach out and grab his hand. He looks over at me, and I swear I see tears in his eyes. *Fuck, it hurts so bad.* My tears are right on the edge of falling. "You were everything to me. I never wanted to be apart from you for even a day." He pulls my hand to his mouth and kisses my fingers. I don't even care that Arthur's asleep in that house. We need to say these things. "I was hurting just as badly as you were, I just wasn't around for you to see it." He nods, I wipe a tear from my eye, and he looks back up at the sky. He drops my hand and I feel his absence immediately.

"You ready to talk yet?"

"No."

"Let me know when you are."

"Carter, I don't know if I'll ever be ready to have that conversation with you."

"Then I'll wait forever." We lie in the grass for a long time, staring at the sky, not talking. The wind blows around us. I hear the barking of seals, and the waves breaking. "You really like this guy?"

"Yes," I say without really thinking about it.

"Why?" *Why?* Well before this trip I would have said it was because we get along so well, and I felt like we were on the same page with everything. After this trip I'm not sure if those things are true.

"What are you two doing?" Bennett calls out to us, interrupting my thoughts.

"Carter hurt his groin."

"I did not hurt my groin." He laughs. I love that I can still make him laugh.

"Jesus, I don't need to hear about Carter's groin."

"We're doing yoga," Carter answers.

"Laying on the ground? The tablet's not even on." The class must have ended and the tablet went to sleep.

"It's Savasana—the nap at the end," I tell him.

"Yeah, it's the nap part."

"Okay, well the moms say breakfast will be ready soon."

"We'll be there." Carter didn't consult me before he accepted on behalf of both of us. I hear Bennett's feet in the grass leaving us. Carter stands up and holds his hands out to help me up.

"I don't know if I'm going to breakfast."

"Why not?" *Because my dad will be there, and I'm not ready to deal with him.*

"For you it's just breakfast. For me it's breakfast and an interrogation. I'm not sure I'm up for it." I rub my hands across my face, and try to rub away my anxiety.

"No interrogation."

"You can't guarantee that."

"I can."

"How?" I don't believe him, that's a big thing to promise me.

"We talked to your dad last night after you left the table."

"Who's *we*?"

"The moms, me, Audrey."

"Audrey talked my dad down?"

"She did. No more interrogation." He shakes his hands at me. I reach for them and he pulls me to my feet.

"You know, her talking about your butt was the best thing that ever happened to me." We start walking towards the patio table where they're starting to set up.

"My butt?"

"Yep."

"You never told me about that."

"I never told you a lot of things Carter."

As promised, breakfast is almost ready. We're still eating outside but it's much less than yesterday, I do see leftover mini cinnamon rolls. Arthur is absent again. The dads, much like the moms, are up early. Bennett and Audrey are up. Nico likes to sleep in, and Nate is probably out on a run. Carter's mom seems to have repurposed *all the meats* from the omelet bar into a breakfast casserole. "I bet there's tater tots on the bottom," I whisper to Carter as I lean over towards him.

"Guaranteed." He smiles and nods behind me as my dad approaches. *Ugh. I'm not in the mood to deal with this.*

"I'm sorry," he says simply. *Holy shit. An apology.* I can't remember the last time he apologized. Maybe Carter was right.

"I'm sorry I didn't keep my promise." He deserves an apology. I should have done it a long time ago.

"I just wish you'd tell me your reasons."

"And I wish you'd trust me enough to know that I have them." He reaches out to hug me. He's not big on hugging. I look past him to Carter's dad who I'm sure coached him on this moment because he's standing with his arms wrapped around himself like a dance mom who's memorized her child's routine. I hug my dad for the first time in a very long time, and I know he feels bad about how things have been. I feel bad too. It's my fault. I just can't tell him about everything, about me and Carter, and college.

We sit down to eat, and the moms put a platter of cinnamon roll pancakes in front of me. I look over at Carter. This is his doing.

"Maddie, I know you said you don't eat these anymore, but after you

guys were talking about them I really wanted some," Carter's mom says.

"They look just like Carter's."

"Well they should, it's the same recipe."

"You gave your mom your recipe?" I ask him.

"It's my recipe," she answers. I look over at him with a look of shock.

I always thought these were his pancakes.

"Cartigan."

"Not my name."

"Denver."

"Not my middle name."

"Jean-Paul."

"Now you're just copying me."

"Evangeline."

"Now you're just being ridiculous."

"Davis."

"There it goes."

"Never in my life have I felt so betrayed."

"What's happening?" I look over to the back door and see Arthur stepping out of the house. *Oh crap. How do I explain this?*

"Carter used to make me these pancakes. Apparently they're his mom's recipe." I turn to look at him accusingly.

"I never said it was my recipe! You asked for cinnamon roll pancakes, I texted her, she sent her recipe. How is that a betrayal?"

"You portrayed these to be your own recipe."

"I did not! I just made you pancakes!" Arthur grabs some pancakes off the stack and I want to smack them out of his hands. These pancakes were a whole thing with us, and he's loading up on them, completely oblivious to their meaning. He stacks several on his plate and dumps syrup all over them.

"They're better with the glaze," Carter's mom says as she hands Arthur a different syrup dispenser.

"There's a *glaze*?!" I look over at Carter with my mouth hanging open. I think I have full crazy eyes. "Cartier. Bensen. Mary-Louise. What the hell?!"

"I was too lazy to make the glaze!"

"The truth comes out today doesn't it?!" I reach over and stack up three cinnamon roll pancakes on a plate and make eye contact with Carter as I pour glaze all over them. "I cannot believe you did this to me."

"I made you pancakes!"

"You deprived me of glaze is what you did." I start cutting up my pancakes.

"Did you say his middle name is Maryann?" Arthur asks.

"Mary-Louise."

"That's not my middle name," Carter says as he leans over to grab pancakes off the platter.

"But you're fighting about pancakes?"

"We're not fighting." Carter starts pouring glaze on his pancakes and I narrow my eyes at him.

"But you're mad?" Arthur asks me.

"She's not mad."

"I'm not mad, he made me pancakes, no one else has ever made me pancakes."

"No one?" Carter seems surprised.

"No one." I shake my head. "You are a rare gem, Carter Davis."

"This is just a thing they do," Audrey explains to Arthur.

"Fight over pancakes?" Arthur is confused.

"No, they banter. It's their thing. I mean the middle names and the betrayal are new, but other than that this is just them."

"So they're like this all the time?"

"Oh, all the time. Literally the first night I met them they were doing some comedy bit."

"You loved it," I say.

"Oh, I did love it, and I have been your captive audience ever since."

"So what's the big deal about the pancakes?" Arthur asks between bites. I take a bite to buy myself time, and damn these things are good. They're sweet and crispy, and she's right the glaze is fantastic, but I liked the way Carter made them, thicker in the middle with too much syrup. It makes me think of cold winter mornings in his freezing house wrapped up in his oversized clothes.

"I used to make Maddie pancakes in college." Carter leaves out the part where he only made these pancakes the morning after we made out... or other things. I shovel more pancake into my mouth to get out of talking.

"Were you roommates in college?" *Oh now he has questions.*

"Maddie practically lived over there," Audrey chimes in from across the table. I shoot a glare at her. *Really? Is this helping?*

"We'd go to a party, we'd have a couple of drinks, she'd crash at my place, and we'd have pancakes in the morning." *Thank you, Carter, this sounds better... no big deal, just crashing at his place.*

"You getting my sister drunk, Carter?" *Oh sweet Jesus, Bennett.*

"Not drunk." Sometimes a little drunk. Carter looks at me with his "help me" face.

"We were just being responsible. No drinking and driving," I say.

"Just drinking and sleeping in a house full of football players," Bennett adds because this is helping. He takes a bite of his food and stares at me expectantly like he wants a better explanation.

"A house full of football players?" Arthur asks. *Great.* Given his previous statements about football players he's probably thinking I was sleeping with all of them.

"No, it wasn't like that," Carter says.

"I told you to watch out for her, Carter." Bennett gestures at him with his fork.

"I did!" I turn towards Bennett.

"He always made sure I was safe." *There, will that shut everyone up?*

"Safe from what?" Arthur asks.

"You know, people hitting on you, roofies, that sort of thing."

"You went to parties with roofies?" That sounds really bad.

"No! He just made sure no one tried anything."

"What were they trying?"

"I just mean that Carter always made sure that no one hit on me, or anything else."

"And then you'd go sleep at a house full of football players." There's Arthur's tone again—judgy.

"It wasn't like that." Now I feel like I'm repeating what Carter said. "It was four of them, Carter, Nate, and two other guys that were barely ever home. So basically the same two guys I spent every summer of my life with." There, that makes sense. I feel like this is sounding bad, and we're not even talking about the sleeping in the same bed or the... things that would happen in that bed.

My mom comes to sit down next to us.

"Arthur, how do you feel about coming back for Fourth of July?" *Oh sweet Jesus. They can't get me to agree to come so they're going to force me back here by talking Arthur into it.*

"Uh, I don't know."

"They shoot the fireworks off a barge in the ocean. You can see from the back yard. We do a whole big barbecue, Audrey makes this berry lemonade, we make homemade ice cream on brownies with caramel sauce."

"Unless the fog is too thick to see the fireworks. Then you just get colored fog," I add.

"Shush, I'm trying to lure him in and you're messing it up."

"Oh, I know what you're doing."

"Maddie loves the Fourth of July," Carter says.

"And she hasn't been in years, so you should both come." Mom with the hard sell.

"I can't get time off of work." That's not true, but that's what I've been telling them for years.

"You can't get the Fourth of July off of work?"

"I can't get any time before or after and I'm not driving up and back the same day." I'm completely full of it right now, but this week was a trial run and it's not going well, so I'm not committing to coming back.

"Fine, what about Birthday Bash?" Now she's really hard selling it.

"What's Birthday Bash?" Arthur asks.

"You didn't tell him about Birthday Bash?" I haven't been to Birthday Bash in four years, so no.

"Carter and Maddie were born on the same day," Audrey explains.

"We weren't born on the same day." It's technically true. Carter's mom perks up, and joins us.

"Oh are we telling the birth story?"

"No," I say, because I don't want Arthur knowing all about me and Carter. He doesn't need to know anything about our friendship. I'm trying to hide the weirdness from him. As far as he knows we have a normal friendship. I don't know why my family insists on telling all of this stuff I don't want him to know about.

"So, Nate was due first, then Carter, and Maddie was last." *She's telling it anyway.*

"You don't have to tell the story."

"I love the story," Audrey says. I glare at her again, because she is not helping.

"I go into labor with Carter, and we head to the hospital together." She gestures between her and mom mom. "Dads were on an out of town job,

we couldn't reach them on their phones, so we'd called the hotel they were staying at to have them meet us."

"They used to turn their phones off when they weren't using them back then," my mom adds.

"Meanwhile she goes into labor with Maddie, but she won't tell anyone because I was sharing a room with another girl."

"Maddie was jealous I was going to be born first." Carter smiles at me. He always likes to tell people this.

"That is in no way true," I say.

"We kept waiting for the other girl to get discharged from the hospital so we could share the room," my mom says.

"But she was taking forever to leave."

"She was definitely scared to take care of that baby without the nurses." Our moms love telling this story, and I can tell they're happy to have a new person to tell it to.

"So finally her contractions are so close together that she has to tell them that she's in labor."

"My water broke."

"Oh yeah! It did break!"

"And I was going to have to start pushing soon. Carter arrived, the dads hadn't made it yet, and Maddie was coming."

"So I kicked that girl out of the room." Carter's mom is so proud. She's a mama bear when she wants to be.

"You did not," I say.

"Oh I did, and I'd do it again. We were having our babies on the same day, and we were sharing that room."

"The nurse comes in to check on them, and I tell her I'm having a baby and she laughs because she thinks I'm joking."

"She wasn't joking."

"Anyway Maddie arrived just after midnight so technically it's two separate days."

"And Nate was born a week later."

"So how far apart are you?" Audrey asks. I'm not sure Arthur is into our birth story, and I wouldn't expect him to be.

"Four hours," my mom says proudly.

"You're four hours younger than him?" I feel like Audrey has heard this before but she sounds like she hasn't.

"They shared a crib," Carter's mom says proudly. *Ugh, please let's not allude to the bed sharing. Arthur doesn't need to know about that.*

"We basically treated them like twins."

"Remember when we'd dress them in little matching outfits?"

"That was so cute."

"You wore matching outfits?!" Audrey is very into this.

"We have pictures!"

"No! No pictures." I do not need Arthur looking through album upon album of me and Carter together. It's already weird. *I'm starting to feel hot. Is it hot in here? Nope, we're outside, and it's definitely cold.*

"We'll show you pictures later," Carter's mom whispers to Audrey.

"No pictures!" I repeat. I look over at Arthur who thankfully is on his phone texting or something. I don't know, I don't care, he's not paying attention and that's all that matters.

"Is everyone going to Street Eats tonight?" Carter's mom asks.

"I need crab sticks like I need my next breath." Audrey has a thing for the crab sticks.

"Sounds like Audrey is going."

"Nate and Nico are coming," Bennett adds.

"What about you two?"

"Us two?" I wave a finger between myself and Carter.

"No you and Arthur." *I probably should have guessed that.*

"We're going. Right, Arthur?"

"Huh?" He looks up from his phone.

"They're doing street food downtown tonight. They block off the street. All the restaurants set up booths and make special menu items that you can walk around eating. You know, street food."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"I was just reading online about happy hour at this bar where they have clams and oysters. That sounds fun." Carter groans.

"No oysters."

"Ugh, no, I can't do oysters," I add.

"Why?"

"Carter and Maddie got horrible food poisoning they swear they got from oysters," Audrey explains.

"It was definitely the oysters," Carter says.

“I think I’m going to vomit just from saying oysters.” My stomach is feeling a little queasy just thinking about the word.

“You don’t eat oysters because you threw up one time?” Arthur sounds confused.

“It wasn’t one time.” I’m actually a little offended. “We were sick for days.”

“We probably should have gone to a hospital,” Carter says.

“You think so?” We were pretty sick.

“I couldn’t eat solid food for five days.”

“Same.”

“I found them on the floor of their bathroom after no one had seen them all day,” Audrey tells Arthur.

“At some point I had literally crawled out to the hallway and yelled for help but no one was home.” I was pretty desperate at that point.

“There’s something disgustingly bonding about sharing food poisoning with someone,” Audrey says wistfully. She seems to be glorifying a horrible situation.

“God, we were so sick. I still can’t eat oysters.” I haven’t touched one since.

“I had part of one last year.”

“How was it?” I sit up and lean in towards him. I’ve been too afraid to touch them, and I want to know if he got sick.

“I was so scared. I spent the rest of the night freaking out that I was getting sick.”

“No oysters.” I sit back in my seat.

“No oysters,” he repeats.

“Well you two could eat something else,” Arthur offers.

“We can. We could do that on Beach Day.” If he’s interested in something I can oblige. I’m just happy he’s taking an interest in something.

“It’s only on Tuesdays.”

“Oh.” Arthur is looking at me like he’s waiting on an answer. They do that every week. Street Eats is literally one day per year. “We could go to Street Eats, and then hit happy hour after. What time is it?”

“Six to eight.”

“What time is Street Eats?” I look over at my Mom.

“Five thirty to nine,” she tells me.

“We can just go to your thing for like an hour and then head to happy

hour.”

“The lines are pretty long, we probably won’t get much food in an hour.”

“So pick out your favorite thing and we’ll get that.” That’s hard because there’s a lot of favorites.

“It’s kind of a whole thing.”

“Yeah, we have a whole strategy for which booths to go to at what time,” Audrey chimes in. I look over at Carter with my “help me” face.

“Arthur, you should go, we can meet up with you after.” I glare at Carter. *That is not helping me.*

“That sounds good.” Arthur is on board with this. Carter knows I brought Arthur here to spend time with me at the festival, not to spend time away from each other.

“We can do both.” I’m not trying to be apart from each other this whole trip.

“Okay, but everyone is going?” my mom asks.

“Yes, everyone is going, you can take the night off.”

“Great, because we were wanting to go out to this new wine bar and I wanted to make sure we didn’t have to cook tonight.” We’re grown adults, we can get ourselves food, but they still feel like they have to feed us and take care of us.

“No cooking. Have fun.”

Chapter 8

Freshman Year of College

February

“Ouch!” I yank the curling iron away from my neck. I burned it. Awesome. I’m not great at this. I barely started doing my hair and makeup this year. My phone vibrates on the bathroom counter as I uncoil my hair from the hot curling iron. It’s Audrey texting to ask how it’s going. I shoot off a quick text telling her I burned my neck and then grab the next piece of hair. She replies with a sad face, then asks if I used the product she gave me. Oh yeah, I was supposed to put stuff in my hair. I unfurl the section of hair and go to my bag.

“What are you doing?” Carter asks from where he’s lounging on his bed.

“Curling my hair.” Audrey gave me a little bag with some travel sized hair products in it to use and I dig through my backpack to find it.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to look like a hobo on my date.”

“I didn’t realize watching movies in bed was a date. Should I have rented a tuxedo?”

“I told you I can’t watch movies tonight, I have a date.” He sits up straighter.

“Oh.” I know that “oh.” It’s the same way I say it when he tells me he has a date. It’s a disappointed “oh” that means “I guess we’re not making out for a while.”

“I texted you on Monday.” Finally, I find the tiny makeup bag at the bottom of my backpack.

“When?” He pulls up his phone and starts scrolling. I stand over his shoulder and look as he scrolls back four entire days.

“We text a lot.” He shrugs. “There!”

“Where?”

"Right between 'Does Dr. Capriotti wear a toupe?' and 'Do you want teriyaki for lunch?'"

"It's not a toupe."

"I'm very sure it is. Look, you said okay."

"I said okay to the teriyaki, I didn't see the one about the date."

"Well, I have a date."

"A date you're curling your hair for."

"As previously stated, I don't want to look like a hobo." I take the bag to the bathroom and set it down. *Oh no.* "Carter!"

"What?" He walks over to the bathroom.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I melted the handle of your toothbrush." He laughs and peels the curling iron off of the toothbrush. There's melty plastic strings hanging from it.

"Did I ruin it?"

"I'm sure it's fine." He grabs a napkin from our lunch off of his desk and wipes the plastic off of the curling iron. "See, good as new." He looks at his melted toothbrush.

"I'll buy you a new one."

"Hell no, I'm keeping this. It's hilarious." He holds it up to me and smiles.

"I'm not really good at this being girly stuff."

"You're still learning, you'll get better. I sucked at football when I started." Carter pulls out the little bottles from the bag and starts looking at them.

"You never sucked at football."

"I did." He sprays one of the bottles into the air, and coughs. "I don't like this one."

"It's not perfume!"

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know. It's for your hair. Audrey gave it to me." Carter starts reading the bottles.

"Are she and Nico dating?"

"I have absolutely no idea. I saw her at lunch with Bennett the other day and that's all I know."

"She seemed to like him at Christmas." Audrey came to The Manor at

Christmas. Her family doesn't live that far from here. She could have gone home, but her mom isn't great. I always thought those pretty sorority girls had perfect lives, but Audrey proved me wrong. I invited her to spend Christmas with us and, to my surprise, she actually accepted. Nico seemed interested that she was coming. She got a flat tire on the way to the house and they sent Bennett to change it since he was also driving up and he'd get there fastest.

"I think Bennett bought her the new tire when he took her to get it replaced."

"Really? Is that romantic? If I bought you a tire would you fall in love with me?" I laugh, my big ridiculous laugh that only Carter gets out of me.

"You think it would be okay to invite her up for part of summer?"

"No one will care if you invite her. Everyone liked her."

"I think she's supposed to go home for the summer, and her mom..."

"Sucks, I know."

"I thought maybe she could use a break. Is it weird to invite her? I haven't known her for long."

"Awww. You like her." He nudges me like a twelve year old girl.

"I do not! She's just a friend!"

"Your first real female friend." My first friend who wasn't using me to get Carter.

"Yes, and I don't want to mess it up."

"Just ask her. She can always say no." Carter starts fiddling with the zipper on the makeup bag. "You think she'll stay in your room again?" *Oh. That would make it harder if Carter and I wanted to... make out this summer. Are we doing that there? Our families are there. What if they find out? But then that means the whole summer without kissing him. I don't like that. I guess it depends on how this date goes tonight. Maybe I'll have someone else to kiss instead.*

"I hadn't thought about that." I start wrapping my hair around the curling iron casually. "I guess she could stay in the office. They have a couch in there."

"I think it's a sofa bed."

"That's not bad right? I mean I'm not asking her to sleep on the floor."

"Just tell her about it and see what she says. She'd probably be happier with her own room." *We'd be happier if Audrey had her own room.*

"Ouch!" I pull my fingers back from the curling iron.

"Do you want an oven mitt?"

"Carter, how would I use it if I had my hand in an oven mitt? My fingers can't... fing." He laughs. I pull the curling iron out of the hair. *Hey! A perfect curl!*

"So who's this guy you're getting dressed up for?"

"I met him at the library."

"Oooh, that's your speed."

"It is. He was doing research for a paper." I pull the hair clip out of my hair and hold it in my mouth as I pull out the next section.

"Paper research, that's hot." I pull the clip out of my mouth.

"It's not even due yet!"

"Writing a paper ahead of time? You better wear your good panties."

"He is not seeing my panties." He holds up his hands.

"Hey, you never know."

"Carter, no one is seeing my panties on a first date." After I twirl the section I'm not using into a bun I clip it in place.

"Okay, well, I'll be home if you need anything."

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno, what if he's a dick?" I widen my eyes.

"What if he's a dick? What am I supposed to do?" I hadn't thought about that.

"What do you usually do if you don't like a guy on a date?"

"Finish the date and never respond to his messages again."

"Maddie!"

"What?"

"You ghost them?"

"Yes, Carter, I ghost them." It's easier than having an uncomfortable conversation.

"I can't believe you're one of those girls."

"I don't like awkward situations." I grab the next section of hair and start on it.

"You run away."

"I do run away!"

"Well, if he's a dick and you don't like him just run away."

"In the middle of the date?"

"Yes."

"I can't do that." That sounds awkward.

"You can't just leave?"

"No! What if he asks me why I'm leaving?" *Then I'd have to tell him why, and it's a whole thing.*

"Just tell him you don't like him!"

"I can't do that."

"You can definitely do that." I pull the next curl free as I contemplate leaving in the middle of the date. I feel awkward just thinking about it.

"I can't do it."

He sighs. "Fine, if he's a dick, or you're uncomfortable then call me and I'll come pick you up."

"I can't do that. You're watching movies, you'll have to stop the movie, and put your shoes on, then drive all the way over."

"I don't care."

"I care. I'm not interrupting your movie night to come get me."

"Maddie, I don't want you to be in a situation where you're uncomfortable. Just call me. I can pause the movie."

"Ugh, fine. I'll call you if he's creepy."

"Were you supposed to spray these on there?" He holds up the cans Audrey gave me.

"Damn it! You think I can do it after? Does it work like that?"

"Just... hose it down, and let it settle. That should be fine." I laugh.

"Hose it down? Is that a technical term?" When I finish with the final section I look at him. He's been standing in the bathroom with me talking while I work on my hair. "It looks weird." He looks contemplative.

"It's not weird, but something looks off." He stares for a while. *Great. Do I have time to wash it and dry it, and try again? Pony tail?* "Can you like... floof it like you did at the wedding?"

"Oh yeah, I did fluff it a little."

"The technical term is floof." I bend over and shake my head, then stand back up.

"There?"

"There! All floofed up." He hands me the bottles Audrey gave me. "Now hose it down."

"I don't feel like these are technical terms." As I spray my hair down with way too much product, Carter starts coughing and leaves the room.

"I didn't tell you to hose down my lungs!"

"Come here and open your mouth." He walks at me with his mouth open and I want to kiss him. *That's probably bad when I'm going out on a*

date, right? I grab my backpack and take it to the bathroom to change. It's still pretty cold out, so I brought a cute pair of jeans and a nice top.

"When do you have to be back at your place?" he yells through the door.

"For what?"

"For him to pick you up."

"I told him to pick me up from your house."

"He's picking you up here?" When I finish I open the door.

"Yeah. I don't want him to know where I live. I'm not trying to get murdered."

"So you tell him where I live so I can get murdered?"

I give him crazy eyes. "Yes."

"Awesome. Enjoy your episode of *Dateline*."

"He was my best friend." I fake like I'm crying and wipe a fake tear.

"Shut up." He's laughing.

"You love it."

"I do, actually." He flops back down on his bed. "You look pretty."

"Thank you." The light catches my earrings and I remember to change them. As I'm swapping my earrings I look over at Carter and I feel bad for a second that I'm ditching him. "What are you watching tonight?"

"I have to choose something new if I'm watching alone."

"Why?"

"I have to wait until you're here to watch something scary." He gives me a big grin.

"No, feel free to watch it without me." I hate those stupid movies, they give me nightmares. Carter glances at the time. "What time is it?"

"Almost six."

"He said he'd be here at six." I run back into the bathroom and give myself a once over in the mirror, then flop on the bed next to Carter.

"Start your stupid movie, we'll finish it later."

"You're the best." He pulls up some god awful thing and starts it. I'm nervous and I keep checking the time like crazy. My stomach is starting to get knotted. "He's late."

"I know he's late."

"Did he tell you he's going to be late?" My phone isn't on the bed, so I start looking for it. Carter pulls it off of his nightstand.

"Why is it over there?"

“I was charging it for you.”

“Oh. That was nice. Thank you.”

“Can’t call me to rescue you with a dead phone.” There’s no messages on my phone and I contemplate texting him, but it feels too clingy, so I don’t. About forty five minutes after he’s supposed to get here I get a message saying he’s at the door. I grab my purse and slip my shoes on. “Where are you going?”

“Chad’s here.”

“He texted you? He’s not coming inside to meet me like a gentleman?”

“You’re not my parents.” I start for the door, and he walks past me.

“Carter!”

“I want to meet this guy.” He heads downstairs to the front door. I try to get past him, but he’s a big guy. “Maddie, I play football. All we do is block and move around people.” *Damn it.* Carter reaches the front door and opens it. Chad’s standing on the front porch, expecting me, and not a giant man.

“Holy shit, it’s Carter Davis!” *Oh good, he knows Carter.* “Do I have the wrong house?”

“Nah man, it’s the right house.”

“Am I getting pranked?”

“If you’re here for Maddie you’re in the right place.”

“You know Maddie?”

“Yeah man, we go way back.” I try to peek around him but he nudges me back with his hip.

“Where are you crazy kids off to tonight?”

“There’s a little cafe down the street. Unless you have a better idea. I mean... whatever you think.”

“No, that sounds good. Just have her back by curfew.”

“Oh, absolutely. And can I say, you were amazing last season. Those were the best games I’ve ever been to.”

“Thank you, thank you. It’s a team effort.” *Ugh, enough. I don’t need him giving sound bites to my date.*

“Okay Carter, you can let me out now.” I push around him and find my date... wearing a shirt that looks like he picked it up out of a pile of clothes on the floor. *Huh. Maybe I didn’t need to get this dressed up.*

“Bring her back by curfew, or I’ll break your arm.” He smiles at

Chad.

"Yes, Sir."

"He's joking. Aren't you, Carter?"

"Not even a little." He's still smiling.

"It's a joke. Let's go." He turns to walk towards the car, and I look up at Carter. "I'll come back after my date."

"Call me if you need help."

When I reach the car Chad is in the driver's seat already. *Huh. Carter always opens my door. I guess I shouldn't expect that of everyone, right?* The handle on the passenger door sticks a little as I try to open it.

"You have to give it a good yank!" he yells from inside the car. *Okay. Let's give it a good yank.* I grip on the door and start to pull, but it's not budging. The second time I use both hands and still nothing, so I put my body weight into it. He reaches over inside and does something and the door flies open. I fall on my butt on the sidewalk. "I forgot to unlock it!" He's still yelling. I hear laughter, and I look back towards the house. Carter is on the porch doubled over. He's never going to let me forget this. When I hop in the car, he's already talking about Carter.

"I can't believe that was Carter Davis."

"Yup. That's Carter." I think he's a fan.

"Is he the one who gave you that hickey?"

"What hickey?!" I scramble to look for a mirror.

"That's cool. If I was a girl I'd probably hook up with him too." He laughs. I open my mouth to protest, but stop because... I mean... we have been kissing... and whatever that was at the wedding a couple weeks ago. *Why am I thinking about Carter grinding on me right now? I'm on a date!*

I finally find a mirror and try to figure out what this guy is talking about.

"Oh, that? I burned my neck with the curling iron when I was getting ready." He laughs.

"It's fine. I don't care. You don't have to make up a ridiculous story." *It's true! And should I be concerned that this guy is fine with me getting a hickey from Carter? Because I kind of am.*

He pulls into the parking lot of the cafe and he's still talking about Carter. Maybe he's nervous. We walk inside, it's cute, cozy, a nice place to talk on a first date. They seat us at a table in the back, and bring us menus. I'm pretty hungry so I start looking over the entrees.

"I should probably tell you I only brought twelve dollars," he whispers to me. *Did he say twelve?* The sandwiches are ten. *Okay... I could buy my own dinner. That's not a problem.* "Did you think last season that our team would be so good this year?"

"I was in high school last season."

"I still can't believe it. Did you see that game where he got three touchdowns? Three!" I don't think he listened to my answer.

"I was definitely there." He starts talking about Nate and Carter and what a great team they are. The server brings us water. *Is my mom hosting the Memorial Day barbecue this year? Is it Carter's mom? I should text her. No, Carter probably knows. God I love those beans my mom makes every year. I should get that recipe. It's probably on their blog. I could pull it up on my phone and check. Oh shit, is he still talking about Carter?*

"He should definitely be in the running for the Heisman, don't you think?"

"Yup." *Still going.*

"Did you see how many yards he got last year?"

"I did." He tries to remember the number, but he can't so he pulls out his phone to look online. He quotes me a number. "No, that's not right."

"It says it on the team website."

"They didn't update it after the last game, and he got a bunch of yards that game. His mom probably has the actual number somewhere, she keeps track of that." He's stopped talking. He's staring.

"You know his mom?" *Oh sweet Jesus. I've made a mistake.*

"I do."

"I thought you guys were just like a casual thing, but you know his mom?"

"Like he said we go way back." *Why are we still talking about Carter?* I'm still holding my menu and looking down, but I've already decided I don't really want to eat a full meal. That would just keep me here longer, in the Carter Davis fan zone. Ice cream is probably a better option. "So what's your major?"

"History."

"What do you want to do after college?"

"Teacher." He waves his hand dismissively. "What's Carter's major?"

"Business." Same as mine, but I don't think this guy cares.

"That's a good major, especially if he goes to the NFL. You think

he'll go?" We actually don't talk about that. If he has feelings one way or another he doesn't tell me about it.

"I don't know."

"Do you guys talk or do you just—" *Oh my god!*

"We talk. We're friends. Best friends."

"Best friends? Really?" He sounds like he doesn't believe me. I rub my forehead and look around for the server so she can save me from this.

"Yes, best friends. Since we were kids." He slams his hand on the table and leans forward.

"No. Way." *God I wish I hadn't said that.* "You saw him play in high school?"

"I did."

"Did you know he was this good?"

"We did."

"Do you know how many yards he had in high school? What about touchdowns?"

Well, this is officially not a date anymore and it's now become... Carter Davis fan trivia? I close my menu and put it on the table. *Fine. Let the quiz begin.* I start answering all his questions about stats. *Why do I know this?* The server comes and I order a cup of cookie dough ice cream. He orders mint chip on a cone.

Chad asks for Carter's workout routine, and I give him the full details of exactly what he does to work out. And then he takes notes on his phone while I go over how I make his protein shake. It's literally on the package, which he pulls up online and puts in his cart after I tell him exactly which brand it is. I add a banana to it, but this guy doesn't need to know that. His ice cream is melting on his hand. His hands are tiny, and I keep staring at them. *They're, like, really small proportionally, right? Those definitely look smaller than normal hands.* Then I think of those hands touching me and I cringe internally. *Nope, don't like that.* Chad keeps asking me questions about which shoes Carter prefers for running, and if he has different ones for other workouts. What does he drive, what's his favorite food, what does he do for fun? *Is he on this date with Carter?* He's licking his ice cream cone and it's so sloppy and messy. It's like a toddler. Has this man ever licked an ice cream cone? It's like he's an alien and they didn't have ice cream on his planet. *How is he this messy? You see melty ice cream, you lick it. How is that hard? I bet he's a terrible kisser. Oh God, is he going to try to kiss me?*

Is he going to try to kiss me because he thinks I've kissed Carter?? I need to get out of this.

"This is really good ice cream. You think Carter would like some?"

"He does like ice cream."

"We should bring him some."

"I thought you only brought twelve dollars."

"I can put it on a card. It's Carter Davis." *I'm sorry, I don't rate high enough to use a card, but Carter does?* "You think he'll be home when I drop you off?"

"Uh... I think he said he might go out." Nope, he never said that.

"With who?"

"Some of the guys from the team."

"Like who?"

"I'm not sure."

"I thought you were his best friend. He didn't tell you who he's going out with?" *Has this turned into an interrogation?* The server brings the bill and for a moment I wish I could trade places with her.

"Probably Bishop and Moore." His cousin Nate and my brother. He doesn't know Bennett is my brother because he didn't bother to ask anything about me.

"You think we could meet up with them?"

"Uh... I'm pretty tired." It's not even eight o'clock. I let him pay for the ice cream, and we head to his car. I'm kinda over the ten thousand questions about Carter. This time he remembers to unlock the car after he climbs in. He parks outside Carter's house, and tries to get out. "You don't have to walk me to the door, I'm fine."

"Are you sure? We could see if he maybe wants dinner or, there's a really good documentary on HBO that everyone is talking about." He's not talking about me. He's talking about hanging out with Carter.

"I don't think he's home."

"Isn't that his SUV?" He points at it. *Damn it.* He did ask what kind of car he drives.

"I'm just really tired. Good night." I give the door a good shove closed and start towards the house. Nate's leaving as I walk up.

"Memorize that guy's car, he's definitely going to start stalking Carter." Nate laughs and holds the door open for me.

"Oh, you're serious." He looks over at the car... that hasn't moved

yet. "Who is he?"

"My date, but I think he'd rather be Carter's date."

"Oh. That sucks. Better luck next time."

"Is he leaving yet?"

"I think he's taking a selfie with the house as the background."

"Sweet Jesus." I rub my forehead and head in the house. "Have fun!"

I call after him.

"Try not to get murdered!" he yells back. I walk upstairs to Carter's room. The door is open. I walk in and close it behind me. He's lying in the middle of the bed watching a movie.

"Move over." I kick my shoes off under the bed and start taking my earrings off. He slides over to make room for me.

"That was quick." He checks the time. "He was forty five minutes late. Did your date even last forty five minutes?"

"Nope."

"It took you longer to get ready than the date lasted."

"Yep." I slide into the bed next to him.

"What did you eat?"

"Ice cream."

"You had ice cream?"

"He only brought twelve dollars."

"He what? On a date? Twelve dollars?"

"Yep."

"Not even a twenty? Exactly twelve?"

"Exactly twelve."

"Why didn't you just buy your own dinner?"

"Because, Carter, I wanted to get the hell out of there, and dinner would have forced me to stay longer."

"It was that bad?"

"He spent the entire time grilling me about you."

"Me?"

I give him crazy eyes and I nod. "Oh, he's a fan." Carter picks up his phone and starts typing something. "He saw the burn on my neck and thought you gave me a hickey."

"Uh oh."

"Oh no, he was fine with it."

Carter gives me his weirded out look. "That's weird."

"Thank you!" He puts his phone down. "Put on your stupid axe murder movie."

"No, we can watch something else."

"Thank you." Remote in hand he starts clicking through a bunch of movies. I cuddle closer to him.

"Did you like him?"

"Not really, no"

"Why not?"

"He had these tiny little hobbit hands."

"Hobbit hands?" Carter laughs.

"Yes, and I kept thinking about how I didn't want them touching me and..."

"And what?"

"And he was so sloppy eating his ice cream I didn't want his tongue touching me either." I shudder.

"So, you think you'll go out with him again?" He's still clicking through the list on the screen.

"God no."

"Thank Christ."

"What? Why?"

He tosses the remote over his shoulder, and rolls over to me.

"Hey, Baby." *Oh. That sounds nice.* He leans down towards me.

"Hey, Baby." His mouth is on mine. He's kissing me, but not as soft and sweet as usual. It's more fire and passion. I don't know what it is about Hey Baby that emboldens us, but it does. He shifts his weight on top of me slightly. *Ugh, I love when I can feel him on top of me. Are we doing the no pants wedding kissing? I could use some of that. That was hot.* He slides his hand along the bottom of my thigh and he grabs my ass. *Oh, hell yes.* I run my fingers down his back until they reach the hem of his shirt. I can feel the bare skin just above the waistband of his pants. His skin is soft, but I can feel the firm muscles underneath. I linger there for a while, afraid to go farther. *Is he okay with me touching his skin? I touched it at the wedding. Can I touch more? He'd stop me if he didn't want it, right?*

His hand slides over my hip, and stops at the hem of my top. The tips of his fingers are gently touching the skin on my waist. He's softly caressing me. *Please just go up a little farther. Just slide that hand up my shirt.* My heart is pounding. He moves his mouth down my chin to my neck, and slides

his hand up my shirt just a couple inches. *Just keep going a couple more inches.*

"You like when I touch you, Baby?" he whispers in my ear. His voice is silk gently floating across my skin.

"God, yes." He slides his hand up more until he's touching the soft skin just under my breasts. Every millimeter his fingers move ignites a fire in me. I can feel desire that I've never felt before, slightly desperate, pleading for more.

"Can I touch you more?" His breath is warm on my skin, and I think I might combust.

"Only if I can touch you." I have no idea where that came from, but I'm glad I said it. I want his hands on me and I want my hands on him. He leans away from me for a second and I think he's pulling away. He reaches back, pulls his shirt off, and tosses it to the side. *Oh, God, yes.* His mouth is back on mine and my hands are on his back. I start tracing lines on his back muscles with the tips of my fingers. His skin is velvety under my hands. He starts sliding my shirt up, slowly inching it up my stomach. I pull it off the rest of the way and toss it over with his. *This is fine, right?* His tongue brushes the skin of my neck as he kisses it and his hand slides onto my bra and gently starts caressing. *Ugh, yes.* He lingers there for a while, assertive but sweet. His fingers glide down my torso, slowly, until they reach the button on my jeans and he pauses. *No pants wedding kissing??* He frees the button, no fumbling, just confident. *God, he's so hot.* He pulls the zipper down, and starts working my jeans off. *Yesss!!* He pulls back, our mouths part, and I want to chase after him. I don't want an inch of space between us. I want to feel every part of his skin on mine. He grabs onto the fabric near my ankles, and pauses to look up at me. I know almost every look on his face. He wants to know if I'm fine with this. I raise my hips to help, and he starts to pull them off.

"These are tight," he says as he pulls them off the rest of the way.

"I wanted to look hot."

"Baby, you always look hot," he says in a seductive voice as he crawls back up the bed towards me. *Damn, that's sexy. Can I have a video of that moment to replay over and over?* He brings his mouth back to mine. I'm left in my bra and panties. He's still wearing his sweatpants. *Are those coming off? Is our underwear coming off?? I don't know if I'm emotionally prepared for that. Maybe the sweatpants can stay on. It's one thing to be*

underwear kissing, but naked together? I mean, it's Carter— nope, it's Hey Baby. This is fine. Tomorrow morning it's Carter, tonight it's me, and Baby, and whatever we want. I move my hand to his hair, and he starts kissing down my sternum. *This is new.*

His fingers find the strap of my bra and he starts to slide it down my shoulder. My breath catches. *Okay, I like where this is going.* He kisses across my chest and down to my bra. *Is he taking my bra off?* He starts to slide the cup of my bra down, kissing the top of my breast. I run my fingers through the back of his hair. His fingers float along my breast, tugging the cup of my bra down further until I'm exposed. He gently cups me in his hand and glides his fingers over my nipple. I feel a whimper slip past my lips.

"Your skin is so soft," he whispers against my chest.

As he kisses further down my breast, his hand sneaks behind me and unhooks my bra. *Yep, it's coming off.* He slides the bra off and gently drops it off the edge of the bed.

"Fuck," he whispers as he takes me in for a moment. *I am topless. In bed. With Carter. Nope. Baby. It's just me and Baby.* But I'm still self conscious because someone is seeing me exposed and vulnerable. Even if it's Baby, even if it's Carter, this is new for me, and I'm a little nervous that I'm not good enough for Carter or Baby.

He leans back down and his mouth glides back over my breast, his breath is warm against my skin, and he finds my nipple. It sends a jolt through my body. My fingers grip in his hair. His tongue is grazing the tip, and he's gently kissing, and, oh my God, I can't think. His other hand slides up and finds my other breast, and his mouth trails kisses over to the other side. I think I might be overheating. I suddenly need to know if you can die from too much desire. He continues to kiss and lick as his other hand slides down my stomach, until it reaches the lace border of my panties. He pauses there for a second, and I know he's waiting to see if I protest. *Am I protesting?* This is a line, a line we can't come back from, but I don't think I care. His fingers continue onward and I guess I'm not protesting. They glide slowly over my panties, and I think they might be damp. I'm a little worried he's going to notice. The tips of his fingers skim along the cotton slowly as he sweeps them gently up and down, rubbing in just the right spot. It feels like time is slowing down. *I want more.* The next time he sweeps his fingers up they find the edge of my panties, and he eases them inside. His finger slides along the slickness.

Oh.

My.

God.

His hand is in my panties. There's no way this is happening right now. I'm having a sex dream.

"Is this for me?" he whispers to me as he glides his finger back and forth through my wetness. I gasp.

"Yes." It's all I can manage to get out. My brain has officially left the building and all I can think about is how good this feels

"That's so fucking hot." *It is?* He continues slowly running his fingers back and forth across my sensitive skin as his mouth finds its way back to mine. *Holy shit.* My whole body is alive. I can't think, and I'm not sure if I'm breathing. I let out a quiet moan into his mouth. He breaks our kiss for just a moment.

"God, I love your sounds." Then his mouth is back on mine, he's kissing me intensely as his fingers pick up the pace. My entire body tightens, and I can feel something amazing building. I dig the tips of my fingers into his skin, and I hold my breath for just a moment until I feel a release more intense than I've ever felt before.

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

Those hands. Those are the ones I want touching me. That tongue is the one I want to taste, to run along my body, to invade my thoughts. I lie back on the bed, no rigidity left in my muscles. Our mouths part, and I can see him smile in the glow of the television. His smile is beauty, and light, and a million other things I can't think of because that was amazing. I trail my fingers down his stomach, slowly, lower, until they reach the waistband of his sweatpants. I can see he's excited, and I want to make him feel the way he made me feel. He reaches his hand onto mine, gentle, and he looks me in the eyes.

"You don't have to." *But I want to. But maybe he doesn't want me to? Maybe he's not ready? Maybe he thinks I'm not? Maybe we're not ready for where this could go when we're both naked.*

"Okay." That's all I say, because I don't want to push him further than he wants. His phone lights up and he looks over at it. A moment later, he's grabbing his shirt and reaching into his pants to adjust himself. Suddenly the

python is gone. *What? Did he just tuck it away? Is that a thing guys can do? Just hide it like that?* Suddenly, I wonder how many hidden erections I didn't know about in my lifetime. He heads towards the door. "Where are you going?" *Is he leaving?*

"I ordered a pizza. It's at the front door."

"You ordered pizza?"

"You didn't get dinner, so I ordered on my phone while we were talking." *Oh.*

"That was really thoughtful." He opens the door enough to snake his way through and I'm very aware that I'm topless in my panties on his bed. I go to the drawer of his old clothes that sort of fit me. I grab a t-shirt and pull it on. Now that he's gone, the cold from the room seeps in, and I climb under his blankets. They smell like him, and I breathe them in deeply.

Carter cracks the door a moment later just enough to squeeze back through. He's got a pizza, some Cokes, and napkins. He sits on the bed back in the spot he was before and opens the box for me. The pizza is still hot. *God, he's the best.* We lay in bed and eat too much pizza while we watch something that won't give me nightmares. The receipt falls off the stack of napkins and onto my lap. I look down. It's more than twelve dollars, and I think he might be the best guy I know. I fall asleep on his chest while he finishes the movie.

I wake the next morning as he shifts in bed and turns his back towards me. Memories of last night start playing in my head and I move close enough to him that I can put my arms around him. I can feel the warmth of his torso on me. I gently run my finger tips down the ripple of his abs until they find his sweatpants. He's awake, I can tell by his breathing. I want to trail my fingers down lower. *I'll just try. If he stops me, no big deal.* I slide them down, gently over his stiffness until I reach the base. His hand reaches out and touches mine, stopping me.

"Hey, Baby, you want some help with this?" I say in a sultry voice.

"You don't have to."

It's the same thing he said last night. *Does he think I feel obligated? Is that what it is?* I shift up so I'm close to his ear and I can whisper. "I want to make you feel good."

He takes a breath in, and I slide my hand out from under his. I run my fingertips along his length until my whole hand is cupping him through the fabric, and I gently rub my hand up and down. His breathing changes, slower,

deeper. I'm trying not to be tentative, but I don't feel very confident.

"Mmm..." *That's good, right?* I've never done this before, but I don't want him to know that. I'm not sure why I don't want him to know, maybe that's something for another day. Maybe today we just focus on him, his breathing, his sounds, the way his hips are gently shifting beside me as he rocks into my hand.

I continue my slow caress, up and down, steadily teasing. My fingers reach the tip and he lets out a quiet moan. *Okay, I think he likes that.* I continue my movement, gentle and careful, rising and falling over the ridge of the tip. He lets out another quiet moan and I think I might be doing okay. His breathing turns husky, slow, deliberate. Sometimes he inhales sharply. *Is that good?* I'm trying to keep it soft, a slow tantalizing pace to get him as turned on as I was.

"Tell me if you don't like it," I whisper to him. I want to make him feel good. I don't want this to be a bad experience for him, but I'm also unsure how to do it. I need him to communicate with me, but talking about this kind of thing is hard for him— fine it's hard for both of us.

"I like it." His voice is different, straining a little. I trail my fingers back up to the band of his sweatpants, teasing along the edge. *Am I going for it?* His breathing changes and I think he's excited, so I slide my hand down into his boxers. He takes a sharp breath in as my hand finds his bare skin. *Oh my God. Is this big?* I don't know normal sizes, but I can't get my hand all the way around it. I start gently moving my hand up and down, and he shifts a little. *I think he's into it.* When my fingers reach the tip he lets out another moan. His skin is satin under my hands, but he's so hard. I linger there for a while keeping a languid pace. I want to hear that moan again. I want to make him make that sound. I want to hear all his sounds and I want to be the reason he makes them. I want those sounds to be mine.

"Baby, if you keep doing that we're going to have a mess." He sounds out of breath. *What does that mean? Ooh! That! Oh. Is he embarrassed? Does he think I'll be grossed out by him? I don't care, it's Car— nope. Baby.* I'm not sure how to communicate to him that nothing that happens here is going to bother me, that I like him for all that he is and all he'll ever be. He's my confidence and my happy place. He's my everything, and if that comes with a mess sometimes, so be it. We'll clean up the mess together and eat pancakes like normal. I'd never try to shame him. Not for this, not for anything, and I know he'd never try to shame me.

"So we'll clean it up," I whisper as I nip at his ear lobe. It's not beautiful or eloquent, it's simple, to the point. It doesn't matter, I'm here with you in this moment, messy or clean, I'm yours. I shift over so I can kiss him on the neck as I stroke him slowly. He groans a little. *Okay, I'm pretty sure he's into this.* I start kissing lazily down his neck, pouty open mouth kisses and I gently swipe my tongue out over his skin. I want to taste every piece of him. I reach his pulse point, and I kiss him a little harder.

"Mmmm..." I speed my pace up just a little and his hand finds my hip. He grips onto me. I swear I feel his heart racing. His fingertips press into the flesh of my thigh. I focus my attention on the tip since he seems to like that, and he grips tighter. I keep kissing him, and listening to his heavy breathing. He's sounding more out of breath, like he's running a marathon, and we're about to cross a finish line. *Oh my god, I think he's going to— am I getting turned on by this?* The feel of his length in my hand, the ragged intake of his breath, knowing that I'm turning him on this much is starting a fire inside of me. "Fuck." It comes out as a whisper. *Okay, yes, this is good.* I speed up just a little more, and I swear he holds his breath for just a moment as he grips my thigh tightly. I feel his body go rigid and then he groans as I feel him pulsing beneath my hand. I keep rubbing him through it. "Oh, fuck." He's still out of breath. He releases my hip and grabs my hand with his. I stop as he catches his breath. I think he needs some reassurance that I'm into this. He didn't make me feel weird or awkward and I don't want him to feel those things either. I want him to feel like this is okay, that we're okay, and the next few moments or days will be the same as they've always been. We're still us. We'll always be us. We're just us with new sounds and hands in places they weren't before.

"Baby, that was so hot." I kiss him on the cheek and he pulls me tighter. We lay there not moving for a few moments while he catches his breath. I can still feel his heart racing. I tighten my arms around him, so tight it almost hurts. I want him to know that everything is fine. When his breathing calms he turns towards me.

"Morning, Baby."

"Morning, Baby."

He kisses me gently on the lips.

"You want pancakes?"

"Always." He kisses me again.

"Let me change and I'll make you some." He hops out of bed and

grabs a change of clothes on his way into the bathroom. I'm a little proud of myself. *I got Carter off– nope, Baby. God damn it.*

Carter makes me pancakes like always and he sneaks kisses until we hear footsteps coming down the stairs and then we part. I keep looking up at him and he keeps glancing over at me. I think these are the best pancakes I've ever had.

Chapter 9

Present Day

“Carter, can we take your Rover?” Nico asks as we all gather at the driveway.

“Uh, yeah, but there isn’t room for everyone.”

“I can drive if we need a second car,” Nate offers. We all split up into two cars. I try to peel off into Nate’s car, but Arthur wants to see Carter’s Rover.

“Shotgun!” Arthur calls, as we walk over to Carter’s SUV. Audrey follows us. *Thank God.* I need someone to talk to Arthur so he and Carter don’t get too talkative. Carter opens the door for me like he always used to, and I feel awkward. I haven’t been in his car since I left. He’d only had it a short time before that. I climb in the back seat and he closes the door. Audrey climbs in the back seat with me.

As I look through the front windshield, my eye catches on navy blue and red tassels hanging from the rear view mirror. My stomach turns. Those were from our college graduation. This car was his graduation present. I hung those up there right after the ceremony. We were laughing, and happy, and so excited about the future we had planned together. I want to jump from this moving car right now.

Don’t cry.

But I think I might anyway. *Shit.* I need something to distract me, because I’m staring, and all I can think about is us, and graduation, and college, and damn it, I feel sick. It hurts so freaking bad right now.

“You okay?”

“Hmm?” I look over and Audrey is staring. Carter and Arthur are talking horsepower and features as we make our way downtown.

“You don’t look so good.” She reaches over and grabs my hand. “You’re not pregnant are you?”

My mouth falls in shock. “Audrey!”

She starts laughing. "You should see your face right now."

"What's funny?" Carter asks as he looks at us in the rear view mirror.

"I just asked Maddie if she's knocked up." Audrey is still laughing. Carter swerves for a second, then corrects.

"Damn, eyes on the road, dude," Arthur says.

"You're what?!" He keeps shifting his eyes from the road to the rear view.

"Sweet Jesus, Audrey, look what you did! Now it's going to spread around the whole family." She still thinks it's funny.

"I'm just joking, relax. You should see your faces right now though."

"So you're not?" Carter asks.

"No! Oh my God, Audrey! That's not funny."

"It's a little funny."

Carter arrives downtown and parks the car. I guess Audrey was a good distraction after all because I'm not sick with sadness anymore. Carter opens the door and our eyes meet.

"You're not?" His voice is quiet and serious.

"No," I say firmly and quietly. "Audrey just thinks she's funny."

"I can go get you a test. I'll be really quick. No one needs to know. There's a bathroom at the coffee shop, we can just tell them we're getting a coffee."

"Carter, I don't need a test. I'm fine."

"You're sure?" *God I'm going to kill Audrey.*

"Very, very sure. Audrey was just making a bad joke." Carter sighs and I feel like I can see some panic leave his body. "Everything is fine." I pat him on the shoulder because I'm not sure how else to comfort him now that we have boundaries.

"Everything okay?" Audrey asks.

"Yeah, Maddie's just having a moment." *I'm having a moment?*

"I'm fine. You broke Carter for a minute."

"Well, let's go get some crab sticks!" She reaches for my hand. I pull away.

"Oh no, I'm definitely mad at you."

"Me? What did I do?" Her face looks completely confused as if she has no idea what she just did.

"You started a rumor that I was pregnant."

"I was just making a joke."

"Some things you can't unsay." She grabs my hand anyway.

"Oh, I'm aware." I think she's referring to the things I said to Carter before I left, things I can't take back or unsay. "I'm sorry I accidentally started a rumor. Can we get food?"

"Fine. I still love you."

There's a big street downtown that's been blocked off for Street Eats. The booths line both sides of the street. Some of them are simple tents, some of them are elaborate booths with fancy signs. The middle of the street is filled with tables and chairs to sit and eat at.

"Donuts?" Audrey asks us. They're fancy brioche donuts in fun flavors. She brings a limited supply and always runs out before the end.

"Donuts," Carter and I repeat together. Street Eats is a whole thing with us. We have a strategy to get all the things we want without having to wait in the longest lines, or miss out because they ran out.

"Donuts? For dinner?" Arthur asks. *Oh yeah, he doesn't know the strategy.* "I saw some pizza over there. That looks good." *Oh no. I'm going to have to explain our strategy.*

"You can't get pizza first," Audrey explains, "the line is too long right now. You have to come back when it's shorter."

"There's lines everywhere." Arthur seems skeptical about our strategy.

"We eat our meal backwards," Carter tells him.

"Dessert first because they'll run out of donuts and homemade ice cream before the end of the night, then pizza because the lines have died down, and finally appetizers because those never run out and by then people are trying to find desserts."

"I just want pizza. I don't want all of that before oysters." *Oh yeah, oysters.* My stomach turns a little.

"I'll go with Arthur for pizza, and I'll meet up with you after." He's my boyfriend, I should go with him.

"You're going to be in that line half the night." Audrey seems disappointed.

"I thought we were staying an hour and then heading to oysters." *Ugh, I definitely want to stay longer than an hour.*

"Let's just go see how long the pizza line is." Arthur and I start to walk towards pizza, but we're heading in two different directions. "It's this way."

"I saw pizza over here." Oh, *that* pizza. He means Gino's. We don't

eat Gino's.

"Oh, we don't like that pizza."

"But it looks fancy."

"We don't eat at Gino's."

"Why?"

"Because when we were kids Gino was really rude to Carter's mom."

"So you don't eat there... because he was rude?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"I don't remember, it's been like twenty years."

"You don't eat there because someone said something rude you can't remember twenty years ago?"

"Yes." It sounds kinda dumb when he's saying it.

"Well, I want the fancy pizza." He starts off in the direction of Gino's and I reluctantly trail behind. Gino's booth is much nicer than other booths. It's made of wood that's been charred with a torch a little and has a fancy lit up sign. They have two giant lanterns next to their booth. It actually looks really cool. There's less of a line over here, but it's still long. We stand in the back and I look around to see if anyone I know can see me. Mrs. Manuszak will definitely tell my mom I was in the Gino's line.

People start to fill in behind us. Arthur takes a step forward and bumps into the guy in front of him. The guy turns around, and his eyes light up when he sees Arthur.

"Hey!" The guy seems to know Arthur. He's taller than us, a big beefy dude in a baseball hat.

"What are you doing here?"

"My girlfriend dragged me to this stupid thing."

"Tell me about it," Arthur says as he rolls his eyes. *Uh, I'm right here.* I'm terribly offended at Arthur agreeing with this guy.

"A bunch of us are heading over to this bar in a few minutes if you want to come. There's half priced drinks and they have clams and oysters." Arthur's eyes light up.

"Who else is here?"

"My girlfriend's friends, and a bunch of the guys, Gator, Bodie, Fitzy, and Armpit." *They have a friend named Armpit??*

"Armpit's here?!" Arthur seems excited about this gentleman named Armpit.

"You're coming, right?"

"I'm definitely coming." *Ugh, I am not looking forward to an evening with Armpit and the gang.*

"Cool, we can get some clams, and then *get you some clam.*" He's laughing and elbowing Arthur. *Gross. Again, I'm right here. Does he realize we're together? Possibly not because Arthur didn't introduce us.* Arthur turns to me.

"You're fine if I go with Kegger and the guys right?" *Kegger? This guy is Kegger?* Part of me is relieved that someone else wants to go get stomach sick with him. Maybe our moms can make their fancy stomach illness gift basket afterward.

"Sure."

Kegger makes it to the front of the line as he and Arthur catch up on Armpit and the gang and their misadventures. Apparently Armpit is a CPA now. *Huh. Interesting.* And Kegger got his driver's license suspended... again. Arthur doesn't seem surprised by this. Arthur and I reach the front of the line and get our pizza. It's a deep dish, with a rosette of ricotta and spicy honey drizzled over the top. *Ugh, it's going to taste like betrayal.* I'm pretty sure I have a legitimate sneer on my face as we walk away. We head to the tables and chairs and find seats. Arthur sits down at the table as I hear a familiar voice behind me.

"What are you eating?" I freeze. *Maybe if I don't move he won't see me.* After a moment I turn to see Nico walking towards me followed by everyone else.

"Uhh... it's pizza."

"Gino's pizza. We don't eat Gino's pizza."

I glance over at Arthur. "It's been twenty years, Nico. Gino is probably dead by now."

"As long as that name is on that restaurant we will not eat there." Nico grabs my paper plate and dumps my pizza onto Arthur's plate. "We hold onto grudges in this family, Maddie. We hold on tight until they turn to diamonds and then we wear them proudly." I roll my eyes, but I'm relieved. I didn't really want to eat Gino's.

"Ew, gross, Gino's. We hate them," Audrey says as she walks up hand in hand with Bennett. Audrey, who wasn't even around back then, joined our Gino's hate without question. *Can I please just find a male Audrey?*

"Were you about to eat Gino's?" My brother asks. *Oh good, everyone*

saw.

"We don't eat Gino's," Nate adds, in case I wasn't already aware.

"Okay, I'm heading out," Arthur announces as he stands up. Apparently he's hoovered down both slices of pizza in an effort to ditch us quicker.

"You guys are leaving already?" Audrey asks, sounding disappointed.

"He's leaving."

"My old drinking buddies are here. We're going to happy hour." I look over at Carter as I tell everyone about the new plan for the evening. *I can't wait to see his face.*

"Yes, Arthur's friends are in town. We bumped into *Kegger*." Carter's eyes go wide. "Who else did *Kegger* say was in town?" I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling as I watch Carter's face when Arthur starts to list them.

"Bodie, Fitzzy, Gator." *Huh, I didn't think Carter's eyes could get wider.* "And Armpit." Carter slaps a hand over his mouth and I know it's to keep from laughing. He clears his throat, and makes eye contact with me.

"So you and, uh... *Armpit* and the guys are going drinking?" He can barely make it through the sentence.

"Armpit is a CPA," I tell Carter while trying to keep a straight face.

"Uh, wow, that's... something."

"Okay, I'll see you later." Arthur pats me on the back and takes off down the street. Carter walks over to me and lowers his voice.

"Maddie, I have many questions."

"Same."

"Why do they call him Armpit?"

"The origin of Armpit is unknown to me to this day."

"Does he smell like armpits? Does he have weird armpits? Does he not have armpits?"

"He has to have them, Carter, he has shoulders."

"Is his legal name Armpit? Do his business cards say Armpit?"

"Well, they'd have to, how else would you know what to call him? Also, Armpit seems to be the most together one of this group."

"Maddie, your boyfriend has a friend named Armpit."

"Is it something dirty?" Carter and I make our weirded out faces at each other.

"You think Armpit can do my taxes?"

"I mean he could, but would you want him to?"

"He said he's going drinking with his drinking buddies."

"Right?"

"Wasn't he judging us this morning for drinking at parties in college?"

"Right?! It's totally fine for him to go drinking with Kegger and Gator, but it's not fine for you and I to have a couple of drinks at a party. What is that?"

Am I trash talking my boyfriend with Carter right now? That's probably not cool, right?

"It's really weird, Mads." He hands me a donut off his plate. I recognize it as the churro donut with the vanilla bean filling. My favorite. He holds up his donut and we clink them together like glasses before we take a bite and stare at the direction Arthur went in.

"Thanks for getting my donut."

"The baby was hungry."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't."

We go to the ice cream booth next, like we usually do, and enjoy our cold sundaes before the sun goes down. It's too cold for ice cream after dark, especially when the fog rolls in. We gather at the tables to enjoy our sundaes, lanterns scattered on every one in different shapes and sizes. When the sun goes down, they'll all turn on. I love the glow of the fake candles at night. They used to be real candles when we were kids, but over the years they switched them to the kind that light up on their own. You don't see people running around to light them anymore, and there are less fires.

"Look, it's Asa and Kiley," Nico says, nudging me as he goes to sit down.

"Who?" I look over and see Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield walking around greeting the crowd. Children gather around them, they smile and answer questions. Little girls look at Mrs. Butterfield's dress.

"That's not their names," I tell Nico.

"It's Becky and Skylar," Carter says. We're all laughing, and I'm happy I stayed. These people, this event, the food, this is what I want this week.

"I am so glad Kegger and Armpit got me out of going to the oyster bar."

“Why didn’t you just say no?” Carter asks.

“Aren’t you supposed to compromise in relationships? He comes to our lame childhood festival and I go to happy hour and stare at some oysters while I try not to vomit?”

“Except he hasn’t really come to the festival,” Nico reminds me.

“Well, no, but as everyone pointed out, I shouldn’t expect him to.” I spoon another bite of sundae in my mouth. “God, this hot fudge is so good.”

“It comes from a can,” my brother says as he’s eating his caramel sundae.

“No way this came from a can. It’s too good. They make their own or something. They definitely make their own caramel sauce.”

“You can’t make hot fudge,” Nico chimes in.

“You can make anything, just ask our moms.”

“How much homemade Gatorade do you think there will be when we get home?” Bennett asks the group.

“Probably a case.” I assume our moms will fully commit to homemade Gatorade. There will probably be taste testing.

“They’re not actually making Gatorade are they?” Nate asks. He sounds skeptical, but he shouldn’t be. Our moms practically raised him, he knows how they are.

“I don’t know, Carter got them all excited about artisanal tummy gift baskets,” Bennett reminds him.

“Arthur’s going to need one after he eats all of those oysters,” Carter says.

“Ugh, I still can’t do oysters.” My stomach turns just at the thought of it.

“We were so sick.”

“But we were still taking care of each other.” I laugh at the memory of the two of us, pathetic on the bathroom floor.

“Were you really?” Audrey asks.

“Yes, luckily we were on opposite vomit schedules, so one of us was fine while the other was sick. We were getting each other water from the sink. I held his hair back.” Carter laughs.

“I remember the opposite, me holding your hair back.”

“And we were rubbing each other’s backs.”

“We were so pathetic.”

“Could have used an artisanal gift basket.”

“I just remember finding you two on the floor and thinking you were dead for a second,” Audrey tells us. I laugh pretty hard at the visual.

“Did you really think we were dead?”

“For like three entire seconds, I definitely thought you were dead.” She takes a bite of her sundae. “I did feel like you two got closer after that, though.” It was the summer between freshman and sophomore year of college. We may have been closer for other reasons.

“No, these two were always weirdly close,” Bennett says.

“How did that work when you were dating people? Were they okay with how close you were?” Audrey has never asked that before, and I guess we’ve never discussed it with her either.

“I took a break from dating for a while in college,” Carter tells her.

“I had pretty much given up on dating by senior year of college.”

“What about before that?” Audrey has some good questions tonight. I glance over at Carter and he has some caramel from his sundae on his lower lip and my brain goes blank for a second. I stare at that caramel thinking about how it tasted on his lips years ago, and I almost forget to answer. His tongue peeks out from his lips and the caramel disappears. *Ugh that tongue.*

“Uhh... I went on dates in college. Carter went out with a few girls. I wouldn’t say I had a boyfriend or he had a girlfriend in college.”

“What about high school?” Audrey spoons more of her sundae in her mouth.

“I had a boyfriend for a while in high school. Carter had a girlfriend at the end of senior year, and they were long distance for the summer and the beginning of college. I think they broke up in October? November?” They were definitely broken up long before December because that’s when we started kissing.

“You and Ty were broken up by graduation,” Carter adds.

“Ty and I were broken up before prom.”

“Yes, because you two went to prom together.” Audrey is here to win Maddie and Carter trivia. “So why did you and Ty break up?” *Ugh.* I never told them why. I shove more ice cream in my mouth. They’re staring at me.

“Fine, we’re all adults now. He was pressuring me for sex, and I wasn’t ready.” I look down at my sundae and scoop more in my mouth so I can avoid seeing their reactions.

“Wait, what?!” I may have never told Carter about this.

“You two should have handled that,” Bennett says, waving a finger

between Carter and Nate.

“What was I supposed to do?” Nate asks.

“I’m literally finding out about it right now.” Carter points his spoon at me. “You told me you didn’t like him anymore.”

“I *didn’t* like him anymore... on account of the pressure.”

“You should have told me about that.” Carter almost seems mad.

“You don’t tell your guy friends that your boyfriend is pressuring you for sex,” Audrey tells him. “You tell your girl friends.”

“Thank you!”

“Maddie didn’t have girl friends. She wasn’t really a girly girl.”

“Maddie was one of the guys in high school,” Nate tells her. I look over at Audrey.

“Let me tell you what it was like being best friends with Carter in high school. He was just as good at football in high school as he was in college. Every girl wanted him. Girls would try to be friends with me just to get to him, and some of them were straight up mean to me because they were jealous that he gave me the attention they wanted.”

“You just had a hard time making female friends,” Carter says.

“I just had a hard time finding a friend who didn’t want to bang you.” He almost chokes on his ice cream.

“That’s not how it was.” Carter’s acting like I’m making this up. I look over at Audrey.

“That’s absolutely how it was. Girls only wanted to sleep with Carter, boys didn’t ask me out.” I point to Nate and Carter. “I had these two idiots and basically no one else.”

“No one asked you out because Carter threatened to beat up anyone who did,” Nate says casually as he takes a bite of his ice cream. My jaw drops. I look over at Carter.

“Uh, Lucy, I think you have some ‘splainin’ to do.” Carter starts shoveling ice cream in his mouth.

“This is a really good sundae. Isn’t it, Maddie?” I open my mouth to talk and he shoves in some ice cream. I swallow it quickly. Suddenly things are starting to make sense.

“This is why Michael Van Der Horn said he’d dance with me at the homecoming dance and then didn’t. He wouldn’t even make eye contact with me anymore!”

“Michael Van Der Horn was an asshole,” Carter says.

“I wouldn’t know, he wouldn’t talk to me after that!” I look over at Nate. “Is this why I didn’t get asked to dances?” Nate says yes as Carter says no. Carter shoots Nate a look. I look over at Audrey.

“I got asked to two dances in all of high school. Two.”

“I took you to any dance you wanted to go to.” Carter leans over to steal some of my sundae because his is getting low. I smack his hand away. Normally I would let him, but I’m a little irritated.

“That is not the same! I wanted to go with someone who actually liked me.”

“I liked you, we were friends.”

“I wanted to go with someone who wasn’t a friend! I wanted an actual boyfriend to take me. Someone who wanted to dance with me.”

“I liked dancing with you, you never complained when I stepped on your feet.”

“Carter. Blanche. Sophia. Rose.”

“Now you’re just naming Golden Girls.”

“I cannot believe you did this to me.”

“Ty still asked you out,” Audrey points out.

“Yeah, every once in a while some guy wouldn’t believe that Carter would actually beat him up,” Nate says.

“Because you didn’t actually beat people up,” I say to him.

“We didn’t have to. We’re big guys, you just stand really tall over them and they get scared. Problem solved.” Nate seems pretty proud of this.

“This *problem* was my social life which was only a problem because you two goons were towering over people intimidating them.”

“Guys in high school aren’t looking to date, Maddie, they’re looking for something else,” Carter informs me.

“Well, I wouldn’t know that, would I? Having been dateless most of high school, I never got to find out.”

“Look at what happened with Ty.”

“I thought Ty was the exception not the rule.” I look over at Audrey. “Audrey and I are getting pizza.” Carter and Bennett start to get up from their chairs. “Alone.” I walk away without waiting for Audrey. She catches up to me before we get to the good pizza booth.

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad.” I’m a little mad. We get in the line for Pelican Pizza. The superior pizza place. Which is still pretty long.

“What did he say to you when we got out of the car?” I give her a look because that was definitely her fault.

“He offered to discretely buy me a pregnancy test and go with me to a coffee shop to take it.”

She smiles and shakes her head. “That boy loves you.”

“He was my best friend.”

“Was? Have I moved up in the rankings?”

“I would say after today you’ve both moved down. Nico seems like a good candidate for best friendship at this point.”

“He was just trying to protect you. High school boys are the worst. There’s like five good ones and they all get snatched up.”

“I only needed one.” Okay, I might be a little upset about this. “How was I supposed to find my person if he was scaring them all off? I’m almost twenty seven years old and I literally have my first real boyfriend because Carter torpedoed my high school dating career.”

“He had good intentions.”

“It doesn’t matter what the intentions were. I was so supportive of his football career, and he repays me by running off all my dating prospects?” Audrey looks over my shoulder.

“I’m going to let you two talk.” *Great.* “She’s a little mad,” she says to Carter as she walks away.

“I know.” *Ugh, of course he knows.* He stands behind me and rests his chin on my shoulder. I know what he’s doing. This is the Carter sweet talk where he tries to charm his way back into my good graces. It’s not going to work. “Mads. Madigan. Maddie cakes.” He flutters his eyelashes against my cheek.

“No.” He wraps his arms around my shoulders, and holds out a caramel brownie. He’s warm and soft and all the things I remember. He smells like Heaven and he feels even better. I used to love when he held me like this.

“I got you this kermel brownie.”

“No. I’m mad at you.” I take the brownie anyway.

“But I have kermel on my fings.” He wiggles his fingers at me. I try to stifle my laugh, but I can’t.

“This is bigger than a brownie.”

“Two brownies?”

“Carter!” He hugs me tighter.

“I didn’t do it to hurt you.”

“But you did hurt me.”

“Maddie, these were not quality guys. I spent a lot of time in locker rooms. Guys say a lot of things, and the things they were saying weren’t about falling in love and getting married.” I sigh, because I know he’s being honest with me. “If any one of them actually cared about you I would have been fine with it.”

“What about college?”

“What about college?” *There it is.*

“Tell me what you did.”

“Fine. It was known to the team that they were to keep their hands off you.”

“Carter!”

“It was for your own good. Now eat your brownie and love me again.”

“This brownie is tainted with your lies.”

“It’s tainted with love.” I laugh.

“It’s still tainted!”

“Maddie, I was protecting you from guys who wanted to grope you.”

“Maybe I wanted to get groped.”

“Did you?”

“I don’t know! Maybe I would have wanted it.”

“As I recall you got groped plenty in college.” *Uh oh.* We’ve taken this conversation too far, and now I don’t know what to say about... the groping. We’ve never talked about it.

“Brownie accepted, conversation over.” I take a bite. If I keep shoving food in my mouth to avoid talking to everyone, I’m going to gain ten pounds before this week is over.

“That’s what I thought.” He lifts his head off my shoulder and puts it on top of my head. That’s probably a better angle for him since he’s so damn tall. Arthur is the same size as me, so he could never stand like this. The line continues forward, and I keep waiting for Carter to let go, but he doesn’t. I know I should say something, but damn I don’t want to. I missed this. I missed him. I missed us. And at the end of this week when I leave I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again. Do I go back to avoiding him? Avoiding everyone? Missing every family gathering as time marches on and I miss out on life? When I’m back home and all of this is over, am I going to be

devastated all over again? Come Monday morning when I'm sitting at my desk, am I going to be hurting over Carter like I was when I started working there? I know it's a bad idea, but I haven't felt this good in four years, and I can't let go of it. I want to freeze time in this moment and stand here forever. Just me and him, and the prospect of good pizza dangling like a carrot in front of us. I know this is going to hurt when it's over, and I guess I don't even care because I let him keep his arms around me.

We reach the front of the line and order. Carter pulls out his wallet and pays. I don't even remember what we got, because all I can think about is the fact that his arms aren't around me and they may never be again. We load our arms full of pizza and head back to the table as the last bit of sun fades from the sky and the Edison bulbs overhead turn on. The lanterns on the table light up, and so do all the ones at the booths. Carter says something to me that I don't quite catch as we're unloading on the table. No one else is there.

"Hmm?" I look over at him, but I'm still not focusing on the present.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He's staring and I look away so he won't see my eyes.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you." Of course he thinks I'm still upset. What else would he think?

"It's not that. Everything's fine. I'm fine." *I'm not fine.*

"That usually means you're not fine." *Guilty.*

Audrey and Bennett return loaded down with crab sticks. Nico and Nate return with drinks. I'd completely forgotten about drinks. Everyone spreads the food out in front of us family style and they all start digging in. I don't reach for anything, I don't talk, I don't move. I take in the moment, because this is my last Street Eats. I'm not coming back. I can't. I have to give this thing with Arthur a real shot, and I can't do that if I'm missing Carter's arms around me. I feel like an addict who just got a taste, and all I can think about is wanting more. Someone sets a plate down in front of me, and starts piling food on.

"Spicy sauce or garlic sauce?" Audrey holds both containers up.

"Both." She dumps some of each out on my plate and I grab a crab stick, still hot from the deep fryer. I burn my mouth and I don't even give a shit. I just feel numb inside. I can feel Carter's eyes on me from across the table, but I can't look at him. He can read me like a book. He'll know what I'm thinking.

"You've got that look in your eye again." I turn to look at Audrey.

“What?”

“That’s the same look you had on your face in the car.”

“I’m just tired.”

“Carter must be tired, too, then.” I turn towards Carter without thinking. His eyes are full of pain, and there's a plate full of food he’s not touching. And, fuck, it tears my heart out. Everyone keeps talking and eating and laughing. We’re both just sitting there. The booths start to pack up to leave. Everyone is full.

“You guys want to go chill on the beach?” Nate asks. Chill is right, I’m getting cold.

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I need to just sit on the beach and think. We get up to leave. Carter and I head towards his car, and Audrey starts to peel off with the guys.

“I’m going back with them. See you at the house.” *Really, Audrey?* I look over at Carter and for a moment I contemplate going with everyone else, but I think it might hurt him more so we keep walking towards his SUV. He drapes his jacket over my shoulders.

“Thank you,” I say without looking at him. We reach the car and he opens the door like always. I start to get in. He stops me.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, you didn’t do anything.”

“No, I did. You gave me a boundary and I didn’t listen. No more touching.” *Why does it hurt so badly to hear him say that?* I made the rule. I made it to avoid this feeling in my chest right now. I take a step forward and rest my head on his chest. He wraps his arms around me. *Just one last taste.* We stand there for too long, cold, damp air chilling us. “Maddie.”

“I know. No more touching.” *After this.* I want to kiss him so bad it hurts. I try desperately to memorize how this feels, his scent, the way his arms curl around me, the way his shirt feels on my finger tips. If it's the last time I'm going to savor it.

Eventually we let go, the cold air chills me, and I pull his jacket around me tighter. I hop up into his SUV and he closes the door. It feels so final, like he's closing the door to the closeness we used to have. No more touching, no more us. We don’t talk on the way home. I don’t know what to say, and I don’t think I could talk if I wanted to.

We head out to join the others on the beach when we get home. I give Carter his jacket back and grab my throw blanket before we go outside. The

boys have the fire lit. I wrap my blanket around my shoulders.

“What happened to you two?” Nate asks. “I thought you were right behind us.”

“Carter got lost.”

“I did not get lost.” He makes a face at me. “We took the scenic route.” We didn’t, but we spent way too much time hugging in the street.

“You both look less tired,” Audrey says quietly to me. “Must have been a refreshing drive.”

The boys start talking about work, and I sit there staring at the fire, thinking about what I’m going to do. Maybe I could come back for a couple of events a year. Something small, baby steps. Nothing where I’d have to spend this much time with Carter. Maybe if we’re around each other less then we could be normal friends who are not weirdly close.

“Hey, it’s Arthur!” Nico calls out.

“Nice of you to join us!” Bennett adds. Arthur takes the empty chair across the fire from me, glassy eyes shining in the firelight. He’s got a bottle of vodka from the house, and a cup.

“You guys hiding the good shit from me?” Arthur asks the group.

“The Macallan?” Nico asks. “That’s our dads’ bottle. They probably hid it.” I’d hide it too if someone was drinking my expensive scotch.

“Arthur, did you have fun with your drinking buddies?” Nate asks.

“Yeah, it was good catching up with everyone. Armpit’s really turned his life around.” Carter looks over at me, and I know that face means he wants me to find out all about Armpit and tell him later. I smile and nod, because how can I not tell him all about it?

“Audrey, you look really beautiful tonight,” Arthur tells her. *Well that’s nice.* Everyone seems to be getting along. Maybe that’s all we needed, just to spend some time doing our own thing.

“Oh, thank you.”

“Maybe you can teach her how to do her hair and make up.” He gestures at me. *Wow. Okay.* “Is your hair going to go back to normal when we go home?” I don’t even know what to say to him. All I can do is curls at the coast. If it’s straight it just becomes a tangled mess. Audrey leans over to me.

“I like your beach hair.”

“Thank you.” It comes out quiet.

“You know, my last girlfriend used to put a lot of effort into how she

looked. She'd wear nice dresses and make her hair look all nice. Like this one." He gestures at Audrey. "Then she let herself go... and I let her go." He takes a sip of his drink. "You could look pretty if you put some effort into it." *I thought I was putting effort into it.*

"Hey, man, that's not cool," Nico tells him.

"She used to take good care of me too. I mean she's crazy, but she knew how to treat me right. I'm used to getting wined and dined and sixty—"

"Woah! Hey, man, maybe you've had enough to drink."

"I'm just saying, she could treat me a little better, you know? My ex used to clean my apartment. You don't clean my apartment."

"Are you saying you want her to clean your place and then, what? Sleep on your couch? Since clearly you don't share a bed." Carter's getting mad.

"She could go home." Arthur shrugs.

"Okay, I'm done. Someone help this guy to bed before I do it in a less gentle way," Bennett says. Nico stands up. Nate stands up on the other side of Arthur.

"Come on, dude, let's get you to bed before you make a bigger ass of yourself," Nate tells him.

"I'm just saying, she could put more effort in."

"You don't need to talk about her like that." Carter's mad.

"Mr. Football over here is going to act all tough."

"Stop talking and walk away." I've never seen Carter this mad. Nate grabs Arthur's arm, and helps him to his feet.

"Why don't we have a little talk about what's acceptable as we walk into the house?" Nico looks at me. "You okay, Mads?" I press my lips together and nod. Nico and Nate start walking Arthur into the house.

"Careful on those steps, Arthur! They can be really slippery! I'd hate for you to get hurt!" Bennett yells after them. He turns to me. "What the fuck was that?" Bennett is asking me like I have an explanation.

"Are you okay?" Carter's still wound up.

"Does he always talk to you like that?" Audrey is almost as mad as Carter. They're all looking at me, and they all want answers, but I don't know what to say to them. Carter reaches over and touches my arm. I just keep staring at the fire. Apparently I'm not enough for Arthur.

"Don't shut down, talk to us."

"He's made little comments, but nothing like that before. He's drunk."

People say lots of things when they're drunk." I'm sad, and I guess more than a little hurt.

"Hey." Carter's hand is still on my arm and he gives it a squeeze. "You're beautiful and he's an asshole." His voice is low, too low for my brother to hear, loud enough for me to hear. But he always says nice things, and I'm never sure if he's just saying it to make me feel better or if he means it.

"I'm going to bed." I get up from my chair so I can have a good cry on my bed away from everyone. Maybe think about my relationship with Arthur.

"Maddie," Audrey says quietly. I ignore her and start walking through the sand, up the steps, and to the yard. The lanterns are lit up all around the grass and the patio tables. It's beautiful.

"Maddie, wait!" Carter calls out as he rushes to catch up. I turn to look at him.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't do that thing where you just say something nice to make me feel better."

"I don't do that." *He does.* The only time I was sure that he meant what he said was when he said "Hey Baby." Those were the times he was honest and told me what he actually felt.

"You absolutely do that." I turn to walk back to the house. I almost make it to the door when he calls out to me.

"Hey, Baby!" I turn back towards him. He's halfway across the yard, and he's yelling. Thankfully our parents are asleep. A big tree full of lights and lanterns light him up in the yard. "I think you're so beautiful it hurts! Sometimes I see you and I forget to breathe!" My heart squeezes in my chest and I'm definitely going to cry before I make it to my room. This... this is real. This he means. "Now do you believe me?!" I nod. This is the Carter I remember, the one I've been desperate to avoid.

"Goodnight, Carter."

Chapter 10

Freshman Year of College

Spring

Hair: floofed and hosed down. Makeup: heavy, because Audrey says it shows up better in photos. Outfit: ugh. I'm not sure. Audrey invited us to a party at a frat house. The theme is ABC— Anything But Clothes. You have to make an outfit out of anything but clothing. I looked online for inspiration, and the outfits are... small. Very small. It's hard to make clothing out of not clothing. Audrey gave me some tips like don't use a trash bag because you'll be sweating like crazy the whole night, but I was on my own after that. I went to several dollar stores and bought every pack of playing cards I could find, and a roll of duct tape. I'm proud of how my outfit turned out. I made a sort of Roman skirt out of lines of cards, and a top that looks like two poker hands splayed out covering each side of my chest, and a line of cards around my back, like a band on a bra. Oh God, I made a bra and a skirt, didn't I? It's not really a top. And despite the fact that I bought what feels like a thousand packs of cards, my skirt is looking a little... short now that it's on. But I've taped myself into it, so I think I'm committed at this point.

I open the door from Carter's bathroom to his bedroom.

"Hey, Carter, is this skirt long enough?"

"Holy shit, that's what you're wearing?" I look down at my outfit, and back over to him. He's barely wearing anything.

"Says the man literally wearing a grocery bag."

"It was this or a box of beer."

"Where is your shirt?" Not that I mind the view, but he's only wearing bottoms.

"Don't need one."

"You don't need one?"

"Well, clearly you don't either!"

“I made a top!”

“I can see that.”

“Is the skirt long enough in the back?” I turn so he can check the back of the skirt for me.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” He rubs his face with his hands.

“Do you have a problem with my outfit?” I’m a little indignant, I spent a lot of time on it, and I think it looks great. Carter and I don’t fight very often, but I am willing to fight about this.

“No. I just wasn’t emotionally prepared for how many guys I was going to have to hit tonight.” I turn and try to get a look at the back of it, but it's too hard to see.

“Can you see my butt?”

“Your entire ass is hanging out.”

“The whole thing?” I don’t believe him. He’s exaggerating. “Really?”

“I don’t know... the... under part... the under... butt.”

“My under butt is hanging out?” I’m laughing. “They’re butt cheeks, Carter. You can say butt cheeks.” He’s getting a little red in the face like he used to when he would get embarrassed. “Aw, red faced Carter is back. I missed him.” He was gone for a couple of months.

“Shut up.” He turns towards his desk and starts rummaging around inside the drawers.

“Well, I’m out of cards. So my option to make the skirt longer is to take the band off of my back and use it to lengthen the skirt.” Carter stops what he’s doing, turns, and looks at me.

“So pasties and a skirt?”

“No, it’s not pasties, it’s like... just the cups of a bra... and, like... okay, it’s pasties.” He turns back to his desk that he’s rummaging around in, and pulls out several packs of playing cards.

“Will these help?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.” That will definitely help. He holds the packs out towards me.

“I need you to do the back side.”

“I have to do it?” I grab the roll of duct tape from the bathroom and hand it to him.

“Well, I taped myself into the skirt, so I’d have to cut myself out of it.”

“Heaven forbid you have to cut some tape.” He rolls his eyes as he

walks around behind me.

“It’ll ruin the structural integrity of the skirt, Carter. Then it’ll be coming apart during the party, and my over butt will be hanging out with my under butt.”

“You’re ridiculous.” He kneels down and starts adding cards at the end of the skirt.

“You have to evenly space them, like the others.”

“I know, I know.” He’s working on taping the new sections down, and his fingers are brushing against the bare skin of my ass. I take a deep breath, and try not to get turned on by him. “Are you really staying home all of spring break to write a paper?”

“Yes, I am.”

“It’s our first spring break as college students, aren’t we supposed to get wild?”

“You’ll be getting wild enough for the both of us.” Carter is going to Pismo with a group of football players who rented a house on the beach. I’m sure those guys will be drinking and partying all of spring break.

“I don’t know. I don’t really know what there is to do in Pismo.” We always go to Monterey since that’s where the vacation house is. They are very far apart, and we really don’t know Pismo.

“I’m sure there will be drinking and clubbing, or something like that.”

“Why don’t you come? You can write your paper at the beach. You like the beach.”

“I think we both know I won’t get any writing done with all the crazy partying that will be going on.”

“So write it when you get back.”

“You know I hate writing papers last minute.”

“Yeah, yeah, *your process*. I just feel bad that you’ll be stuck here alone in your dorm writing a paper.”

“That’s really sweet, but I’m fine.” His knuckles skim across my skin again, and I try to think of something else, anything else to keep my mind off of those hands.

“Is Cynthia meeting us there or are we picking her up?” Carter’s been seeing a girl for the last month or so. We’ve specifically avoided situations where we are sleeping in the same bed, or touching at all. I try to keep my voice even, like it doesn’t matter. I guess it doesn’t, but things have been different between us the last few weeks. No more sleepovers, no more laying

in bed watching movies, no... gropey hands or gropey mouths. *God I love his gropey mouth.* It's fine. It had to end some time. His hands keep moving along my... under butt.

"Uh... she's not coming."

"I thought you were going to invite her." He shrugs and makes an "eh" sound.

"I kinda decided it wasn't going to work out."

"Oh." This is a different kind of oh. It's not the "oh, you're seeing someone" oh. It's the "oh, you're *not* seeing someone." There's less disappointment, and more... I don't know, hope? Lust? Fine, it's probably the second one. "Are you okay?" I arch my back so I can look at him, but I can't really see his face from this angle.

"Yeah, it's fine. We went out like three or four times. She was nice, I just didn't think there was anything there."

"How'd she take it?"

"Uh... she was disappointed. I guess she thought there was something there."

"So the sex was bad." Okay, I'm fishing. I want to know how far it went, and if I need to wait for him to get tested before we can resume gropey hands and mouths. I really don't want to wait.

"It never got that far. I kissed her twice."

"And?"

"And nothing. There was nothing. It was like kissing a sister." *Huh.* A year ago I would have assumed he would describe kissing me like that, but now I don't think he would. It sounds like my lucky day, too, because I won't have to wait for the med center test results. He keeps working on taping the cards to my skirt, and I swear his knuckles are grazing my skin more. *Is he doing this on purpose?*

"I'm sorry." He rips off some tape and starts taping another section. "Do you want to get buckets of ice cream and watch romantic comedies?"

"Uh, no, because I'm not a girl."

"What do guys do when they get their hearts broken?"

"Get drunk."

"Well, I have just the place to take you! A frat party with enough alcohol to send the entire wing of my dorm to the hospital with alcohol poisoning." He laughs, and continues taping.

"Maddie, you know I'm not heartbroken, right?"

"I'm just joking."

"I'm fine. We went on a couple dates, it didn't work out, no big deal."

"If you were really heartbroken, I think you'd be a little upset."

"I'll let you know how I react when I get there."

"Have you really never had your heart broken?" I guess I never thought about it before.

"I've never liked anyone enough to get my heart broken."

"You've liked plenty of girls."

"But you're my favorite." He looks up and winks at me.

"Save it for the sorority girls." I roll my eyes at him. He spends way more time than I thought it would take to finish up on the back of my skirt. His fingers keep ghosting along my skin. I'm getting just a little bit hot, there's a warmth in my core that's starting. It's been almost a month since I last heard him say "Hey Baby." My body has missed the touch of his body, and there is a longing growing inside me.

"You want me to fix the front since I'm down here?" I try to swallow, but my throat is dry.

"Uh, yeah." There's a lot I want him to do while he's down there. He shifts over to the front, and keeps working. His knuckles whisper against the front of my thighs and I wish he'd move them up... just a little. He finishes lengthening my skirt. As he stands he drags his entire hand up the back of my thigh, and right over the bare skin of my ass.

Holy.

Fuck.

That was hot.

"You ready, Baby?" My mind is completely blank. *Ready? Like ready to what? Oh my God, does he mean sex?? Is he asking if I'm ready for— Oh my God he means go to the party. Sweet Jesus.*

"I'm ready." *Do I sound weird? I definitely sound weird. I think my voice cracked. He absolutely knows what I was thinking about, but fuck that was hot. We can do more of that later, right? In fact, screw this party, let's start now.*

Carter's looking at his phone, and I'm about to give him the *Hey Baby* and throw him on this bed.

"The guys on the team were talking about a new ride share app. It's like Uber or Lyft, but way cheaper. Is that cool?"

"Yeah, that's fine. What's it called?"

"Hytch."

"Like hitch hike?"

"It says *Hytch a Ride* on the app."

"Ooohh." He's still looking at his phone and pushing buttons. I could tell him to stop. I could tell him to forget the party. I'm working on building the courage to say it to him when he interrupts my thoughts.

"Okay, he'll be here in eight minutes— oh. He sent us a pin so we can meet him." He turns his phone a little and zooms in. "At the corner." I grab my tiny clutch with my ID, lip gloss, and whatnot. It's too late to change our plans now. "Where do I put my wallet?" I start laughing pretty hard.

"Bet you're regretting that grocery bag now."

"I'm not naked under here." *Damn, I wish he was.*

"Shove it in your underwear." I can't make it through the sentence, I'm laughing too hard.

"I'm not doing that." He's trying not to laugh. I grab the roll of duct tape, and pull out about six inches.

"Let's tape it to your bag." I'm laughing so hard I have tears starting. He gives me a look. "Do you have a better solution?" He's got no shorts and no shirt. It's underwear, or bag.

"Fine." After I tear off the strip of tape I secure his wallet to the inside of the bag. We're both laughing. "This is so dumb."

We reach the end of the street a couple minutes before the driver is supposed to get there. The sun is just starting to set. Good thing it's a nice day to be half dressed. I'm suddenly conscious of the fact that we're wearing very little and standing on the corner... near a busy street. Cars are speeding by, and I think we're getting some looks.

"Does it show who's picking us up?" I ask Carter and he checks the app.

"His name is— nope. I'm pronouncing this wrong." He holds out his phone.

"Reaper?"

"Is that his given name?"

"You booked us a ride up the River Styx in a— why does this just say 'classic car.' Why doesn't it say what it is?"

"Maybe it's like a fun surprise. Ooohh, maybe it's like a fastback, or a Shelby— or a drophead!"

"I don't know what any of those words mean." A car drives by and honks at us.

"Hey, Sexy!" The driver yells out the window as he drives by. Carter moves to stand between me and the road.

"Your outfit is attracting attention."

"My outfit? You think a topless Carter Davis isn't going to attract attention?" His sun-kissed torso looks amazing right now.

"It's not 'topless' when it's a man, Maddie."

"You are without a top, thus topless." I start looking around for Reaper in his classic car, however, since I don't know what to look for, it makes it hard. "Hey, a quarter!" I lean down to pick it up.

"Don't bend over!" Another car honks.

"You need a ride?!" The driver yells.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Carter rubs his hand over his face.

"Okay, apparently when I lean all of the cards shift to the front."

"You don't say." He's giving me a look.

"I'm wearing underwear, Carter." He's still giving me a look. "It's a thong!" He shakes his head and turns away.

"Nope."

"Are you getting all red faced again from the word thong?"

"I am not getting red faced from... that word."

"You can't even say it." A rusted out 1970's car slows to a stop next to us and opens the window.

"Ya'll hitchin'?"

"No, we're fine!" Carter yells to the driver then turns back towards me. "Don't look at him, do not make eye contact." My eyes go wide, and I grab his arm. The man leans further towards us.

"Is yer name Carter?"

I grip his arm tighter. "Oh my God! He knows your name!" I'm a little scared.

"It's fine, he'll leave. Just ignore him."

"Are ya tryin' ta hitch?" Carter turns towards the guy and I cower behind him. I'm not sure how he intends to protect us, unless he has a weapon hidden in that bag.

"We're fine, you can—"

"It's Reaper!"

I let out a big breath. "Sweet Jesus, Carter. It's Reaper! Didn't you

recognize him from the no photo or description the app gave you?" I'm dripping with sarcasm right now. Carter starts towards the car. I dig my fingers into his arm. I'm probably leaving a mark, but I'm scared and he's walking towards that death trap.

"You're not getting in that, are you?"

"It's Reaper."

"And?"

"And we ordered the car off the app." I'm not getting in that car with that man. It doesn't look safe, it doesn't even look like it'll get us to the party.

"Have fun getting murdered, I'm walking." He turns and looks me up and down.

"In that?" *Damn it.* He's right, I can't walk for half an hour in this, by myself, on busy streets. I sigh. Loudly.

"Fine."

"They vet them when they sign up for the app. I'm sure he's fine."

"Do they? Do they vet them, Carter? Because that car is rusted."

"So are half the cars at the coast."

"This isn't the coast!" I whisper-yell at him as he walks towards the car.

"That there door doesn't work quite right. Ya might wanna use the other one," Reaper calls to him from inside the car.

"Hillbilly Ted Bundy says the car door is broken." Carter turns and shushes me as he starts for the other side of the car. I follow, because I'm insane or something. He opens the door for me, and I start to slide in. The car smells like food. There's a crock pot resting precariously on the hump of the floorboards. An honest to God crock pot. It's got a bunch of bare wires leading to the cigarette lighter. I pause for a second, because what the hell? Carter ushers me in.

"Maddie, I'm in traffic." I start to crawl along the seats. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"You wanted me inside!" I get to the third seat, and I see the floorboards are rusted through. There's a large hole, I can see the road below, so I try to straddle the rust hole as Carter climbs in. He shuts the door, I hit him with my hand and show him the hole. There isn't enough room on the right side for my foot.

"Just put your legs on this side." I try to put both legs towards the middle.

“His lunch is burning me.”

“Jesus Christ.” He grabs my legs and pulls them on his lap. The car starts to pull away from the curb, and I guess we’ve decided to die in this car together.

“My name is Reaper, I saved Randy Travis’s life once.” I look over at Carter, and my eyes go wide. I mouth the words “what is happening?” “Ya’ll can have some beans if you want ‘em. I keep ‘em in here for the hitchers. People like ‘em. My auntie makes ‘em.” Carter starts to reach over my legs towards a stack of mismatched ceramic bowls and a partially melted ladle. I smack his hand.

“What are you doing?” I whisper at him.

“His auntie made them.” As if that explains anything.

“You don’t know where those beans have been!”

“They’ve been in the crock pot.”

“What if he’s trying to poison you?”

“With beans?”

“Don’t eat random food from strangers!”

“Ya’ll headed to a party?” Our new friend asks. Carter opens his mouth to answer, and I beat him to it.

“Nope.” Carter looks at me with his “what the hell” face. “I don’t want him to know where we’re going!”

“He’s driving us there!” I look back at the road to make sure he’s driving us to the correct location.

“Ya’ll just don’t like clothes then?” Reaper’s phone rings, saving me from this conversation about our clothing. Carter is still eyeing the beans in the crock pot. “Reaper’s Mortuary.” I snap my head over towards Carter. “Oh, hi.” He pauses while he’s listening to the person. “Yeah, she’s got the stuff.” *Oh my god.* “Cash only, my friend.” *What is happening?* “White stuff is extra.” *Is this a drug deal??* “Naw, not the main house, the camper out back. Ya gotta honk three times.” *It’s a drug deal.* “Then give her the password.” *Our driver is dealing drugs while he’s driving us.* “No, that’s last week’s password. This week is yee haw.” Carter finally looks over at me and I mouth “yee haw” to him. Reaper hangs up the phone. “Sorry about that, my auntie runs an illegal restaurant out of her trailer. She’s got powdered sugar donuts this week. People are goin’ crazy fer ‘em. Ya’ll aren’t cops are ya?”

“No, we’re students.” I wack Carter with my hand. I don’t want this guy to know anything about us.

“You want I should bring ya some when I pick ya up later?” *Oh sweet Jesus.*

“That sounds nice.”

“Carter!” *I am not calling this guy again.*

“People are goin’ crazy fer ‘em,” Carter whispers to me. I’m reconsidering my choice in best friend as Reaper pulls up to the frat house. I want to jump out as soon as the car stops, but Carter is carefully un-taping his wallet from the inside of his bag. He tips Reaper, and slowly tapes his wallet back inside the bag. I’m getting a little impatient to get out of the car as Carter casually slides out. “Hey, thanks, man!”

“Ya’ll have fun.”

The frat house is already crazy. There’s people outside on the lawn, people on the porch. People are talking, drinking, arguing. I can already see some crazy costumes. The music is so loud you can hear it from outside. Two people at the front door are checking IDs and taking money. Carter un-tapes his wallet again, I pull out my ID and hold it out to the guy at the door. Carter holds out his ID with mine. The guy behind the table is wearing shorts made out of duct tape. *Huh, that was probably a good idea.*

The frat guy starts looking at the IDs and reaches for white paper wristbands.

"Looks like no fun for you tonight Mr– oh shit!" The guy looks up at Carter, then over at me, and back to Carter. "You're Carter Davis."

"Uh, yeah." Carter rubs his hand awkwardly on his neck. *How does everyone know him??* The guy puts down the white wristbands and picks up neon yellow ones.

"No charge." He hands us the yellow ones. "Have fun, you two." Okay, well I guess coming with Carter has its advantages.

We walk into the house, there's a sea of people in crazy costumes. The music is pulsing and you can feel the thump thump thump of the bass in your chest. Carter starts rapping along with the song. He looks at me and says the words as we make our way through the crowd. I roll my eyes at him, but I think it’s funny. There's a DJ in the corner wearing a leopard duct tape fedora and neon sunglasses. I can't see the rest of his costume behind the equipment. It’s dark in here, and the DJ has a bunch of colorful lights going. People are dressed in all kinds of costumes. Some people really put some effort into the theme, some people really didn't. No shirt and boxes around the lower half seems to be a popular choice for guys. There's lots of girls in caution tape.

One girl has duct tape that looks like it's directly on her skin. *That's going to hurt later.* There's a shower curtain toga, a trash bag with a neck hole and two arm holes, a tissue paper dress, a skirt made out of gift wrap bows, and only two bows for a top. *Wow.* There's a girl wearing just ace bandages and a couple of guys just wearing shorts with a beer box over them. Carter looks better than them.

There's a drinking game going on in the corner. They have playing cards on their heads and are laughing hysterically.

"Let's go find Audrey!" I yell over the music. We start to walk around and Carter puts his hand on my bare back. *Hello.* It's pretty crowded in the house.

"Hey! Davis!" Someone raises their hand to high five him. He doesn't know this guy, but he high fives him anyway.

"Good season, dude!" Someone yells then pats him on the back.

"Three touchdowns!" He's attracting attention, but he's taller than most of the crowd, so he'd attract attention anyway. We're still weaving our way around looking for Audrey, passing through a crowd of fans when he leans down.

"She's at the bar!" His breath is on my neck and a shiver runs down my back. *God, he's hot.* We snake our way through the crowd towards the kitchen where Audrey is pouring drinks with a guy in a mini fridge box. He has arm holes cut out, but they're too small and it's restricting his movements. We finally reach the kitchen and I get a full look at her costume. It's pretty elaborate. She's got a full skirt made of folded white phone book pages, and a bustier made with the yellow pages. Front and center on her chest is Two Guys and a Truck. I start laughing.

"Hey! You made it!" Audrey yells as she finishes ladling some drink out of a bowl and into a red plastic cup. She hands it to a girl then turns to someone else who has the white wristband. The guy asks for a vodka. Audrey hands him a bottle of water and tells him to get lost. *Oh shit, Carter and I have some ill-gotten wristbands. She's going to spot those.* I lower my hand below the counter so she can't see it. Carter edges around to the mini fridge guy, out of Audrey's line of sight. Audrey's been at parties where we were drinking before, but she's co-hosting this thing, and I'm not trying to cause problems for her.

"Did our dads pay you to advertise for them?" I yell over the noise. I see the mini fridge guy struggle to ladle out a drink from a pink cooler.

Yesss!! Audrey made jungle juice. The guy in the box has to tip himself over to reach the ladle. I'm trying not to laugh and draw attention to it.

"I should charge them!" She leans over and gives me a hug across the bar. "Your outfit turned out amazing!"

"Me? Look at you!" Carter slides over with two cups. He holds them down below the counter.

"She looks hot! Don't let her out of your sight!" she yells to Carter. He nods at her. "Keep her away from the guy in the PBR box, he gets handsy!" That's a vague description, there's lots of guys in beer boxes. "You want a water or something?"

"I'm fine." Carter has two drinks under the counter.

"I'm stuck here for a few more minutes, then I get a break to hang out, and then I have to help one of the brothers give people rides home." Some guy walks up and yells out a drink to her. "I think I saw some of your football guys on the back patio!" She yells as she turns to get the guy a drink. Yeah, that sounds right, if there's a porch or a patio they're out there.

We fight our way back through the crowd until we find the back door. There's a decent sized deck outside. The boards are old and warped. There's a much smaller crowd out here, and a bunch of guys from the team I recognize. Before we reach them, a tin foil guy stops us. Like, he has full shorts, suspenders, a top hat, fake glasses, and shoes all done in tin foil.

"Hey, man! I heard we had a VIP here, but I didn't believe them! I'm Atomic, I'm President. If you need anything tonight just let me or my VP know." He points over at a guy doing a keg stand. *Interesting.* "Your money's no good here, we've told all the brothers there's no charge for Big D." *Big D?* "If you need a clean bathroom, food, *anything at all*, please just let us know." He reaches his hand out and Carter shakes it.

"Thanks, man." Atomic walks away, and Carter leans down to whisper in my ear. "Why do these guys always have crazy names? Your name is Pete, just own it." I look up at him and smile.

"I don't know, *Big D.*" He gives me a look.

"That's your fault."

"How is that my fault?" The guys from the team spot us.

"Big D!"

"Hey! The Python is here!"

"That's how it's your fault," Carter tells me.

"Big D means big-?"

"YUP! So thanks for that!" I cover my mouth with my hands.

"I'm so sorry," I say through my fingers. This has kind of gotten out of control. "I thought it meant Davis."

"Nope!"

"I said one thing to one girl at a party."

"And apparently she had the biggest mouth on campus!"

"Are you mad?" I'm still talking through my fingers.

"I'm not mad." I tentatively take my hands off my mouth. I still feel a little bad.

"It's pretty funny."

"It's a little funny." He's smiling as he hands me my drink. We clink our cups together. I start drinking, and fruit punch boozy goodness starts swirling around my mouth.

"Well, don't let the rumor go to your head or I'll spread another one." I down about half my cup because I'm a little worried we'll get caught— and I just love jungle juice.

"Oh really?"

"Don't doubt me. I am all powerful."

"Now who's letting what go to their head? I'm still getting you back for that by the way." We start walking over towards the guys. There's a junky patio table and some miss matched chairs they're sitting around. I think there's at least one rolling desk chair... outside. *Huh. You don't see that very often.*

"And I'd still love to see you try."

Miller, Sanchez, and Yang are all sitting around the table talking as we approach. There's two empty chairs, so we sit down with them. Miller is wearing a Miller light box. Sanchez has a kilt made out of potato chips bags, which makes sense, because he's a chip fiend. Yang is in some elaborate vest and pants ensemble made out of gum wrappers with glow stick glasses. Is everyone wearing weird glasses?

"Love to see you try what?" Miller has a dirty mind.

"Nothing," Carter tells him. "I told her I'd get her back for spreading the python rumor."

"Oh, shit! You started that?" He waves his finger between us. "I didn't know you two were like that."

"Us? No. We're not like that." *Okay, we're a little like that... sort of.*

"Nah, man, she just made it up to mess with me." Carter is acting way

more casual than I am.

"In my defense, I didn't think it would get this big."

"Oh, it gets real big," Sanchez says.

"I heard it's huge," Yang chimes in. I look over to see Carter glaring at me, so I start to laugh. I love his stupid faces.

"Carter and I took Hytch here," I say awkwardly as I take a drink. I'm trying to change the subject, also it's a pretty hilarious story. "Some old 1970's car picked us up." I'm about to launch into my story about Reaper, and his beans, and his auntie's illegal trailer restaurant.

"Did Reaper pick you up?" Okay, Miller knows this guy.

"Yeah."

"I love that dude," Yang says. "Did you try the beans? They're so good." Carter is glaring at me again and I'm trying not to look at him.

"We did not." Carter is clearly unhappy about missing out on the beans.

"I've eaten at his auntie's trailer, it's good food." I don't know how to feel about Yang right now. "They have powdered sugar donuts this week."

"Yeah, he said he'd bring us some when he picks us up later." Carter still wants him to pick us up. *Fine, he can sit over the rust hole.*

"Are you freaking serious? Drunk donuts sound bomb." Yang can have my donuts.

"Oh, good, you found each other!" Audrey says as she walks over and stands by the table. She looks down at her phone. "One of my sorority sisters is meeting up with me. I promised her we'd dance while I had a break." She types something into her phone and looks back at us. "Do you guys need anything? Water? Soda?" I try not to look at my half drunk jungle juice that's on the table and totally not mine.

"We're fine." I know Audrey only has a short amount of time to enjoy the party, I don't want to use it up. She checks her phone again.

"I have like forty five minutes before I have to help with the sober rides."

"Is that safe?" Carter sounds worried. He'd probably volunteer to help her all night if he could.

"Yeah." Audrey waves her hand. "I've known Kyson since we were kids. He's a good guy. I'm just riding along so the drunk girls feel more comfortable... and to make sure no one gets handsy."

"What the hell is happening?!" Sanchez yells and points to the second

floor. Audrey's head snaps over to the direction he's pointing.

"Again?!" Audrey yells, and angrily starts typing on her phone. I turn to look at where they're looking and Carter covers my eyes.

"What do you mean again?!" Carter sounds very surprised.

"What's happening? Why are you covering my eyes?" I bat at his hand like a cat.

"There's a naked guy climbing out the window."

"I'm an adult, Carter, I've seen a naked man before." I have not seen a naked man before, and I'm kinda grateful that he's covering my eyes.

"Trust me, I'm doing you a favor."

"Hey, it's Audrey. Corky's climbing out the window again... yeah, he's definitely naked."

"How many times has this happened?" Carter asks.

"He did this at our Heaven and Hell party— which you should definitely come to, by the way." Suddenly I hear the sound of someone running by, and Carter takes his hand down.

"Yeah, you better run!" Audrey yells. "We know who you are, Corky!" She groans. "Last time he did this he locked us out of the upstairs bathroom."

"Do you need some help with that?" Yang offers. He's a really nice guy.

"Nah, Juan is headed up to check it out. It took them like two hours to unlock it last time. Hopefully they remember how they did it."

"Did you see Corky run out of here naked again?" A girl asks as she walks up to the table. She's dressed in a skirt and bra similar to mine, only hers is made of— *oh my God, are those condom wrappers?? Yup! They still have condoms in them!*

"Yeah, Juan is checking the bathroom." Audrey turns to us. "This is Peach and Andre." She gestures towards the condom girl and a guy wearing a cowboy hat over his crotch. Wow, Peach and Andre don't mess around. "Maddie, Peach and I are going to dance, you have to come with us."

I look over at Carter and shrug. "I have to go with them."

We head back into the house, there's a huge crowd of people inside. It might actually be more than before. We're almost shoulder to shoulder with people as we make our way through the crowd. A girl walks by me wearing a dress made out of inflated balloons followed by a guy who only has his parts stuffed into a Crown Royal bag. *Holy shit! Where's Carter?? He needs to see*

all the crazy costumes.

The music has a fast beat. It's a little hot in here. Some of the people wearing trash bags are sweating and poking vent holes in the bags. I'm glad Audrey told me not to wear one of those. Andre comes out to join us at some point and Peach starts grinding up on him. There's a guy passed out on the couch, and a girl dirty dancing with the corner of the wall. This party is crazier than the ones we usually go to. We dance to Avicii, and we sing along to Justin Bieber's "Baby." Audrey does most of the dance when Beyonce tells us he should have put a ring on it. I start to get a little hot and sweaty myself. When Audrey's forty five minutes are up, she leaves and I head back to Carter and the guys, leaving Peach and Andre grinding together on the dance floor.

Carter's getting up when I reach the table. I grab my drink and down the other half now that Audrey is gone.

"I'm going to find a bathroom," Carter announces.

"Why don't you just pee in the bushes like all the other guys?" He glares at me.

"I'm not just going to whip it out in front of everyone." I don't know why hearing Carter say "whip it out" is funny to me. I lean into him so I can fake whisper.

"Are you worried they'll see the python and be disappointed? Did I over sell it?" He laughs and shakes his head. I put a hand over my mouth like I'm shocked. "Did I under sell it?"

"You're the worst." He turns to leave and I follow because I kinda need to go. We weave through the crowd of people and find a bathroom. Carter doesn't bother to knock, which seems like a bad idea. When he opens the door there's a girl sitting on the edge of the tub crying.

"Nope." I shut the door.

"We should help her."

"Carter, every dance I ever went to in high school had a girl crying in the bathroom. I've spent many, many minutes of my life consoling crying girls in bathrooms. She's fine." We continue down the hallway some more until we come to another bathroom door. Carter knocks first this time, and when no one answers he opens the door— and there's a couple having sex. I think we're both in shock for a second because neither of us moves. The door is still open, and we're in full view of... it. The guy looks at us.

"Hey! Good season!" *Nope!*

I slam the door shut as the girl yells. “We met at a game!” I look at Carter, and I’m slightly horrified. His eyes are wide and he’s frozen in place. His face is turning a little red.

“Carter.”

“I know.”

“And then.”

“I know.” He rubs his hand down his face. The tinfoil man walks by us right at that moment.

“Everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah.” *Did Carter’s voice just squeak?* “We’re just looking for a bathroom.”

“Oh, here, you can use mine.” The foil guy starts towards the stairs and we follow him. About halfway up the stairs he pauses and turns towards us. “Oh, were you two wanting to bang it out? You can just use my room.” *Nope!*

“I’ll just hold it!” I practically yell at them as I turn to race down the stairs. I have no idea where I’m going, just away from that awkward situation upstairs. A guy walks by me with a tray of shots.

“Dollar shots!” he yells. Someone sticks cash in his waistband and takes a shot off the tray. He looks over at me. “Hey! You’re here with Davis!” He grabs a shot off the tray and hands it to me. “Enjoy!” He disappears back into the crowd where more people shove dollar bills at him. I shrug and take the shot, because I’m young and poor and it’s free booze, so why not? It tastes like coffee and Baileys. I want to chase him down for more.

Eventually I make it back to the kitchen where the alcohol is set up. It’s harder to navigate the crowd without Carter clearing the way. When I get to the bar, I immediately notice the guy in the mini fridge box has cut the arm holes way bigger and is getting drinks much faster. There’s a girl with him wearing feather boas as a top and skirt. She’s running circles around him. The guy in the box looks over at me. I hold up the wrist band.

“What do you want?!” he yells.

“What’s in the bowl?!”

“Midori sour!”

“Sounds great!” He ladles me out some without having to tip over this time, and hands me the cup. Two hands lift me up and set me on the counter. It’s a guy in a PBR box. *Great. I think I found Mr. Handsy.*

“Hey, sweet thing.” I try to look bored and sip my drink so he knows I’m not interested. I don’t want to give him any ideas that this is going anywhere.

“I’m here with someone.”

“But you could leave with me.” *Gross.* Another guy walks up wearing a Corona box and pulls me across the counter towards him.

“Hey, sexy,” the new guy says. *Gross.* “You don’t want this low rent Justin Bieber.”

“This guy looks like Ryan Reynolds with a five head!” *Oh my God, he does, and now I can’t unsee it.* PBR pushes Corona. “Hey! I saw her first, man!”

“Yeah, well I saw the last one first and you fucked her anyway.” *Nope. Nope nope nope. I don’t want anything to do with this.*

Corona shoves PBR and they’re getting a little heated.

“What about Adrianna?” *Oh good, there’s a history here.*

“You weren’t dating! You were just hooking up! Let it go, man!” More hands slide me further down the counter. *Awesome. This night just keeps getting better– Oh. It’s Carter.*

“Hey, Baby.” His voice is smooth and sexy as he leans down towards me.

“Hey, Baby.” I’m glad to see him. He smiles at me like he knows it.

“These guys bothering you?”

“What guys?” He leans down and kisses me gently on the lips. *God, I missed those lips.* “Dance with me.” Carter pulls me off the counter and we walk to the dance floor. It’s much easier when he’s walking with me. I finish my drink as we dance to the beat. Carter’s got some moves tonight, but I’m kinda missing his dorky dance moves. I think they’re adorable. The shot guy comes by. He takes my empty cup and hands us each a shot which I immediately take since I loved the first one so much. *I wonder if Audrey can tell me the recipe.* The lights get a little lower. I’m a little tipsy. Carter and I are dancing a little close. Eventually we find Peach and Andre still bumping and grinding their way across the dance floor. Andre’s cowboy hat is a little flatter than before. Peach seems a little drunk. She leans over towards me.

"You look hot!"

"Thank you!" She reaches down towards the edge of her skirt.

"You're going to need one of these!" She pauses, looks Carter up and down, then reaches for the ones on the other side labeled magnum. "No,

definitely this one." She tears one off and hands it to me. I look over at Carter to see what he thinks. He's not paying attention. I don't know why, but I put it in my clutch. "Have fun!" She winks at me and then goes back to grinding on Andre.

Carter and I end up closer to the edge of the dance floor, over by the fireplace. The lights are darker and the strobe is on. He pulls me close, my back is towards him and puts his hand on my bare stomach. His face is next to mine and he kisses me on the cheek really quickly. It's sweet. I start thinking about the hand that slid up my ass earlier, and I feel heat pooling down below. I'm feeling a little handsy myself, so I lean back into him... and okay, I started grinding up on him... just a little. It's fine, we've rubbed up on each other before... in a less vertical position... but still. His hand glides up my torso, and my nerve endings are on fire. I wish these cards weren't on my chest right now so he could get a little more handsy. Someone starts passing around bottles of alcohol and people start pouring them in their mouths. They hand a bottle to Carter. He leans back and dumps some in his mouth, then holds it over my head. I lean back and he pours some in my mouth. A little drips down my cheek, and he licks it up before he sticks his tongue in my mouth. *Oh, hell yes. I've missed that tongue so much.* He tastes like whisky and bad decisions. The bottle disappears, I have no idea where, because all I can focus on is him and that biteable bottom lip of his.

Some guy walks in the front door holding two giant bags of cheeseburgers in the air and the crowd cheers. He tosses the bags to the group and they crowd surf for a microsecond before the bags get torn open and cheeseburgers go everywhere. I spy Peach and Andre with their mouths on opposing sides of a cheeseburger, Lady and the Tramp style. I look back at Carter who has two shots in his hands. He hands me one and we take them. They're blue and they taste like bubblegum.

Carter puts the empty shot glasses on the fireplace and his lips are back on mine. His tongue sweeps through my mouth. The beat of the song gets faster and faster. His hands are on me, teasing my nerve endings. I feel like it's been forever since he touched me, and I've never wanted it so badly. As the beat stops, the lights go out. Carter picks me up and moves me. When the lights come back on we're in a dark corner. We're completely making out, and I don't care that there's people around. I want this so badly. I want him so badly. It's probably the alcohol talking, but I'm listening because I like what it's saying. He has one hand in my hair, and I have one hand on his—bag.

Nope, let's move that somewhere better. It's dark in this corner, people can't see us, right? Or maybe they can't see exactly where our hands are? That should be good enough. His other hand slides up my thigh, fingers gently teasing, higher, under my skirt, and onto my bare ass cheek. He grabs on, digging his finger tips in just a little as he pulls me closer to him until our torsos are touching. *Fuck, he's so hot.* I want his hands, I want his mouth, I want... him.

He trails open mouth kisses down my neck. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and I have no idea why, but I reach into my clutch and pull out the condom Peach gave me. I bring my arms back down, slide my fingers down his arm, and press it into the palm of his hand. He pulls back enough to look at it. The lights are still low, but his eyes find mine. I know that look. He's asking if this is what I want. *God, yes.* I nod. He kisses me again, frantic, fevered. Suddenly I'm very aware that there's a huge crowd of people in this house. I pull back. Now I'm nervous that people have seen us. *Does he care?* Carter puts his hand on my back and starts to guide me through the crowd, out of the house. He pulls his phone out of his bag and starts frantically typing.

When we reach the front door, he starts kissing me and walking me towards the curb. I guess I'm back to not caring if people see us. What feels like too quickly, a car pulls up.

"Ya'll ready ta go home?" *God damn it, Carter.* He pulls away and walks over to the other side of the car to let me in, pulling me reluctantly behind him. I trail my hand over his chest as I climb into the car and I wish that bag wasn't there. I slide in the back seat of Reaper's car, and true to his word his auntie's donuts are on a kitchen plate. Carter grabs one off the plate as I swing my legs on his. Reaper starts chatting, and I'm not listening. I'm too distracted by the hand that is gently sliding up and down my back. Carter takes a bite of the donut. Powdered sugar falls on my arm. He looks at me with this smoldering look that I want to see more of. He leans down, licks the sugar off my arm, and then starts kissing me again. I get pulled onto his lap and I can hear the crunch of the grocery bag. Whatever, we don't need it anymore. We make out in the back seat of Reaper's car and I briefly wonder what kind of girl that makes me. At this point I don't care what anyone thinks, all I care about is what Carter wants and what I want. Right now it seems like we want each other.

Reaper drops us off at Carter's house and we continue kissing all the

way to the front door. He unlocks the door and we separate. As soon as it's open we look around to see if anyone is home. The lights are off, but we stay separated until we're in his bedroom just in case someone is home. The moment his door closes we're making out again. He lifts me up and puts his hands under my butt. I wrap my legs around him as he walks us to the bed. He lays us down, I unwrap my legs, and tear the bag off of him. *Holy shit. The python is out.* Peach might be right about the magnum. Carter pulls the cards off my chest and my breasts are in his mouth before I can think about it. I'm trying not to be nervous and just stay in the moment. *Don't over think, just go with it.* I start pushing his boxers down because this is definitely happening, right? He reaches down and takes them the rest of the way off. Carter is naked. Full naked, and on top of me. *It's fine.* I open my eyes a few times as he's kissing me so I can sneak peeks of his body. He reaches down to my skirt, and rips the tape. The whole skirt comes off with my thong, and suddenly we're both naked. He pulls back and looks at me for a moment. We're both out of breath and staring at each other. Neither of us has ever seen the other one naked before.

"God, you're gorgeous." He holds the condom out. "Are you sure, Baby?" His voice is sincere. He really wants to know. He's not just saying words he doesn't mean.

"So fucking sure." I don't think I've ever been more sure about anything in my life. He tears it open, and rolls in on. His mouth is back on mine. I know what's about to happen. I'm a little scared, but a lot excited. Very, very excited. He starts rubbing the tip at my entrance slowly, teasing... hesitating? *Is he nervous?* It didn't occur to me that he would be. He's a guy, he's done this before. It's not as huge a deal to him as it is to me. He moves his mouth to my ear.

"You tell me to stop and I'll stop." I know he means it. I know he would never want me to be uncomfortable or feel unsafe with him. I trust him with everything... with this. "I don't care if I'm about to come, you say stop and I'll stop." I think my brain stopped at the word come, because I want to see that. He's still not moving, and God do I want him to move. I'm pretty sure he's waiting for me to acknowledge him.

"Okay. " It comes out breathy.

"You promise?"

"I promise." He pushes forward, and I gasp as he slides in.

OH.

MY.

GOD.

It's tight for a minute, and all I can think of is how accurate the python nickname is because *damn*. He pauses for a second and I'm grateful for the moment to adjust to his size. He slows his kissing, softer, gentle. His hips start to lightly rock back and forth. My body is electric and his touch is a live wire on my skin. He thrusts slightly deeper and his name escapes my lips on a moan. He freezes, his entire body is stiff. His mouth is still. He pulls away. *Oh no, I've ruined this*. But we've crossed a line there is no going back from, and honestly I don't want to go back. Now that I know what this is like I don't want it to end. I want him to keep going. I want to hear the moan of his voice in my ear as he grips my body with his hands. I want to feel him shudder and shake as he finishes.

"Baby, don't stop," I whisper at his lips. I push my hips forward. I lean up to him and press my lips to his. He seems to come back to life. His hips start gently rocking. My entire body feels alive in a way it never has before. His hand slides up my torso and his fingers find the hard end of my nipple. He starts to lightly pinch and tease as he eases in and out of me. I'm hungry for more so I pull him closer to me. He continues his slow pace, slowly building tension in my body. I run my hand along his back until I reach his neck, and I cup his face in my hand. My heart feels like it's going to pound right out of my chest. For a brief moment it feels surreal. There's no way this is actually happening. Time slows down. There is no before, there is no after, just now. My mouth swallows a moan as it escapes his lips. He thrusts a little more and I feel it deep inside. "Oh, Baby." My words seem to spur him on and he slides in deeper. My free hand grabs the sheets of his bed, and I grip them until I feel them tug off the edge. There's a tension building in my core. Every thrust of his hips is building it more and more. He slides his hand down my torso, and slowly trails it down until he finds the spot just above where we're connected and he starts slowly working circles with his fingers. His hands are incendiary and my body is about to burst into flame. His thrusts become more shallow, more frantic. He moans in my mouth again, louder. My breath is shallow, and my body is tensing up. I'm so close I know the release is coming, but I want him to get there too. His lips release mine.

"Oh, Baby." His voice is breathless in my ear. His movements are more erratic, his pace is faltering. I wrap my legs around his back and pull

him tight. My hand moves to his back and I start to grip him tightly. “Fuck.” He groans out the word next to my ear. I’m so close to the edge I know I’m about to fall, and I want him to come with me. His body stiffens on top of me. He thrusts one last deep thrust and it pushes me over the edge. I let out a slow moan, and suddenly I feel myself pulsing around him. He groans with me, and we both fall off the cliff together.

He collapses on top of me. I know it’s not the full weight of his body. I wrap my arms around his neck and keep my legs around him as we lie there together for what feels like forever. Everything is fine. We’re still us. Carter peppers my face with kisses before he slowly pulls away from me. I’ve never felt more empty in my life. He walks to the bathroom to clean up, while I grab a shirt from his drawer of old clothes.

He returns a few minutes later, and slides back into bed with me. He pulls me tight and wraps his arms around me. I want to bask in the afterglow with him. I can feel tingles on my skin everywhere he touches me. I feel the pounding of his heart slow to a normal pace, the rise and fall of his chest as his breathing returns to normal. I feel the warmth of his body, and the smell of his scent. I lie there for a long time thinking about what just happened. No regrets, just thinking. *So this is what this is like.* Eventually we fall asleep wrapped in each other’s arms.

The next morning, I wake to the sound of my phone vibrating on the nightstand. Carter’s still asleep. I ease out from under his arms and reach for my phone. It’s a message from Audrey.

Audrey: Are you okay?

Me: I’m fine. Why?

Audrey: I know he’s your best friend, but I’m kind of mad at him and I’m hoping there’s an explanation

Me: For what??

Audrey: I’m at the house cleaning up and the guys are saying that they saw Carter making out with some girl at the party last night

Me: Ok

Audrey: Did he ditch you?? Did you get home ok?

Me: OMG no! He didn’t ditch me! We took Hytch home.

Audrey: Was that you two that Reaper picked up? Did you try the beans??

Me: No, but Carter had a donut.

Audrey: Well, I'm glad you're ok. Tell Carter I'm not mad at him anymore. Text me if you want to hang out over break. I'll be around.

I close my phone and snuggle close to him. He stirs, and starts to lean over me.

“Hey, Baby.” *Uh oh.* He starts to kiss me on the mouth and roll over onto me.

“No— I.” I don't know how to say this.

His body stiffens, the same as it did last night. He stops and pulls away. His eyes find mine and I know they are searching for regret. He thinks I don't want this, that I don't want him, that I didn't want last night. That's not it, but I can't get myself to say the words out loud to him. Carter and I don't talk about these things, we don't talk about sex, or our bodies, or things like that. It feels weird to talk about those things with him. I feel like there's a lump in my throat and I can't get the words past it.

“Baby.” *There, that feels better.* I force the words out. “I only had one.” I feel so awkward and weird right now, but Peach only gave me one condom. It's literally all I had. I see the hurt leave his eyes, and the tension leave his body.

“Look in the drawer.” He nods over towards the nightstand on his side of the bed. I crawl over and open the drawer. There's a brand new twelve pack of condoms in the drawer and a receipt. I look over at him.

“Are you writing these off on your taxes? Why do you have the receipt?” His face is turning red and I know he's struggling with this as much as I am.

“I wanted you to know that I got these for you— for us.” I turn the receipt over in my hand. “I told Cynthia it was over a week ago.” The date on the receipt was yesterday... from the grocery store where he got the bag he wore for his costume. “Is that okay?”

“That was really thoughtful.” I lean over and kiss his lips.

I never meet up with Audrey. Carter never makes it to Pismo. I see a naked man for the first time. We only leave the bedroom to get food from the porch after it's delivered. Sometimes the food is cold. We stay in his bed, and finish the whole box before the end of spring break. I write my paper the night before it's due, and I don't even care.

Chapter 11

Present Day

It's late in the morning and I'm still in bed. The mountain of pillows my mom gave me is surrounding me, I'm burrowed deep in the blankets. I've been looking at our moms' blog for hours. I just want to lay here for a while longer. I'm not ready to face the day, or the people downstairs. They'll all be leaving for beach day soon, and I'll have the house to myself. My stomach growls, and I promise it some food as soon as the house is empty. The door to the bathroom swings open.

"Are you ready to go? Everyone's packing up the cars." Carter leans in the doorway dressed for the beach. I don't look up from my phone.

"I'm not going." He pushes off of the door frame and walks over to my bed.

"What do you mean you're not going? You love beach day." I still don't look up.

"I love many things. Right now, I love this bed, and not leaving it." Carter flops onto my bed. "Carter! Boundaries!" I push at him, but he doesn't budge. He rolls over to me and puts his head on my shoulder.

"Maddie."

"What?"

"You're avoiding." I keep scrolling through my phone, but I'm not looking at what's on the screen anymore.

"Right now I'm avoiding leaving this bed."

"Are you fused to the bed?"

"I might be."

"It's beach day."

"I don't want to go."

"You don't want to see Arthur, and have what is probably a difficult conversation with him." *Yes, that is exactly right, so please leave so I can avoid all of that.*

"Enjoy your beach day, Carter." And because I really want one, I add. "Bring me back a pretzel." They have these amazing pretzels the size of a pizza pan with several sauces to choose from.

"Nope, no pretzel."

"What do you mean no pretzel? I've brought you back one before."

"I was sick. Are you sick?"

"I'm sick of something," I grumble. *Him.*

He reaches over and feels my forehead. "Nope, no signs of illness. No pretzel."

"Audrey will bring me one." *I can just bypass him and go straight to her.*

"If anyone attempts to bring you a pretzel, I will throw it out the car window on the ride home."

"You wouldn't." He makes a throwing motion.

"Right into the bay." I glare at him. "Whereupon the seagulls will descend upon it and tear it apart."

"Whereupon?"

"You heard me, Maddie cakes." He pats me on the leg. "The only way a pretzel is getting into that stomach is if you get it yourself." He pushes off the bed and walks towards my dresser.

"Let's see if we can find you some long sleeved one piece to frump around the beach in." He starts opening drawers and digging through my clothes.

"Boundaries, Carter!"

"They're just clothes."

"And your fingers are all up in them." He grabs my bikini and tosses it directly in my face.

"You women like bathrobes or something over your swim trunks right?"

"They're not swim trunks when it's a girl." I'm trying not to laugh, because I know he's doing this on purpose. Carter thinks he's a full comedian sometimes and I'm not trying to feed that ego.

He waves his hand. "Semantics." He grabs a terry cloth robe from our bathroom and throws it right in my face.

"Stop throwing things in my face!"

"Put on your towel with sleeves and join us in the car." I start laughing, because this boy is ridiculous and knows exactly how to pull me

out of a funk.

"I am not wearing a bathrobe to the beach."

"Well, I'll just make you an even more hideous outfit to wear... or, you can get out of that bed and pick one out yourself."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't." He walks over to my purse and starts stuffing sunblock and sunglasses in it.

"You don't take a fancy purse to the beach." He starts grabbing whatever is around and shoving it in my purse. Pens, socks, sticky notes, a framed photo of my mom, it all goes inside. I get up out of bed to stop him, because he's filling my purse with all kinds of nonsense.

"Hey! You weren't fused to the bed after all!" I push him aside and start pulling everything back out of my purse.

"I don't want to go." My voice catches a little. I'm trying not to cry in front of him. We haven't been close like that in a long time, and being vulnerable around him always leads to crossing lines. I need boundaries with Carter. I need him at arm's length. He puts his hand on my arm. I need him to not put his hand on my arm.

"You do want to go. You just don't want to face us, and you don't want to have an uncomfortable conversation with Arthur. We love you no matter what. It's him we're mad at." He starts shoving more nonsense in my bag. "So we'll go to the beach. You'll eat a pretzel the size of Montana, that I won't throw in the bay, and you'll have an uncomfortable conversation with Arthur where you tell him he hurt your feelings. I will be right there with you the whole time... ready to pop him in the mouth if he gets out of line."

"You're going to pop him in the mouth?"

"I'm gonna pop him in the mouth." His bad Italian accent is back. I love it.

"I cannot believe after all these years... that that accent hasn't gotten any better. It's terrible."

"It's not terrible, it's totally authentic. You feel like I'm going to serve you gelato and pasta right now."

"I do not feel that way." I take a deep breath and let it out. "Leave."

"I'm not leaving."

"Leave so I can change." *I am not changing in front of him anymore, we're not close like that. Boundaries.*

"Please, I've seen you naked hundreds of times."

"Not recently."

"I saw you naked the other day!" I glare at him.

"You broke the door down to see me naked!"

"I didn't— fine! Have your privacy. We're all waiting downstairs." I play with the little gold emblem on my purse.

"Even Arthur?" I'm fishing. I kinda don't want him to go. I think I'd rather have some space from him right now.

"Audrey woke him up at dawn to tell him to get ready because he will be joining us."

"I love her."

"That friendship was brought to you by my butt."

I smile and push him towards the bathroom door. "Get out of here."

He leaves the room and I reluctantly change into my bikini and beach clothes, fluff my hair and put on a tiny bit of makeup. There's a beach bag in the closet full of towels and other beach accessories that I grab... and then I sit on the bed... for several minutes... because I just don't want to go out there. I hate this. I just want the stupid pretzel.

After a long while I open the door, and gingerly walk down stairs. I can hear the sound of everyone talking and laughing. They stop when they see me.

"Hey! You're alive!" Bennett yells.

"Little Moore!" Nico wraps his arms around me and plants a sloppy kiss on my cheek. He squishes it into my eye and I can't see out of it for a second. Nico's arm lingers on me after he loosens his grip. I know he's checking on me. I'm fine... but not really, so I pull him in a little closer. He almost feels like Carter, but he doesn't smell the same. "You okay?" he whispers in my ear, then kisses my cheek again. I nod.

"Carter said you fused to the bed," Audrey says with a smile. I can't really smile. It's hard to fake being happy when I feel this crappy. Arthur is standing near Nate and I purposely ignore him. Our parents left a long time ago to get the good spot at the beach. The whole town will be out there plus a ton of tourists, so if you want a good spot you have to go early. "Why don't we head to the beach."

Nate comes up on the other side of me and puts an arm around me. He and Nico bookend me all the way to the driveway. They may think I'm a flight risk. They release me as we reach the street.

Carter starts to head to his SUV, and the rest of us start walking

towards Nico's. Arthur approaches me, and opens his mouth. I turn on my heel and start to follow Carter.

"I'm going with Carter!" Okay, maybe I am a flight risk. Audrey follows behind me. I climb in the front seat and buckle up. Audrey climbs in the back seat behind me. She throws her arms around me, pinning me to the seat.

"I love you and I'm sorry you're hurt." I put my hands on hers as Carter starts the car. I look over at him. I purse my lips and try not to cry. I love these people, more than anything in this world. I've missed them like crazy the last few years. He reaches over and pats me on the leg.

"You'll be fine." He puts the car in drive and heads to the beach.

We park up the hill a couple of blocks from Lovers Point Beach. Carter executes a perfect parallel park job— on a hill, and I think it's the hottest thing I've seen in a long time. Why does a parallel park job get me going? I should probably talk that out with a professional. It seems a bit strange. We all unload the gear they packed up while I was upstairs feeling sorry for myself, and awkwardly carry it to the beach.

As expected, our parents have the best spot. It's tucked into the back corner and raised up off the sand. The shade hits it perfectly. It's a beautiful warm day today. You never know what you'll get here: cold and overcast, or beautiful sunny day. Some years we shivered on the beach in our coats because it was so cold.

The parents have full tables and chairs set up, coolers of drinks, food to eat if you get hungry. It's a base camp we come back to in between games. There's a bunch of lanterns scattered throughout our area. The moms usually stay there all day. Our dads are really into volleyball, so they usually go play in the tournament. We like to hit up all the games. We have our own personal tournament where we try to beat each other in as many games as possible.

There's a huge grassy area up the stairs where they have a ton of games. There's volleyball courts and tennis courts up there too. The games on the sand are usually for the small kids, the sandcastle building contest, ring toss, find the whale, etc. Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield walk around judging, playing kids games with the kids, and sometimes playing the adult games too. I always get a laugh when the girl playing Mrs. Butterfield does the obstacle course in the full Victorian gown.

I set my bag down next to my mom. Her hair is blown out, and falls in loose waves. She has the perfect beach outfit, white linen pants and a nautical

looking top. She looks like she's going yachting.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything is great." I'm not really wanting to see the judgy looks on their faces when they hear what happened. Carter's mom is dressed in thin pants with a blousy top, not a hair out of place despite the breeze. They always look gorgeous. She pulls me over and kisses my cheek.

"Hi, honey."

I groan. "Who told you?"

"Told us what?" My mom is playing dumb.

"Nico," Carter's mom admits. *Stupid Nico*. He's got the biggest mouth. He's like a gossip teenage girl. I mentally remind myself to hit him with the ball during wave ball. *Oops!* I can make it look like an accident.

"I'm fine, everything is fine." My Mom hands me one of those fruity off-brand sodas we loved when we were kids. They always have a cooler full of them on beach day. I crack it open, and grab a black cherry for Carter. Everyone else dumps their stuff with our moms. I still can't look at Arthur. I don't know if I'm going to see an apology on his face, or worse, maybe indifference. Maybe he doesn't care about what happened, but I do. Carter comes to stand by me and I hand him his drink as I sip mine. He smiles in a wistful way.

"This is my favorite." The can sprays a little as he cracks it open.

"That's been your favorite soda since we were eight." *Like I didn't know which one was his favorite.*

"Not the drink, beach day is my favorite."

"Now that I didn't know." After all these years, how are we still learning new things about each other? Maybe it was the time apart. Maybe we're just able to talk more now that we've grown up a little.

"Alright." Nate's taking charge, I guess. "We have an odd number of people again this year. How do you want to pick teams?"

"I can get an app on my phone that randomly pairs us up," Nico says as he types on his phone.

"I'll sit out," Carter volunteers as he casually sips his drink.

"Again?" Audrey shakes her head. "No. You sat out the last two years." *Oh*. That makes me really sad, especially because he just told me that beach day is his favorite.

"What are we pairing up for?" Arthur asks. I look over at him for the first time today. He doesn't look good. He's wearing sunglasses, which is

normal because we're at the beach, but his clothes are disheveled, his hair is a mess, and he's hunched over. I guess hungover is a better term.

"Beach games, bro. It's a whole tournament," Nate tells him.

"Games? Like sit down games, or like... doing stuff?"

"There's an obstacle course and volleyball, wave ball, all kinds of stuff," Audrey explains. Arthur groans.

"Uh, I don't think I can do all of that."

"Got some tummy troubles there, Arthur?" Bennett asks him.

"I'm fine, I just don't feel so well."

"Bro, you look like you're gonna puke." Nate's being direct. *Good. I hope he does puke, right in the ocean, and a shark smells it and comes and bites him... okay... maybe not that. Maybe one of those old sharks with no teeth that just kinda gums him up really good.* My mom, who has clearly been eavesdropping, appears with a swing top bottle of red liquid.

"Here, Arthur." She reaches out and hands him the bottle. "We made a whole batch of Gatorade." *Of course they did.* Arthur takes the bottle and starts downing it. He makes an approving face like it's not bad. I look over at Carter because I know he's going to take credit for this.

"I want a percentage of the profits from artisanal stomach baskets." My mom smiles at him, and pats him on the shoulder as she walks back to her seat.

"Not a chance, Sweets." I laugh at Carter while he feigns being hurt, then start to sip my drink.

"Why do I always get screwed out of my ideas? Me, the inventor of Baskets A Go-Go." I spit out my drink.

"Carter, that's freaking terrible," Audrey says, but she's laughing. Nico is just shaking his head.

"My brother, everyone."

"You people don't appreciate my brand of humor."

"Okay, Arthur is sitting out. How do you want to pick teams?" Nate is serious about beach games this year.

"Dream team!" Audrey says as she reaches out to high five Nate. *Well that's interesting. I thought for sure she and Bennett would pair up. Or maybe Nico.* Nate high fives her.

"Dream team."

"Fine, if you two are pairing up again I pick Nico." Bennett turns towards Nico with his fist out, and Nico bumps it with his. "Dream team,

bro."

"It's comeback time." Nico looks a little amped. I feel like I missed something. I've been feeling all week like I missed something, and it makes me a little sad.

"Uh. That leaves these two together." Nate waves his finger back and forth at Carter and me.

"Oh, hell no." Bennett shakes his head. "You can't be on the same team."

"Why not?" Arthur asks.

"They cheat." My brother gives me an accusing look.

"Uh, no we don't." I'm defending us. This is not the first time he's accused us of cheating.

"It's not cheating to know the rules of the game better," Carter says.

"Thank you, Carter."

Nico looks over at Arthur. "They cheat."

"We do not cheat!" Every year we kick their butts in wave ball, and they are the sorest losers about it.

"Dude, there's a rule book. Everyone can read it." Carter's defending us.

"It's the size of a paperback! And you two just happened to 'memorize' the whole thing? Bullshit!" Nico has never read the rules.

"There's a PDF now! You can read it on your phone!" I'm not actually mad. We're not actually fighting, this is just how we are on beach day. Teams, rivalries, trash talk, it's all in good fun.

"Do you need someone to teach you how to read?" Carter with the trash talk. I hit him with a high five, and we swing our arms around and hit hands again at the bottom.

"No! None of that Top Gun high five-y bullshit, or the clapping, or the chants." Bennett's telling me exactly where his hot buttons are, and I'm taking notes. I stare in his eyes and clap twice. Carter answers me with a single clap. "Uh uh, no. You two can't be on a team."

"Fine, who's giving up their dream team to split us up?" I'm daring him. I know neither of them wants to give up their team.

"Audrey will team up with you. Carter can have Nate."

"Oh, hell no, Ben. You're just upset that Nate and I beat you last year. Why don't you team up with your sister and let the brothers pair up?" Audrey stares at Bennett with her arms crossed. Bennett gives it a long moment

before he answers.

"Fine, team Obnoxious can pair up." Bennett's giving in.

"Team Obnoxious," I say to Carter in a sarcastic voice. "That sounds like sore loser talk."

"The alternative is team Cheater. You choose," my brother says.

"How about team Ass Kick?" I offer.

"Baskets A Go-Go," Audrey offers with a giggle.

"How about team Rule Book?" Nico suggests.

"You're welcome to learn the rules, Neek." Every year I tell them to read the rules, and every year they don't.

"Have we ever been wrong about a rule?"

"Good question, Carter. And what's the answer?" I look over at my brother.

"No," he says in an irritated voice.

"I thought so." Carter and I give each other the Top Gun high five again, and we start walking up the sandy steps that lead up to the adult games, death gripping the rail as we go.

"God damn it, I hate you two."

∞∞∞∞∞

So the dream team of Audrey and Nate was not an exaggeration. She's small, but she has the speed. Nate has the brawn. Between the two of them they're really good. We started with volleyball. I have a killer serve... that I haven't used in four years, so it took a while to get back into the groove. Once I did we were good, but it took a while, so we were behind in points and had to race to catch up. I can set the ball up, and Carter can spike it down, but Nico is really good at returning those. Arthur is really good at nursing a hangover in a lawn chair while drinking artisanal Gatorade and occasionally yelling if the ball was out or not. People have several times stopped to ask what he is drinking. Some of them have gone over to talk to our moms. Carter is swearing that he's not bitter, because he's going to get the money back in inheritance anyway. I've pointed out that half the money goes to my mom, which he will not be inheriting.

Carter and I win volleyball, but Audrey has the fastest time on the obstacle course. Damn that girl is speedy. Nico and Bennett win bean bag

toss, and that leaves just one game... wave ball. Have I mentioned that Carter and I kick ass at wave ball? This is our game.

Carter is on the tennis court with me, doing lunges. He's been doing them off and on all day.

"Maddie, why does my groin hurt?" I start laughing pretty hard. It's very likely from trying to do proud pigeon yesterday morning.

"Is it your VD?" I say it loud enough for our whole group to hear. Carter shoots me a look, but I see his lips curling at the edges. I've got him. "Do you want me to take you to go get tested?" I drop my voice down low. "We'll be quick about it. We'll tell everyone we're going for coffee." He's smashing his lips together. He wants to laugh so badly. I've almost got him, I just need to tip him over the edge.

"I don't have VD."

"You wouldn't if you took the penicillin they gave you." He laughs and shakes his head. *Got him.*

"Okay, does everyone have their drink?" Nate asks. Carter, Audrey, Nate and I all hold up the drinks in our left hand. We're standing in one of the tennis courts. We each have a racquet ball racquet. Nate has the ball.

"Wait, what game is this?" Arthur asks.

"Wave ball, dude." Nate says it as if Arthur should know what it is.

"What is wave ball?"

"What do you mean what is wave ball? Have you never heard of wave ball?"

"It's some game a guy in town made up and they only play it here," Bennett explains.

"And you play while holding a drink?"

"Wave ball is a game designed to be played while drinking, preferably wine or beer," I recite from the rule book.

"You memorized the rule book word for word?" My brother sounds like he's surprised by this.

"That's literally the first line in the book."

"Which you would know if you ever opened it." Carter's really laying it on thick.

"Thank you, Carter."

"Just shut up and serve the ball." My brother rolls his eyes, so I decide to mess with him more. He plays worse when he's irritated.

"Ball? Carter, do you remember there being a ball in this game?"

“No, Maddie, I do not. There is a shark egg in this game, but not a *ball*.”

“Do we have to use all of the stupid coastal nicknames for everything? It’s so dumb.” Nate is not into wave ball terminology.

“Yes!” Carter and I both yell at the same time.

“Can we please just call the score like a normal game? The scoring is such bullshit.”

“Fine,” I concede. Scoring can get complicated... for those who never read the rules. For the sake of simplicity I’m willing to make this one concession.

“Arthur, you’re going to be the line judge. You have to make sure these two don’t cheat,” my brother tells Arthur. Arthur sets himself up in the beach chair near the edge of the court.

“Okay, this is the shark egg,” I start. “If the egg leaves the tank you have to yell ‘fish out of water.’”

“I’m not yelling that,” Arthur says.

“You have to, that’s how you play the game.” I’m kinda over Arthur being snobby about all of our stuff. It’s a stupid game, just play the stupid game.

“I’ll just let you know if it’s out.” I groan internally.

I hold my fruit punch soda in my left hand, yes I’m an adult, as Nate serves the first ball. They score the first point, and Nate goes to serve a second time. He does it wrong and I know Carter isn’t going to touch that ball. If he does, we lose two points. He doesn’t move, and the ball bounces right past him.

“You’re not even going to play?” Nate yells across the court to him.

“You served it wrong,” I tell him. “It’s our ball and you have negative one point.”

“They have negative points?” Arthur asks.

“Even number serves have two bounces before the serve. He bounced it once, he gets negative two points, unless we return it, then we lose two points.”

“That’s crazy, and overly complicated.” Arthur sure is getting judgy.

“Those are the rules, and they’re in the book.”

He pulls out his phone and starts to scroll. “I’m looking up the rules.”

Carter and I get the ball, and immediately score two points. Carter serves the even serve, perfectly by the way... because he knows the rules.

“Arthur, tell them they’re cheating,” Bennett yells over to Arthur. Arthur scratches along his jaw.

“No, she’s right.” He scrolls through his phone for a second. “There’s a lot of crazy rules to this game. You know there’s no cursing allowed?”

“Oh, we’re aware.”

“That rule brings out the best in the boys.” I’m grinning, because I know that’s hard for them. I do enjoy all the nonsense they come up with though. We serve the ball again, and it hits Nate’s drink. It splashes juuust slightly, but Carter and I both clock it.

“Sin bin!” we both yell at the same time. I turn to Carter and smile. I love that he knows the rules. Nate gives us a glare.

“It didn’t spill!”

“It definitely did spill,” I accuse.

“Where?” I walk over to his side of the court and point at the droplet on the court.

“That’s not a spill! That’s a drop!”

“Any volume of liquid that leaves the cup is deemed a party foul. The player who spills must stay in the sin bin until two points are scored,” Carter says matter of factly. Nate looks over to Arthur who is looking at his phone.

“He’s right.”

“Son of a goat farmer!” Nate yells as he walks over to the penalty box. We pretty quickly score the first point off of Audrey. “My drink is empty! Can I get a new one?”

“No!” Carter and I both yell. Nate looks over at Arthur.

“It says you can’t have a new drink until you’re out of the penalty box,” Arthur explains.

“I can’t even drink in here?”

“No, but you could read the rules!” I yell over to him.

“Pass!”

The midday sun starts beating down on us, and I’m getting a little warm with my clothes over my swimsuit. Nico is sitting in a chair on the sidelines, and he’s taken his shirt off. *Oh, hello.* I won’t cry about seeing Nico shirtless, looks like he’s stayed in shape. Nate returns from the sin bin, new drink in hand, and he takes his shirt off too. *I guess everyone is stripping down.*

We get a pretty good game going for a while. Audrey is actually pretty good at this. Maybe she read the rules. Carter scores a point, and we’re

one away from winning. I turn to run over and give him the Top Gun high five, and he's taken off his shirt too. *Oh shit.* My brain has stopped working. *What was I doing? Oh, high five.* I walk over towards him. *Has he grown even more abs? Is that possible? You can't have infinite abs right? At some point you stop making new ones... I think.* I can't remember how abs work... or how the human body works. I high five him, but not in the smoothest of ways.

As I turn to walk back to my spot on the court he smacks me on the butt. I'm a little stunned. *Don't react. Do not react.* I look around to see if anyone noticed. If they did, they aren't reacting. I look over at Arthur who is napping in his chair, then I turn towards Carter and give him an accusatory look. He mouths "I'm sorry" to me, and makes an apologetic face. Carter's never slipped and crossed a line in front of people before.

We lose the next three points to Audrey and Nate because my head is not in the game, and instead is thinking about shirtless Carter, and that hand on my butt. Eventually Carter scores the last point, and we beat Nate and Audrey.

"You want another beer, partner?" Audrey asks.

"Is it off-season?"

"Hell yes!" she yells, and they walk off to the beer booth. Bennett and Nico walk onto the court. Nico looks intense. Bennett looks aloof. This is their good cop bad cop routine. Carter claps twice and I clap once to answer him.

"No. No clapping." We're already pushing Bennett's buttons. *Good, he plays worse when he's irritated.*

"Oh there will be clapping, and chanting," I inform him.

"And many Top Gun high fives," Carter tells him. "We should do one after every point."

"I can't wait until we win." Bennett gives me a confident smile.

"Ben, you've got a lot of confidence for a guy who's never beaten us," I say. It's true. Carter and I have lost very few times, and never to Bennett. Nico tosses the ball over to me, and when I go to throw it to Carter he's doing lunges again.

"Dude, what is with the lunges?" Nico asks.

"Carter has groin problems," I tell him.

"Oh. Is it like itching and burning? They can give you penicillin for that." Carter glares at Nico as I burst out laughing.

“I think I pulled something doing that pigeon.”

“I do not need to know what that means.” Nico’s hands are up in the air. I’m still laughing.

“Maybe you’ll think twice about calling it old people yoga,” I tell him. Carter serves the ball. We pick up the first couple of points easily, but Nico and Bennett score a couple on us.

“Oh! Whale tail!” I yell and point at my brother.

“Good eye, Maddiekins!” Carter runs up behind me and starts drumming on my back with his hands. It feels like old times. The boys always had sports. Our brothers were always bigger than us, but when they got to junior high they could beat me at any sport. Carter was always a little bigger than me, but once he shot up in eighth grade I really didn’t stand a chance. I had board games, and this stupid beach themed game that I could win. This was my game. Carter and I rarely lost.

“That is not a whale tail!” Bennett’s trying to argue.

“Oh, it absolutely was!” Carter argues back with Bennett.

We’re pretty evenly tied until the middle of the game where I score three points in a row. I call out the score right before I serve.

“Uh, no, cheater, you can’t just add extra points.” I roll my eyes because my brother is once again accusing me of cheating.

“She got a pelican, so the points double. It’s six points, not three.” Carter, master of rules.

“Oh, bullshit. You’re making stuff up now.” I look over at Carter to save me.

“Three points in succession is a pelican and the points count as two each. Every subsequent point in the series counts as two until you reach six at which point—”

“Fine!” Bennett groans. Carter’s smiling, and I absolutely love that he can recite that stupid rule book. I serve the ball again. If we get this point and the next one, we win. We start to get a good rally going back and forth for a few minutes before Nico wacks it really hard towards Carter. He lunges for it.

“Shit!”

“AH!! No cursing!” Bennett yells.

“Don’t,” I say to him seriously because I know that tone. I run over to Carter who’s kneeling on one knee, and I crouch next to him. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” He’s holding his knee. He’s clearly in pain. It’s the same knee he hurt in college.

“Dude, if your crotch hurts that bad I’ll take you to urgent care!” Nico yells.

“We forfeit,” I say to him. I can hear the fear in my own voice.

“No, we don’t forfeit!” Carter calls over to our brothers. “Maddie, I’m fine.”

"You're not fine."

"I'm fine."

"Look at me." He looks over at me and our eyes meet. "I don't care about this game. I care about you." He nods. His face is serious. My mind goes back to the night he hurt it, and I feel like a scared little girl all over again. I reach my arm out to help him up. He leans on me, and pulls himself up to standing.

"Is it your knee?" Nico asks as he jogs over.

"Yeah," Carter says with a groan. He tries to put his weight on it, and makes a hiss through his teeth. I wrap my arm around his waist, and he puts some of his weight on me. Nico puts an arm around his other side, and we both help him to the chairs next to the courts. I'm very aware that I'm touching his bare torso right now. I haven't felt his skin on mine in four long years. We sit Carter down in a chair near the edge of the court. Bennett jogs over to check on him.

"You want some ice or something?" Nico asks.

"Nah man, it's fine, I just turned it wrong. It'll be good in a few minutes." I grab another chair and lift his leg up to elevate it, like I used to the first time he hurt it. “Give me a minute, and we’ll finish.”

“No. No more.” I’m not risking him reinjuring the knee for this stupid game.

“Maddie, we’re finishing the game.”

“No, you’re more important than the game.”

“We’ll finish some other time,” Bennett offers.

“We can finish next year.” The words are past my lips before I realize the implication. I’ve just agreed to come back next year. Carter’s head snaps over to mine and he searches my face for deception.

“You promise?” *Damn. He’s got me now.* I can sit here and argue with him about finishing today, or I can promise to come back next year.

“Fine. I promise.” I swear I see his eyes light up. He’s wearing me

down and he knows it.

“Deal.”

“Neek and I can play Nate and Audrey and you two can yell out rules at us,” Bennett offers. I look over at Carter, and use a sappy romantic voice.

“Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.”

“I’d love that,” he says back in an equally sappy voice and I start laughing pretty hard. Nico and Bennett head back to the court to play Nate and Audrey.

“Come on, Maddie cakes, I’ll buy you a pretzel.” I give him my best “oh hell no” look.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Is there some boundary against buying you a pretzel?”

“Don’t try to take care of me when you’re hurt.”

“Maddie, I will always try to take care of you.” His words are so sincere that I almost want to cry. Why can't I find someone like this who loves me in that truly, madly, deeply way, and not in that friendzone way that Carter does?

“I will go buy you a pretzel, and I will happily eat half... or possibly more than half as we sit here in fear of the seagulls.”

“That was San Diego.”

“Oh, that was San Diego! I forgot! Those seagulls were vicious.”

“They grabbed your sandwich right out of your hand.”

“The universe owes me a sandwich.”

“Fine. I’ll buy the second pretzel when you eat all of the first one.”

He’s probably right. They’re really good pretzels.

“Deal.” I reach for my beach bag and grab my wallet.

“And a blue raspberry cooler too,” he says in a pathetic little voice.

“Only if you say it in a more pathetic voice.”

“How much more?”

“Like fifty percent more pathetic.”

“Pwease—” I let out a huge laugh.

“That’s not pathetic, that’s a toddler.” I shake my wallet at him. “Work on your pathetic voice while I’m gone.” I look over at Arthur who is still sleeping in his chair. *Whatever*. Then I head to the food stand near the stairs.

There’s a decent line at the stand, which is pretty normal this time of year. When I get to the front of the line I order Carter’s drink, and the giant

pretzel with a side of the white cheese sauce, the cheddar cheese sauce *and* the cinnamon frosting, because I'm on vacation, and real life is for Monday. The person taking orders tells me to stand on the side and wait because they have fresh pretzels coming out right now. *Ugh, yum.* They're even better fresh. I decide to check my emails while I'm waiting on the delicious pretzel.

"Madison?" I look up from my phone. *Holy shit, it's Beck Bradford.*

"Beck? Wow, what are you doing here?"

"My wife wanted to get away from the heat for a few days so we decided to come check out the festival."

"You got married?" Of course Beck got married, he was a catch. He was a really sweet guy, good in school, good looking— I mean, he's no Carter, but he's a pretty good looking guy. We dated for a little bit in college. He was the best guy I ever dated, and one day he just... stopped calling.

"I did. Did you ever get married?"

"No. I haven't found the right guy yet." *Huh, I forgot Arthur is about thirty feet away sleeping in a beach chair. It's probably bad that I forgot about him, right? And at this point adding "oh yeah, I have a boyfriend," probably makes me look like a desperate liar at worst, and at best... huh, not quite sure where that leaves me.* They call my order number and I try to balance my pizza box filled with a giant pretzel, my 3 containers of dipping sauces, and Carter's drink. "Beck, can I ask you a serious question?"

"Sure, I guess." He's looking a little nervous, and I think he knows where this is going.

"Why did you ghost me?" I'm not mad, I'd done it a bunch of times myself, I guess I kind of deserved it. But I kinda liked him, and I thought things were going pretty well, and then... nothing. I always wondered why.

"Honestly?" He looks so uncomfortable right now.

"Yes. No hard feelings, I was just always curious." That seems to make him feel a little better. He takes a long breath in.

"Honestly." He pauses for so long I think he's not going to answer. "You were just really hung up on Davis, and I didn't think I could compete with that."

"Carter?"

"Yeah. No one could compete with that guy. You were always talking about him, and hanging out with him. One of my buddies was on the football team and he said you were always over at his house."

"He was my best friend." I don't feel like it's that big of a deal to talk

about your best friend, or spend time with them.

“Yeah, you said that a lot, but it always seemed like there was more going on there.”

“Oh.” I guess I got the answer I wanted, even if I didn’t like it.

“I guess I was afraid that if we kept dating you’d start hooking up with him behind my back.” *Yikes. That seems awful. Is that the kind of person people think I am?* “Did you two ever end up dating?” The question catches me off guard, though it shouldn’t, given what he just said.

“Uh, no, it really wasn’t like that.” And I guess by that I mean that Carter never felt that way about me.

“That’s too bad. He always seemed like he was into you.” Except he wasn’t.

“Good to see you, Beck. Congratulations on the marriage.” I turn and leave before Beck can break my heart even more.

I return to the tennis courts to a still napping Arthur and Carter leaning forward in his chair yelling “fish out of water” at our brothers. He smiles when he sees me, and I smile back. For a moment I wish Beck was right and he actually felt that way about me. He pulls a chair over for me and I sit down next to him, close enough to share our giant pretzel... close enough to feel his body heat. He doesn’t seem to have found his shirt since I left.

“Maddikins.” There’s a whine to his voice.

“That sounds about forty nine percent more pathetic.”

“That is fifty one at least.” I hold his drink out to him. He takes a sip and lets out a slight moan. Tingles run up my back as I remember that moan in my ear. “God, I love this drink.” I tear off a chunk of pretzel and dip it in the white cheese sauce. This thing is amazing. Crispy outside, soft inside, the size of a large pizza. And the dipping sauces, don’t even get me started. I don’t know what’s in these but I want to pour them on everything.

“You’ll never guess who I ran into at the food stand.”

“Who?”

“Beck.” Carter looks a little shocked.

“Bradford’s here? As in *the one who got away?*”

“I definitely wouldn’t call him that.”

“You liked him a lot.” He lowers his voice and looks around. “You want me to distract Arthur while you go build a sand castle on the beach with Bradford? It’ll be romantic like those books you read. What do they call

those? Second choice romances?" He's messing with me.

"It's second chance, not second choice, that sounds awful." I laugh and throw a piece of pretzel at him. He tries to catch it with his mouth, but he misses and it lands on his lap. "And, no, I don't want to build a sand castle with Beck, and not just because he's married."

"Bradford got married?" He leans back in his seat. "Damn. Good for him, he's a cool dude." He sips his drink again. "Did he at least tell you why he ghosted you?"

"Yes."

Carter leans forward like a gossipy girl at a slumber party. "And?"

I shove some pretzel in my mouth because apparently that's what I do now when I don't want to talk about something. He stares at me expectantly as I chew.

"And he said it was our friendship," I mumble with a mouth full of food.

"Us? What did we do?" I swallow.

"Thank you! He said he was scared that if he and I kept dating that I'd cheat on him with you."

"That's rude."

"I don't know. I guess it was a valid fear." In Beck's defense Carter and I were sleeping together until I met Beck, and then after he ghosted me. Maybe some people wouldn't have been able to stop. At least we never crossed that line while we were dating other people. *Hey! We did have some boundaries. Good for us.*

"No, you're not a cheater. You'd never do that." I mean, he's right, that was never me. But I guess I could see a scenario where I would be so enticed that— no, I was never that person. Carter pulls off a piece of pretzel and dips it in the cheddar sauce and then the white cheese sauce.

"Oh, ew, don't double dip."

"They're both cheese. It's not like I mixed the cheese with the frosting."

"You mix that cheese and frosting and I'll throw *you* in the bay for the seagulls."

"I was surprised you didn't start with the frosting."

"The frosting is for the dessert portion of the pretzel."

"There's a dessert portion?"

"Yeah, you have the cheese sauce for the meal, and the frosting for

the dessert— obviously.”

“Oh, obviously.” He tears off another part and dips it in the frosting. I shake my head at him.

“You’re buying me more frosting when you eat all of that.” He’s quiet for a second as he stares down at the food. I can feel a shift in him, the silliness is gone, and he’s turned serious.

“Maddie, I’m really sorry about... before...” He seems a little awkward, and I’m not sure what he’s talking about.

“Before when? This morning? That’s fine. I needed pulled out of my funk.” He’s playing with a piece of pretzel and not looking up.

“No, when I hurt my knee.”

“What? Why are you sorry?”

“For how I was back then. I owe you a big apology.” I am so confused right now, and it makes my stomach a little sick. *Was Arthur right? Is he admitting to something?* “I was pretty awful to you during that.” *Oh.*

“Carter, do you think you were mean to me?” He’s still looking down at his food.

“I was pretty mean to you.”

“Hey.” I gently turn his face to look at me, and I drop my voice. “You were in no way mean to me. You were scared, and in a lot of pain, but you were *never* mean to me.”

“But I wasn’t very good to you either.” I drop my hand from his face.

“You weren’t supposed to be, you were hurt and we were taking care of you, all of us. You don’t have to take care of me when you’re hurt.”

“You gave up so much to take care of me.” He has no idea how much I actually gave up to take care of him.

“You already thanked me. You don’t need to apologize. We were best friends. I would have done anything for you.” He’ll never know how much I was willing to do. He smiles at me, in a sad way, and a look crosses his face that I don’t recognize. I realize I used the past tense when I talked about our friendship, and I’m not sure how I feel about that. Someone walks over to us, and interrupts my thoughts.

“Arthur, you’re alive! You want some pretzel?” Carter holds out the pizza box towards Arthur. I’m still not in the mood to talk to him.

“No. My stomach isn’t feeling so great.” I’m looking down at the pretzel like it’s the most interesting thing in the world.

“Is it like a weird gurgle?” I know that tone, Carter’s messing with

him.

“Yeah, it’s kinda like that.” Out of the corner of my eye I see Arthur rub his stomach.

“That’s not good, man.”

“It’s not?”

“No. That’s exactly what ours did when Maddie and I got food poisoning from oysters. You remember don’t you, Maddie?” He pauses, but I don’t answer. “She remembers. But you didn’t have any oysters last night, right?” He’s really laying it on thick.

“We did have oysters.”

“Oh. My condolences.”

“What?”

“You’re about to have a really bad night. I’d go find a bathroom to camp out in if I was you.”

“Shit.”

“You got that right.”

“Is there a bathroom around here?”

“There’s one over by the grass.” Carter points towards the bathrooms. Arthur hurries away.

“You did that on purpose,” I accuse as I pull off a whole section of pretzel.

“Of course I did it on purpose. He deserved it.” I raise my eyebrows at him. “Tell me he didn’t deserve it and I’ll go right now and tell him I was just messing with him.” I look up and away and take a big bite because, okay, he kind of deserves it. “Yeah, I thought so.”

We sit there for a while eating and sharing Carter’s drink, and I wonder what kind of person I am for letting Carter mess with Arthur. I thought when Arthur and I got here that maybe we just had two different ideas for how we wanted this trip to go. Now I wonder if I never really knew who Arthur was before we came here. Maybe now I’m seeing him for the first time.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.” I don’t want him to know what’s going on in my head right now.

“You want a bucket of ice cream and to watch movies in bed together?”

“No.” He’s asking if I have a broken heart. I do kind of want to watch

movies in bed with him.

“You want me to find you a really trashy romance novel for you to read on the beach?” Now that sounds amazing.

“Yes, please.”

“The beach here or the beach at home?” I look up at him, he knows I want to go home. It’s been a long day, I’m tired, he’s hurting. I start on the dessert section of my pretzel. Carter has already eaten a good portion of the frosting. He searches online for a book. After the third try he hooks me. He stands up, but he’s still having a hard time putting his weight on his knee. Audrey walks over.

“Are you guys taking off?” I wrap my arm around Carter and he leans on me a little. He probably doesn’t need the help, but I need the hug.

“Yeah, I’m going to go rest my knee.” He means I want to leave.

“You want Ben to go with you and help you?”

“No, no. You stay, have fun. Make sure Arthur gets home okay.”

“Okay. Text if you need us to get anything on the way home.” I grab the pizza box because I’m not leaving the rest there.

“Thank you.” Carter leans on me as we walk towards the street we parked on. “You want to pick up something to eat on the way home?”

“No. I have the rest of the pretzel.”

“Literally all you’ve eaten today is that pretzel.”

“It’s all I want to eat.” We’re quiet for a while as we walk towards the car. I’m worried about his knee on the hills, and I guess I’m letting my mind wander about Arthur too. He didn’t seem at all worried about how things went last night. Maybe he doesn’t realize I’m upset.

“You know I don’t need you to help me to the car, right?”

“I know.” I just want his arm around me as I contemplate my future with Arthur. He pulls me closer as we ascend the final hill. I want him to pull me tighter. I want his arm so tight it almost hurts. I lean my head on his shoulder and he gently strokes my hair. I’m not really sure why I’m sad right now, but I am.

“You drive,” he says as we reach the car. He opens the driver door and waits for me to get in.

“You want me to drive your Rover?”

“Why not? You drove my other car.”

“Your other car didn’t cost this much. What if I mess it up?”

“Then I’ll fix it. It’s just a car.” *Damn it, I love this guy.* “My knee

still hurts and I want to rest it.”

I drive Carter home in his car, and we spend the next few hours reading on the beach alone.

Chapter 12

Sophomore Year of College

December

“Did our parents make it?” Carter asks me over the phone.

"Parents are present and accounted for. Audrey and Nico are here, Bennett is stuck on a job and will come as soon as it's over." Nico and Bennett have been working for our dads since they graduated. Bennett had to supervise a particularly hard move that has gone longer than expected.

"Blankets?"

"There are several blankets available for warmth and cuddling." Audrey is sitting next to me in her own custom stadium seat our moms made her with a blanket on her legs.

"Are you checking your phone again to see if Bradford texted you back?"

"I am not!" I don't need to, I checked earlier and there was nothing.

"What's the last thing you sent him?" I sigh deeply.

"I asked if he wanted to get lunch."

"Ouch. Well, it's only been a couple of days."

"It's been a week." And a half.

"Oh. That's probably not good."

"No. It would appear to be over." My voice is a little sad.

"You want to ditch the after party and get a bucket of ice cream?" *Is ice cream the heartbreak scale now? How heartbroken are you? A bucket worth? Less?*

"Maybe a pint. But we don't need to skip the after party."

"You really liked him."

"Eh. We went on a couple of dates." Okay, I really liked him. Maybe I need a quart of ice cream... he's definitely not worth a whole bucket though.

"Tomorrow we'll get you some ice cream and watch movies in bed."

"Deal." Carter takes a deep breath, and lets it out. "Are you okay?" He seems a bit off.

"I'm just nervous."

"You're always nervous." This is more, this is extra.

"They have a really big guy on their team." The way he says that gives me a sick feeling in my stomach.

"So? You're a big guy." I'm trying to give him a pep talk here. That's what I do when he calls. He's nervous, I cure the nerves.

"Wait till you see him. He's massive." I don't like that at all.

"You're amazing, you'll be fine. And Nico says win, or you're out of the family." Nico's head snaps over to me at the sound of his name. He gives me a look, and I shrug at him. Carter laughs through the phone.

"Okay. I'll see you after the game." We hang up the phone and I stare at it a little bit. He's always a little nervous, but not like this. And the description of that guy sounds bad. A bundle of nerves starts to form in my stomach.

"What's up with him?" Nico asks. It snaps me out of my trance.

"He said there's a really big guy on the other team."

"He's a big guy."

"That's what I said."

The lights start going and the music starts playing. The announcer starts hyping up the crowd. I love college football. I've been to every kind of game from peewee to NFL games and college is still my favorite. The teams take the field, and my eye immediately goes to the giant on the other team. He stands taller than the rest of the team, and he's built like a semi truck.

"Jesus Fuck, look at that guy." I look over at Nico, who is not helping right now. "He's gotta be on steroids."

"Nico!" his mother scolds.

"Look at him! There's no way that's not 'roids." *Ugh*. This is the first season in all the years the boys have been playing that Nico and Bennett are sitting with us and not on the field. I'm not appreciating Nico's commentary.

The game begins, and we're starting with the ball. Carter lines up on the field... and the giant lines up... right by him.

"Oh, shit." Nico with the scary commentary. "He's going after Carter."

"What? How do you know?" He's freaking me out right now.

"I can tell by the way he's acting." They snap the ball, Carter takes off down the field. The ball sails downfield to him, and the big guy tackles him—

hard. Carter's on the ground for a moment. He gets up, and shakes his head a little before he walks back to join the other guys.

"Uh oh." Carter's dad now with the scary commentary.

"What?" I need to know what they're seeing that I'm not.

"He got his bell rung." I'm not completely sure what that means, but I'm worried.

It continues like that for a while, every time Carter gets the ball the big guy takes him down... hard. I'm starting to get really upset about it.

"Are you okay?" Audrey asks. I look down at my hand. It has a death grip on the blanket we're sharing.

"He's doing it on purpose! He's going after him like it's personal!"

"Calm down. He's a big boy," Nico says.

"If that was your best friend down there how would you feel?"

"Like I'd want to kick his ass," Audrey says.

"Thank you!"

"He doesn't need you to kick the guy's ass." Nico's trying to calm me down, but it's not working. I just really really want this game to be over. I want Carter's dad to fall asleep at ten, our parents to leave early like always, and to go to that after party where we drink and laugh about the crazy guy with 'roid rage. The guy hits Carter again. "He's going to be feeling this tomorrow." *Ugh*. I start looking online for what to do if he's all beat up tomorrow. I guess movies in bed is a good idea. I'm trying to distract myself because I don't want to keep watching this guy hurt him. I hear the crunch of their pads from the field and I look up.

"Are you okay?" Audrey asks again.

"No, I hate this."

"He always gets tackled."

"Not like this. It's like he's trying to hurt him." I keep checking the time on the scoreboard to see how much time is left. Too much. We're not even at half time yet. Audrey puts a hand on my leg to steady it. I didn't realize I was bouncing it. It's probably annoying her.

"Sorry."

"It's fine. I know you care about him." *I do. So much.* There's nothing I can do right now, and it's killing me.

They set up the next play. They snap the ball, Carter goes deep. Maybe if he's too fast the guy can't catch him. Nate drops back. *Please throw it to Miller.* He throws it to Carter. *Damn it.* He catches it and starts to run

just as the guy catches up to him. *Shit*. He tackles him— hard. Very hard. Carter's on the ground. The guy stands up, and lets out a loud howl into the night sky. His breath billows out of his mouth in a cloud. I'll never forget that moment as long as I live, because while he's celebrating Carter is on the ground... and he's not moving. I stand up. My mom stands next to me. Carter's mom is on her feet. Audrey joins us a minute later. All I can hear is the silence of the crowd and the beating of my own heart.

"Mom." I reach over and grab her sleeve. Suddenly I'm a small child and I just want my mommy. "He's not moving." The other team takes a knee, and I think I'm going to be sick.

"Just wait." The medic rushes over from the sidelines. Carter's dad takes off like a rocket down the stairs followed by my dad. I've never seen him move like that before. Now I see where Carter gets his speed. "He's moving!" But not in a good way. He's rolling around holding his knee.

"He's hurt," Nico says. I turn towards his mom. Growing up, if we were scared, Carter's mom would say, "Do I look scared? You only need to be scared if I look scared." She looks so scared right now. *Shit*. Audrey wraps her arms around her. I'm still holding my mom's arm. They bring the stretcher out, and load him up on it. Carter's mom starts to move around.

"We need to— pack everything up and—" She's looking around frantically, but she's not doing anything.

"I'll pack everything up, you go," Audrey tells us.

"Keys." My mom holds her hand out to Carter's mom, and with a shaky hand she holds her keys over me and Audrey. My mom grabs the keys and her best friend's hand. "I'll drive." Carter's mom starts to walk past me. For a moment that feels like forever I think they're leaving me. Carter's mom reaches out and grabs my hand as she passes by me and starts to pull me along. I look over to Audrey.

"Go, go, go," she ushers me along. I follow behind them, knocking over my cup of hot cocoa that was sitting next to my foot. It's one of those custom paper ones our moms make. It's got Carter's jersey number on it and the contents spill everywhere.

I blindly stumble behind our moms as they tug me through the stadium. I barely register that the game has started back up again. The world keeps turning, but my world has completely stopped. We reach the ambulance as they're loading Carter in. His dad is there. I try to look over to see Carter, but there's too many people in my way. I'm kind of relieved

because I don't know if I want to see him in that kind of pain.

"Where are they taking him?" Carter's mom asks his dad.

"Community," he tells her.

"Which one?"

"West."

"No." He looks confused for a second.

"That's where Daniel died," I say in a quiet voice. Carter's mom's brother, Nate's dad, died at that hospital when we were kids. I don't want Carter going there either.

"Tell them to take him to the north one. That's a nice one," his mom says. His dad nods and climbs into the ambulance as they shut the doors.

Nico arrives at the hospital not long after we do. Audrey is not far behind. The waiting room is packed with people. We have to take seats scattered around the room. At some point, Carter's dad comes out and brings his mom to the back. The rest of us stay in the waiting room. Nico sits down next to me and puts his arm around me. He almost feels like Carter, and all I want right now is him. I pull the neck of Carter's sweatshirt up over my mouth and nose, and pull the hood over my head. I burrow into Nico's side like a baby bunny. I start crying, and I can't stop. One of my sleeves is damp from wiping my tears. The television in the corner is playing the game. They keep showing the hit over and over, and the image of that guy celebrating it afterwards. I hate him so much.

"Don't watch." Nico pulls the hood down a little so I can't see the screen. I drop my eyes down to the floor and stare at the tiles. "He's going to be fine." I nod, but I don't believe him. Bennett bursts into the waiting room almost at a run, then starts searching around for a familiar face. He finds our mom and goes to talk to her. Audrey gets up and walks over to them. Time seems to slow in the waiting room. It feels like we've been here forever. Just when I think I can't take another moment in this purgatory, a nurse walks over to my mom. They talk for a moment. My mom holds one finger up to the nurse gently then walks over to us.

"They're letting one more person back before they end visiting hours." I nod. My mom looks at Nico. He pushes me away from him.

"Go," he tells me. I look over at him for confirmation. "He wants to see you more than he wants to see me." He gently pushes me forward. My mom grabs my hand and walks me over to the nurse.

"I'm going to take you to his room," she tells me. I nod, because I'm

scared I'll start crying again if I talk. She pushes through the double doors of the waiting room. She's talking, but I can't really hear her. We walk down a long hallway and turn a corner. She opens the door to a room and waves me inside. Carter's parents are standing in there with their backs to me. I slip in quietly behind them. There's a doctor talking to them.

"The x-rays look good. I don't see any breaks. At this point I think it's either an MCL or an ACL tear, but I won't know for sure until we do the MRI. You're sure you can't remember if you heard a pop?" There's silence for a moment.

"He said all he heard was the pads hitting together," his dad answers. I walk up behind Carter's dad and try to burrow into his side. I need the dad who's going to tell me that everything is going to be okay. I can see Carter laying in the bed, staring at nothing. His pants are cut open around his right knee. His pads and jersey are off. I've never seen him look so freaked out. His dad raises his arm to put it around me, and Carter's head snaps over to us. I see the moment he registers that I'm there.

"You came?" I nod.

"Can I hug you?" My voice is thick with sadness. He reaches his arms out.

"Maddie, you can always hug me." I walk around to the other side of the bed away from the side where his knee is propped up. I wrap my arms around him and I hug him too tight and I have to loosen my grip. "No, tighter," he says in my ear. I hug him tighter, and dig my fingers into his skin.

"I was really scared." I'm crying again. He grips me tightly and I don't want him to let go.

"I'm okay."

"No you're not." I'm trying not to sob on him, but it's really hard.

"They said someone can stay the night with you," Carter's dad tells him. I try to pull back, but Carter only lets me pull away enough to see his dad. I wipe my face with his hoodie sleeve again. "My back hurts just looking at that thing." He gestures to the uncomfortable looking recliner in the corner. "Maddie, your back is young. You want to stay?" I nod and keep wiping tears. "We'll come back during visiting hours." Carter's dad pulls us both in for a hug. "Everything is going to be okay." That's what I needed.

Carter's parents leave us alone with the doctor. As soon as they're gone I feel their absence and I want them back.

"Okay, Mr. Davis, we're going to get you in for an MRI as soon as

possible. We're going to keep you overnight for the head injury. As long as you seem okay, you should be good to go tomorrow morning. In the meantime let us know if you need anything." He's gone quiet again. "Our cafeteria has Superior Dairy ice cream. I can get them to bring you a milkshake or a scoop while you're waiting." I look over at him.

"You love their ice cream." He's just quiet. Really, really quiet. "He likes chocolate," I tell the doctor.

"I'll have them send some up. This button calls the nurse if you need anything." She leaves us alone in the room.

"You want to watch some TV?" I ask him, because I'm not sure how to keep his mind busy.

"I guess." I turn it on, and the channel is playing the game. I try to change it before he notices. "Is that the game?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to change it." I'm pressing buttons, but nothing is happening.

"I want to see." They're showing him again. I can't keep watching it. "Oh shit. That looked bad."

"It did."

"No wonder you were scared."

"It was really scary" He pats the bed next to him.

"Climb in."

"I don't think I'm supposed to."

"There's plenty of room."

"What if I hurt you?"

"They've got me on a bunch of pain meds." I climb into his bed anyway, and try really hard not to move him. He pulls me tightly to him and I kiss his cheek.

"Can we change the channel? I've seen this like six times already." I don't think I can take any more of it. He nods against my face.

They bring us a bunch of chocolate ice cream. The guys in food service are fans. We lie in bed eating ice cream together watching a nature documentary until we start falling asleep. Around one in the morning they wake us to take him for his MRI.

"Mr. Davis, do your clothes have any metal in them?" the nurse asks.

"Uh, yeah, I think my shorts have these loops on them."

"We're going to have to cut them off." They're already cut around his knee, so they're garbage anyway. "Do you want your girlfriend to leave while

we cut you out?"

"No, she's seen me before." The nurse pulls out a pair of scissors and starts cutting his shorts off. I'm painfully aware of the fact that he didn't correct her. For a moment, I let myself feel what it's like to be Carter's girlfriend. After she finishes cutting his shorts off, I help him into a hospital gown. It's so strange seeing him like this. He's always so strong and so brave. He seems so helpless and scared right now.

The nurse helps him into a wheelchair, and I push him down the hallway into the room with the MRI machine. He's quiet the whole way.

"Can she stay with me?" The nurse looks at me.

"You're not pregnant are you?" My eyes go wide.

"No, we haven't..." I gesture between us "in a few weeks." Before I started seeing Beck. And I definitely wasn't sleeping with Beck. I barely knew him. *Jesus, this is awkward.* The nurse turns to the computer at the desk. Carter looks at me.

"Bradford?" he asks quietly. I look over at the nurse who's typing in the computer, because I don't want her to think that I cheat on my boyfriend. I shake my head at him.

"We never..." I see a look wash over his face that looks something like relief. I assume because that means I can stay with him.

"She can stay with you," the nurse says without looking up. I mentally assess my clothing to make sure I'm not wearing anything metal. We wheel Carter over to the MRI machine. I get to hold his hand while they run it. We go back to the room and try to sleep. I'm awake most of the night staring at him. I'm pretty sure he's not sleeping either.

It's after noon by the time they release him. His parents bring him clothes and give us a ride home. He's quiet the whole way. I'm starting to worry about him. He seems really upset and I don't know what to do. Carter's parents bring us back to his house. His dad opens the door while he uses crutches to get inside. I'm exhausted and I'm glad to be home. The sofa bed has been pulled out of the couch in the living room and the bed is made. Clearly our moms were here, because the sheets look new and there's a pile of pillows.

"The doctor said it might be hard to get up the stairs." His dad explains.

"I really just want to sleep in my own bed," Carter tells him. He sounds exhausted. His eyes are tired and sad.

“Okay,” his dad says, giving in. Carter grips the railing of the stairs and tries to hop up without putting weight on his other leg.

“Shit.” He leans over and grabs at his knee.

“No stairs,” his mom says.

“No stairs,” he repeats with a groan. His dad helps him back down the one stair he made it up, and he uses the crutches to get to the sofa bed.

“We made you a bunch of meals. They’re in the fridge and the freezer. There’s instructions on how to heat them on top.” Carter rubs his head. “Are you okay?” His mom’s voice is full of concern.

“I just feel really dizzy, like I’m drunk.”

“That’s the concussion,” his dad explains. “You’ll probably feel like that for a few days.”

“Days?”

“Yeah. Just get lots of rest.” His dad puts the prescription bag on the table. “You want us to stick around for a while and help you?”

“No. I’m in a lot of pain, and I just want some sleep.” His mom reaches over to hug him. She’s so small. How she made such a giant child, I’ll never know.

“Let us know if you need anything.” They’re forty five minutes away. It’s not like they’re down the street. “We’ll bring more food.” She turns and hugs me too. “Love you both.” His parents leave, and I feel like a new parent who’s been left alone with a baby. I have no idea what I’m doing.

“Can you come lay down with me? I always sleep better when you’re there.”

“Yeah.” I help him into bed, and prop his leg up with a pillow. They gave us a sheet of information on what to do when we got home. I read it in the car. I kick off my shoes and climb into the bed. He lays his head on my chest and I wrap my arms around him.

“Maddie, I hate this.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I can’t even sleep in my bed. I have no privacy. I haven’t even showered.” I kiss his forehead and rub my fingers in the hair near his neck.

“Rest, and I’ll help you shower after.”

“Just keep scratching my hair like that.”

“Absolutely.” He finally falls asleep, and I start responding to all the messages on my phone. The guys on the team shared my number with each other and I have a ton of messages with questions about how he is. I try to

update everyone while he sleeps. Yang wants to bring some soup his mom made that's supposed to help with healing. I promise to text him when Carter wakes up. Audrey comes by at some point with a get well basket for Carter and some things she grabbed from my dorm room. I keep some things here, but not everything. I slip out from under him for a few minutes so we can talk before she leaves. I rub my eyes because they're so dry and tired.

"You look exhausted. Did you get any sleep?"

"I think, like... two hours."

"That's horrible. Tell him I'm sorry this happened. Try to get some sleep. I'm right down the street if you need anything." She hugs me and leaves. I slide back into the bed, but he's right, there's no privacy and it feels weird sleeping in a bed with him when anyone can see us. It's different when we have walls and a door to hide behind. I keep answering messages on my phone until early evening when my eyelids get too heavy. I snuggle into Carter and fall asleep.

It's dark when I wake up. I reach over to feel for Carter next to me, but he's not there. I start to panic, and I open my eyes to look for him. He's sitting up in the bed staring. I can barely see his face in the moonlight.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep." I rub my eyes and check the time. It's three in the morning.

"Are you hurting? Do you need your pills?"

"I've been in pain since midnight."

"Why didn't you wake me?" I jump up and grab the prescription bag off of the counter. I pull out the bottle and start to open it.

"What are those?" There's a giant red sticker that says opioid on the top.

"It says opioids."

"No. Hell no. I'm not taking those." He's acting like it's a rattlesnake.

"Carter."

"I'm not doing it. Too many people have lost their lives to those things." He's freaking out.

"Okay." I put the bottle back in the bag. "I'll call the doctor tomorrow and see if we can get a strong dose of an OTC or something."

"I'm fine. I don't need pills."

"You can't suffer. You can't even sleep right now." He runs his hand through his hair, and tugs on it.

"Maddie, I don't know how I'm going to do this."

"The surgery?" They scheduled surgery to repair the tear they found on the MRI.

"What if it's just fucked? What if they can't repair it? And then what? I'm just done with football?" I've never seen him like this. "I always knew that one day I'd be done, but I wanted to go out on my own terms. Not like this. And not— fuck. If I can't play, I lose my scholarship. I have two years left. I don't have that kind of money."

"Carter." He's spiraling.

"Maddie, I don't know who I am without this game." I toss the bag to the side and slide over next to him. "And what if I get so addicted to pills that I can't function without them? Then what? I'm doing whatever just to get more pills?" He's full down the rabbit hole on this.

"Baby." I kiss him on the lips. "I won't let that happen to you." I hold his face in my hands. "Take a breath, be here with me right now. Not tomorrow, not a year from now, right now, and right now you need to rest, and take care of yourself. No suffering in pain." He nods. "Tell me what you need and it's yours."

"You."

"I'm right here."

"I can do anything as long as I have you." His voice catches a little. I can hear misery in it.

"You have me."

"Always?"

"Always." I kiss him again, and hold him against me. I didn't realize what I was promising. Forever didn't seem as long when we'd been so close for so long already. He settles in against me and I feel his body relax a little.

"Maddie, get those pills out of the house," he says into my chest.

"Okay. I'll get you something else when their office opens. Whatever you want. It's your choice." I feel him get heavier against me and his breathing gets steadier. I'm pretty sure he's sleeping, but I don't move. I'm worried I'll wake him. He needs sleep, we both do. I knew he was upset, but I didn't realize how bad it was. I stroke his hair gently and feel the rise and fall of his chest. Eventually, I go back to sleep.

I wake the next morning to the sound of feet pounding down the stairs. I know it's Nate. I should separate myself from Carter before Nate sees, but he knows we're close. This is a special circumstance. Also it's too

late, he's definitely seen us. I slide out of the sofa bed and walk to the kitchen. Nate's making coffee.

"Is he okay?" he whispers to me. I shake my head, and start to cry a little. I wipe my tears with the same tear stained hoodie I wore to the game. I hate this so much. Nate puts an arm around me. He's warm, but he's soft and hard in all the wrong places and he doesn't feel anything like Carter. "He's just hurting." And scared, but I don't say it out loud because it's not my place.

"I know. I just feel like I can't do anything to help him."

"He just needs you to love him right now." Nate lets go of me, reaches over and pours me a cup of coffee, then one for himself. The word "love" hits me a little hard. I guess we've always loved each other as friends. We've never said it out loud. I didn't think anyone on the outside could look at us and think we loved each other. Nate pours me some of his hazelnut creamer which I don't like, but whatever. I'm just grateful for coffee. He hands me the mug and I take a big sip. It's not the way that Carter makes it.

"I don't know that it's enough." Maybe I mean that I don't know if I'm enough.

"You and Carter were really great when my dad died." Now I'm really going to cry.

"We were kids. We didn't really know how to be there for you." God, life sucks so bad sometimes.

"You really got me through it."

"That was Carter."

He takes a sip of his coffee and shakes his head. "It was both of you. Just do that for him."

"I don't know if I can get him through this." This is so much bigger than I feel like I'm equipped to help with.

"We see the way you are with him." He pauses and takes another sip. "Sometimes all you need is the love of a good woman to get you through something." He smiles at me. "And I'm here if you guys need anything. Carter's always been there for me. I owe him a lot. He's the one who encouraged me to play football. And when my mom couldn't afford to pay for it he made sure it got taken care of." Nate and I don't really talk about feelings. He's not a feelings guy. He's usually pretty focused on football... or food.

"He's a really good guy."

"You guys hungry? I can go get something." *There's the Nate I know.*

"Our moms left some food in the fridge." He opens the fridge again, you know the one he just got the creamer out of, and he sees the food. He can be so oblivious sometimes... yet he seems to see love between me and Carter. *Interesting.*

"This is a lot." I'm not surprised. I'm sure they cooked up a bunch of food to calm themselves. Nate pulls a breakfast casserole out of the fridge and starts warming it. "Some of the guys want to come by and visit for a little bit."

"Yeah, I told them I'd text when he's awake. He slept most of yesterday." I grab the prescription bag and hand it to Nate. "He said he wants these gone."

"Then they're gone." He opens the bottle and dumps it down the drain. He turns on the disposal. There's a crunching sound. When he turns it off I hear Carter stirring in the next room so I walk over to the bed.

"How are you feeling?" He shakes his head.

"Like I've been hit by a truck."

"Nate is warming breakfast. I'm going to call to get you different meds. Some of the guys from the team wanted to come by and see you if that's okay."

"I dunno." He rubs his hand over his hair.

"They love you. They just want to be there for you. Let them come by for a few minutes, if you want them gone I'll kick them out."

"Promise?"

"I promise." He begrudgingly agrees and I send out the text letting them know he's up.

An hour later the house is full of guys from the team. Nico and Bennett are here. They all have plates of breakfast casserole and they're loudly talking and laughing. Nate's warming a second casserole in the oven. Audrey breezes in the front door with Carter's new pills and two big bags in her hands. She has more food for the guys, and cleaning supplies. She pulls out a big cord and starts to unfurl it.

"What is that?" I ask.

"Clothesline."

"Why?"

"Because everyone deserves their privacy." She starts tying one end to the bannister, but she can't quite reach. Bennett walks over and lifts her up. I see them exchange a look. Something is going on there. I think they like each

other. Nico grabs some sheets from upstairs and they make a full privacy curtain across the living room. You can still see down from upstairs, but people can use the kitchen and dining room without seeing in. Audrey sits down next to Carter and he twists around to hug her.

"Thank you," I hear him tell her.

"You can thank me after I clean that bathroom." She points to the downstairs bathroom. We never use it, but he's going to have to for a while. "That thing's disgusting." She's right.

The guys tell stories and laugh. Carter starts to talk a little more. I swear I see a hint of a smile on his face. I'm glad the guys came. Yang brings his mom's soup and Carter downs it like it's a cure all.

"When's your surgery?" Sanchez asks.

"The day after finals." The day after *his* finals. I still have one that afternoon. "They said the surgeon is really good, and I'm really lucky she had an opening. If not, I'd have to wait months to get in."

"What time is it?"

"Nine thirty, but I have to be there an hour early."

"Surgery is what? Two hours? You'll probably be home by lunch." Sanchez puts a big bite of casserole in his mouth.

"That would be nice." It would. We didn't enjoy being there the first time. Being home would be better.

"You know," Sanchez points to the casserole, "this would be better with some chips crumbled on top." I want to roll my eyes. *Of course*. That guy would put chips on anything. Someone passes him a bag of potato chips. "YES!!" He tears the bag open and I see a smile on Carter's face.

Audrey scrubs the disgusting bathroom clean, and I'm endlessly grateful because it was so gross in there. The guys leave in the afternoon so Carter can rest. He seems less miserable than he was yesterday.

"Alright, I promised I'd help you shower."

"Maddie, I haven't showered since the game. I stink."

"Oh, I can smell your stank from over here."

"You stank." He throws a balled up napkin at me.

"Come on, Cartigan, I'll help you." I walk over to him and reach my hands out to help him up. He grabs my arms and pulls himself to standing. He crutches over to the bathroom. It's not very big, but it'll do for now. I lock the door behind us. Carter leans against the counter, and I kneel down in front of him. "This needs to come off right?" They have a fabric brace wrapped

tightly around his knee.

"Yeah. They said to take it off to shower." I very gently and very slowly start to take it off. He makes a sound and I yank my hands back.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"No, you're fine. It hurts all the time." I need to talk him into those new pills the doctor sent over. It's the same stuff you get over the counter. I gingerly finish taking the brace off and set it on the counter. He pulls his shirt off. *Oh, hello.* I forgot about the naked part. *Is it hot in this room? No, it's December and there's no heat. Just me then. Okay.*

"You want me to help with your shorts?" *Please say yes.* I haven't touched him in weeks, and I really want to.

"Yeah, that would help." I stick my thumbs inside his shorts and I can feel the indent of the muscles in his butt as my thumbs glide down. *Ugh, yum.* I slide his shorts over his butt, and let them drop gently on the floor so I won't bump his knee. He's completely naked, and God he looks amazing. He reaches for his crutches and I help him step out of his shorts. We somehow manage to get him over to the shower. There's no tub in this bathroom, so he only has to clear an inch and a half to get in the shower.

"You want a chair or something to sit on?" He gives me a look.

"I'm not an old man."

"How are you going to shower without falling over?"

"You said you were going to help me." *Ooohh.* I didn't realize he thought I was going to help him *in* the shower. *He's my best friend. He needs help. He's seen me naked a bunch of times. I guess we're doing this.* I pull his hoodie off over my head. I haven't showered since he got hurt. I'm probably no prize myself right now. I shimmy out of my pants and turn away to take off my bra and leave it on the counter.

"Does your underwear say 'game day' and have a football on them?" He's laughing. This is the first good laugh he's had since the game.

"Yes, Carter. Some of us haven't been able to change since the game."

"You wore those to the game?"

"Uh, yeah, it was *game day.*" He's smiling, bigger than he has in two days.

"Get your stanky butt over here."

"You're the stanky one." I leave my bra on the counter, drop my panties to the floor and climb into the shower with him. I try to point the

shower head away from us as I turn the water on so we're not blasted with cold water. It's small in here, and we get blasted with cold water anyway. I try not to jump as it hits me, but I definitely let out a yelp. Thankfully the water warms very quickly. I squeeze out some of his body wash into my hands and start to soap down his chest. *Okay, I'm kind of into this. I get to run my hands all over him? Why didn't I think of this myself?* He leans back against the shower wall, and I start rubbing slow circles over his chest and abs. I mean very slow. *I have to savor this right?* I add more soap to my hands and start gently running my fingers over his biceps. Soap bubbles slide down his torso. It's then that I realize he's too tall for the shower. His head isn't under the water. "How do you wash your hair?" His shower upstairs is taller. He dips his head down into the water. When he stands, rivulets run down his face and drip off his lips and chin. "Hey, Baby." The words leave my mouth with no thought behind them other than I want to kiss him. I lean forward and capture his lips with mine. He braces himself on the tile wall.

"Baby, I missed you so much," he says between kisses. *I'm right here, I've been here the whole time.*

"What did you miss?"

"Kissing you." *Oh.*

"Well, let's make up for lost time then." We kiss for a while under the stream of warm water, until I feel bad that he's leaning awkwardly down and I'm supposed to be helping him. I break away from him. "Let me get your back." He angles himself so he's leaning over and bracing his body against the wall with both arms. I squeeze out more soap. I rub slow circles on his back, and start to dip my hands down just a bit lower with each circle until I'm gently caressing his butt. *Holy Michaelangelo's David, he's beautiful.* I slowly wash off his legs. Soap runs down his calves to his ankles. His shampoo is in here too, so I squeeze out some of that and start working it into his hair.

"Mmm... That feels nice." *Good. He's been through a lot and I want him to feel better.* I keep rubbing his hair and neck long after I need to because he seems to be enjoying it. As he shifts to rinse the soap out of his hair I catch a glimpse of the python in the room. *Oh.* He finishes rinsing off and he sees me eyeing it. "Just ignore that." His voice is almost sheepish, like he's embarrassed that I've seen it.

"What if I don't want to?" I'm asking permission, but I don't really need it. I know he's fine with me touching him.

A smile slowly spreads across his lips. Not quite the full Davis smile, but we're making good progress. "God, I missed this."

I step closer into his space so my body is touching his. Warm water runs down our skin. I slide my hand along his hip until I reach his length and then I slowly glide my hand along it. He takes in a sharp breath, and braces himself against the wall again.

"I'm not going to hurt you, am I?" I ask quietly as I run my hand over the tip.

"Never." I'm not sure if we're talking about the same thing. I just don't want to make his knee worse. I start working a good rhythm with my hand gliding, teasing. "Oh, Baby," he says in a breathy moan. His breathing starts to pick up the pace, and my heart starts to pick up pace with it. I love seeing him like this, breathless and starving for more.

He releases one hand off the wall and pulls me to him. His mouth is on mine, fierce, hungry. I want him to devour me, to forget about the last two days, and all the bad days before. I want to pull all the pain from his body and replace it with anything else. Pleasure, hope, reverie, I don't care as long as the pain is gone. His skin is silken soft in my hand, over big, thick, hardness. He pulls me to him tightly and I'm unrelenting with my pace. I need this as much as he does, for him to release all his pent up desires and frustrations. His fingers start to dig into my skin and he breaks our kiss.

"Fuck," he breathes against my lips. His breath a quiet promise that he's almost there. His breathing is ragged, water cascades down his face. I take a mental video of it to replay later. He lets out a few quiet moans as I glide my hand across his length. My body wants more from him. I want everything. I want him to shove me up against the glass and take what he wants, but I know that's not happening today. Not in his condition. So I'll settle for what I can get. Baby, breathy and moaning, surrendering to me. His body goes rigid and he lets out a groan loud enough that I worry Nate will hear. Finger tips dig into my skin deep enough that his nails might break it, and I don't care. I feel him pulse in my hand as he releases, and I don't stop until I know every last drop is out. One last "Fuck," is whispered against my lips and I know he's done. His chest heaves as he tries to catch his breath. I smile to myself because I know he felt better, if only for a fleeting moment.

"Come here." He pulls me over towards him. His foot slips and he puts his full weight on his knee. He takes a sharp breath in and pulls his hand off me.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s fine, I’m fine.” He puts his hand on my shoulder and leans on me.

“I think we’re done for today.”

“Oh we are definitely not done,” he says in a way that makes the heat rise in my body and settle in my lower half.

“We can finish some other time.” I want to finish, but not like this, not with him in pain.

“Baby.” It’s a plea.

“I’m sure you can find some way to make it up to me later.”

“I can think of lots of ways.” I feel like I need to fan myself right now, or at the very least turn this shower to ice cold because I’m not getting any satisfaction in the immediate future. I wash my hair and body at record speed, and help Carter out of the shower. He wraps a big fluffy towel around me and pulls me in for a kiss. I missed this. I missed this closeness we have. I wrap a towel around him and we stand there for a moment just wrapped in each other.

“Maddie.” *Uh oh.* That’s a serious tone.

“Yeah.”

He pulls me forward by the towel and rests his forehead on mine. *Uh oh.*

“Will you take me to my surgery?” *Oh.* I wasn’t expecting that.

“Me?” He nods against my face. “Are you scared?” He nods again. “Then I’ll be there.”

“I can do anything as long as I have you.” It’s the second time he’s said that. I’ve never heard him talk like this before.

“Then you have me.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

We dry each other off and change into clean clothes. I wrap his knee back in the brace the way the internet video shows me. He only winces a little. We leave the safety and comfort of the bathroom and sit in his temporary bed in the living room.

“Finals schedule just came out,” Carter says as he scrolls through his phone. I pull up the schedule. It’s always off from the times we normally have class, so your nine am class has a ten am final, your eleven thirty is at one, my one pm class is at— NINE A.M.?! WHAT?! That can’t be right. I

check the page again. I have to be reading this wrong. I look a third time. It still says the same thing. *Shit.*

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Carter's surgery is at nine thirty, the surgery I literally just promised I'd take him to. He has to be there at eight thirty. My final is at nine. There's no way. There's absolutely no way. Unless I take him early, and just drop him off and race back here for the final. I start doing math in my head for the drive there and back.

"Carter, what did they say about you being lucky to get in with that surgeon?" I'm fishing. Maybe we can reschedule for another day.

"They said she's booked up for months, but she has an opening."

"That was really lucky." For him, not for me. Horrible for me. I pull open my laptop and start typing an email to the professor. Maybe she'll let me take it early. I'm not asking to take it later, just not at nine a.m. That's fine right? There's no harm in asking right?

Good Morning Dr. Kwon,

I just saw the finals schedule for next week. Our afternoon class is scheduled at nine a.m. I have a conflict with my schedule. I have to take Carter Davis for surgery after his injury this past Friday. They're unable to reschedule the surgery for another time. Is there any way I can take the final early in the testing center?

Thank you,

Madison Moore

I stare at it. I agonize over it. I write and rewrite, and delete it until words have lost all meaning. And yes, I dropped Carter's name. Normally I don't do that, but if it will help this situation then I'm going to use it. Sorry if that makes me a bad person, but I *just* promised him. I agonize some more and hit send. About an hour later her reply comes through.

Dear Miss Moore,

I understand that college students with very active night lives may think this is morning, but it is actually late afternoon. I do not control the finals schedule, the school does. As stated in my syllabus the final will be taken in person in my classroom at the designated time. I do not make exceptions. I do, however, lock my door at 9:01 exactly. No late entry will be permitted. Missing the final will result in a zero for the test and a failure of the class. Despite the culture at this school, sports do not take priority over academics. Any further questions you have can be answered by reviewing the syllabus I gave you at the start of the semester.

Amy Kwon PhD

My stomach drops. *Shit. I did write morning. Why didn't I catch that the five thousand times I went over it? Apparently it was a big mistake dropping Carter's name. And if I don't show up to that final I fail.* I rub my hands over my eyes. I'm here on an academic scholarship. It pays for my tuition and housing. If I fail a class my GPA drops and I lose the scholarship. *Shit. Now I know what Carter felt like last night.*

"Everything okay?" I glance over at him.

"I'm fine." I'm not fine. I'm spiraling. *Just tell him. Just say the words "I have a final" outloud to him. He will understand. And then he will go to his surgery that he's afraid of without me. I can be there when he wakes up. How do I do this? Dump him off at the front door of the hospital and race back here? Okay, maybe not exactly that, but drop him off? Then come back, take the final, and race back to him in time for him to wake up. Okay fine. That one.*

Thankfully classes are done so I don't have to help Carter to all of his classes, just to the finals. They let him take two of them in the testing center back to back so it cuts down on him having to get around campus on crutches. Apparently *his* professors are nice.

The night before the surgery he barely sleeps. He spends half the night sitting in bed staring, and the other half tossing and turning. I know because I was up most of the night doing the same. Neither of us is in good shape the next morning when we get ready to leave. Carter's dragging, he's really quiet, but I already know he's scared.

I help him into his SUV because my car is too small and it's too hard to scrunch him in there with the knee. I get him to the office a little early so I

can turn around and drive back to campus. I have him seated in the waiting room with his crutches. I mentally go over everything to make sure he's fine before I leave. He reaches over and grabs my hand.

"Thank you for staying with me." He's gripping my hand tight. *Oh no. I need to leave. I can't stay. Shit. I need to tell him I have a final.* He bows over his legs and holds my hand to his forehead.

"Good morning, Mr. Davis, I am Dr. Gupta," the doctor says in a sweet high pitched voice. She has a slight accent. Carter's head snaps up to look at her. "I am here to perform your brain surgery." *What?* She forces a laugh. I think she's joking. We probably would have laughed if we both weren't such messes. "Not really. I am here to perform a reconstructive surgery of the anterior cruciate ligament of your right knee." She's being slow and deliberate with her words. I feel like she's doing it so we know she's competent after the joke she just made. "The surgery will take around two hours to complete. Will your girlfriend be taking you home after?" He grips my hand with both of his.

"Yes," he says in a quiet voice. And just like that I'm his girlfriend again.

"My staff will provide you with instructions on how to care for him after the surgery." *Care for him.* I hadn't thought about that. He's going to need cared for. My stomach turns a little. I'm starting to worry about this. "I see you have left a note for me." I look over at Carter's left knee where he made me write "not this one" in sharpie this morning. "That is very helpful. I assure you, I have successfully performed this surgery many times." I might make a drinking game out of Carter's surgery. Drink every time this doctor says surgery. "Do you have any questions for me before my staff takes you back?" Carter's almost crushing my hand.

"Am I going to be able to play football again?" I can hear the fear in his voice, see the fear in his eyes.

"Most of my patients have successfully returned to their sports." I catch that she said most, but not all. I think Carter did too, because he's not relaxing.

"Alright, Mr. Davis, let's get you ready," a nurse says as she walks into the room.

"I will see you in the operating room. I'll be the one with the scalpel." Dr. Gupta leaves as the nurse and I help Carter into a wheelchair. I think Dr. Gupta thinks she's a comedian, which Carter would normally love, but

again— he’s a mess. We push him down the hallway and into a room where they start prepping him for the surgery. I keep checking the time. Eventually the nurse leaves us and we sit there together. My stomach keeps getting sicker as the minutes tick by. I feel like I’m going to vomit, but fuck, I can’t leave him. As the minute hand hits nine o’clock I feel like I’m watching my entire future go up in flames.

“You okay?” I look over at Carter and I nod.

“I’m just worried.” About him, about me, about our futures. There’s no guarantee that this will work. We may both lose our scholarships. The minute hand ticks over one more minute and the doors are officially locked. It’s done. I’m done. I’ve officially failed. The nurse takes Carter into surgery, and I promise him I’ll be right here when he gets out. And then I spiral horribly the entire time he’s in there because I’m so scared of what our lives are going to look like when he comes out. Two hours hasn’t felt this long since the night he got injured. I think about how much I hate the guy who did this to him, and all the things I wish I could do to him. About two and a half hours later they get me from the waiting room.

“He’s still coming out of the anesthesia, so he might be a little loopy,” the nurse explains.

“Maddie cakes!” He is a little loopy.

“Cartier!” I feel little tears at the corners of my eyes. He seems okay, but his knee is all bandaged up. “I was worried about you.”

“Can I have a banana split on the way home?” I look over at the nurse. She shakes her head and mouths “no.” I look back at Carter.

“Uh, how about we get you one later tonight?”

“But I want one now.” I kind of feel like I’m negotiating with a toddler.

“Why don’t we get you home to rest, and you can have all the food and banana splits you want later?” He doesn’t even like banana splits.

“Okay, but I want two.”

“Sure.” Do I doubt that he can consume two? No. Do I think he’s going to want even one when this wears off? Also no. The nurse is checking him and writing things down in his chart.

“Maddie, can we get married on the way home?”

“WHAT?!” I look over at the nurse. *Is this real life?*

“Girl, I’d take him up on that before he changes his mind,” she says without looking up from his chart. He reaches out for my hand. The nurse

wraps a blood pressure cuff on his arm.

“I want to marry you. Just me, and you. No baby.”

“No baby?” the nurse asks as she inflates the cuff.

“No baby. Just Maddie and Carter,” he explains. She’s watching the needle on the cuff as she lets the air out.

“I might give up having kids if he wanted to marry me.” He’s not asking for that, but I’m not entirely sure what he’s saying. I don’t think *he* knows what he’s saying. The nurse pulls the blood pressure cuff off and writes more.

“Maddiekins. Cakes? Kins? What’s your name?” *Oh my God.*

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll be back to normal in a little bit.”

“Are you sure?”

“I kinda like him like this.” He starts singing the first line of Bruno Mars’s “Marry You.” I look over at the nurse. “Girl, you better stop by that courthouse on your way home.”

What. Is. Happening?

They load him up in the wheelchair. *We’re going home like this??* I push him through the hospital as he continues to sing “Marry You” pretty loudly. He’s totally nailing the lyrics, which is very unusual. The staff seems to be enjoying it. He gets to the part where he asks if it’s dancing juice.

“Oh, it’s some kind of juice.” *Anesthesia.* He keeps singing as we pass through the lobby. A couple of staff members and a patient start clapping. “Carter Davis, ladies and gentleman!” He takes a bow in the wheelchair and continues singing. By the time we get to the parking lot I’m singing along with him and dancing with his wheelchair, because why not?

I help him up in the passenger seat of his SUV and start to buckle him in. As I lean over he catches my face in his hands. He’s kind of squishing my face a little.

“I love you, Baby.” He kisses me on the squishy mouth.

“I love you too, Baby.”

“Can we make out on the way home?” Now I’m just laughing.

“I kind of have to drive.” Maybe I like him like this, too. He’s kind of adorable.

“Oh. Will you hold my hand?”

“Yes, I will hold your hand.”

I help him get into bed, I help him go to the bathroom. I feed him a

special after surgery diet. When he needs to shower, I tape plastic around his leg and help him shower. I take him to get his stitches out. When he starts physical therapy, I drive him to his appointments. For about two months, I basically live in his house on that sofa bed with him. I spend endless hours helping with the exercises the physical therapist gives him. And okay... we keep up with the gropey hands and gropey mouths. He finds a way to pay me back for earlier.

∞∞∞∞

Summer

“Just twenty more minutes, Mads, please.” We’re out on the lawn of The Manor in the early morning fog. I’ve been throwing this football to him for almost two hours. I’m exhausted and my shoulder is killing me. I’m not Nate, I’m not used to this.

“Carter, my shoulder hurts.” We’ve been doing this every morning for the last few weeks. “Can’t Nico and Bennett do this? Or Nate?” Nate, who is actually a quarterback. Carter jogs over to me. I can still see the red surgery scars on his knee.

“I don’t want them to know.” *What? Why is he being so secretive?*

“Why don’t you want them to know?”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s embarrassing that you had knee surgery and are working on getting back into shape?”

“See, you get it.” I don’t get it. He looks over to the house. Everyone is still sleeping. He grabs my hand. “Please. I’ll buy you a kermel latte at Java Juice.”

“And a breakfast sandwich?” This is worth more than a latte for sure, and I’m more than willing to negotiate a better deal.

“And ice cream! I’ll even ice down your shoulder.”

“Ew, no. It’s too cold for that.”

“Fine. Latte, breakfast sandwich, ice cream, shoulder rub. Final offer.”

“Twenty minutes. That’s all.”

“Yes!” He’s already lining back up to run again. “Your spiral is

getting really good.” He taught me when he first started playing when we were kids so we could practice in the yard. It was mediocre at best. After weeks of practice, it’s looking half decent. *I should show Nate.* He runs down the yard, turns, and I throw him the ball. In twenty minutes he’ll ask for another twenty. I can probably get lunch out of him. Hell, if we keep this up I could probably get a new car. He catches the ball, turns, and runs again. He looks so much happier than he did a few months ago. He jogs back over to me with the ball. I reach out for it, he tugs my arm and pulls me close.

“I love you, Baby.” He kisses me.

“I love you too, Baby.”

Chapter 13

Present Day

The sound of seals barking mixes with the caw of seagulls and the crashing of waves. Salty ocean breeze gently blows my hair. The morning fog has almost burned off. It's turning out to be a nice day today. I'm sitting at the bistro set at the cliffside of The Manor watching the waves roll through.

"Hey, Bestie," Audrey says as she sits next to me. Her dark hair is neatly styled, and her outfit is perfect. She hands me a cup of coffee. I don't know how she always makes the most amazing drinks, but I will drink whatever she puts in front of me. I take a sip. *Yum.*

"What is this?"

"Chocolate, caramel, and hazelnut. I call it a Snickers bar." Is there a job where you just make all kinds of drinks? Not an alcohol mixologist, but all kinds of drinks. Audrey would be amazing at that. "You looked really tired, I thought you could use an afternoon pick me up."

"I haven't been sleeping well this trip." I've been up all night thinking about Arthur, and Carter... and feelings. All kinds of feelings.

"How are you feeling about being home?"

"Being home is a mixed bag of emotions."

"Because of Carter?" I take a sip and contemplate my answer.

"Carter, Arthur, my dad." Audrey waves her hand.

"We talked to your dad."

"You did, that was amazing, thank you. After four years I didn't think we'd be able to get along again." My dad has been closer to normal since Audrey talked to him.

"Sometimes men just need reminded that their approach is too rough." She takes a sip of her coffee. "This coffee maker is amazing. I keep telling Bennett we need one for the house."

"How are things with Bennett?"

"Good."

"You think you'll get married soon?" I've been dying to know the status of their relationship for a while, and now seems as good a time as any to ask.

"Us? Oh my God, no. It's too soon."

"Audrey." I give her a look. "You've been together almost six years."

"Yeah. Too soon." She takes a sip of her coffee.

"Audrey."

"What?" She's avoiding looking me in the eye.

"You're scared."

"I am not scared... I'm... cautious."

"After this long you know each other." I don't know why she doesn't want to take the leap.

"I just—"

"What?"

"I just don't know if I can do it." Audrey and I have had deep conversations before, but not about her and my brother.

"Do what?"

"The whole wife and mom thing. My mom... my mom didn't know how to love, so I didn't know how to love."

"You knew how."

"I knew how to be nice, and polite. I didn't know how to love. I learned unconditional love from you guys."

"Us?"

"Your moms, the boys, you and Carter."

"Me and Carter?" I've never thought about us having unconditional love.

"Maddie, he was going to take you to get a pregnancy test."

"And? That's just Carter." I take another sip of my Snickers bar.

"For a baby that definitely wasn't his."

"So?"

"So that's unconditional love. You think any guy would just do that? No way. He loves you. Best friends or not, he just loves you." She sips her coffee. "People spend their whole lives searching for a Carter Davis and you have him completely."

"Audrey— that's friend love. You and I have that. Bennett actually wants to marry you, and have babies with you. That's what people look for."

"Are we jealous of each other's relationships?"

"Apparently." I sip my coffee.

"All I know is, that boy was a mess without you. That's love." *I was a mess without him too.*

"But I want that 'till death do us part' kind of love. Carter and I don't have that."

"Do you and Arthur have that?" I groan.

"I don't know what Arthur and I have anymore. I don't think he even knows I'm mad at him."

"Did you tell him you're mad?" I don't know why, but that question surprises me.

"No." I feel like Carter was saying something similar.

"He's not us. He hasn't known you long enough to know when you're upset."

"But shouldn't he know?"

"He's a guy! They barely know any feelings past hungry." I laugh. "You need to tell him you're mad, and why, in plain English so he understands." I groan again, louder.

"But I don't wanna!" Audrey laughs at me.

"You're not good with the hard conversations... like goodbye." She gives me a pointed look.

"I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye to you. I didn't think I'd be gone this long."

"How long did you plan on being gone?" *Long enough to get over Carter. At this point that seems like it may not happen. It feels like being around him is bad for me. We just slip into this same relationship... okay minus the groping. At least there's that. I wanted boundaries in our friendship, I guess not groping is a big boundary.* "You're being very quiet right now."

"Because I just don't know. I didn't know then, and I don't know now."

"I miss our friendship." She sighs. "And it's weird here without you."

"I miss you too. I miss all of this, it's just too hard." *I've said too much.* Audrey doesn't know about Carter and me. "Just tell me what to do about Arthur." *There, that will distract her.*

"Drive home without him and leave his ass here." She smiles and raises her mug at me.

"It's his car."

“So?”

“So, that’s grand theft auto.”

“First of all, I’ve seen his car, it’s not *grand theft*, it’s a misdemeanor at most.” I spit out the coffee I’m drinking because I’m laughing so hard. “Second, that would definitely show him you’re angry.”

“I’m not committing a crime just to show him how mad I am.” Audrey and I both start laughing.

“What are you two laughing so hard about?” Bennett asks as he walks up.

“Stealing a guy’s car so he knows you’re mad at him,” Audrey says in a playful tone. Bennett starts patting his pockets.

“Fuck. Where are my keys?” I start laughing harder.

“Relax, you’re not the one in trouble,” Audrey tells him.

“Oh, Arthur? You’d be doing him a favor, that thing is on its dying breath.” Why do I think it’s so funny? Because I agree, and he doesn’t want me to touch it despite the fact that it’s in terrible condition. “You two about ready to go? I’m ready to bust a move.”

“Back off, ladies, he’s mine,” Audrey says. “Sorry, I’m just practicing for later.” Now I’m really laughing. He’s my brother, and I love him, but his dance moves are not great. He’s no Carter, that’s for sure.

“Back off, paramedics, he’s not having a heart attack, he’s just dancing.” I look over at Bennett. “Sorry, I was also practicing for later.” He sticks his tongue out at me like when we were kids.

“We’re doing the NSYNC dance.” The boys all learned the “Bye Bye Bye” choreography when they were bored teenagers.

“You guys do that dance every year.”

“Yeah, and every year Nico and Nate get a bunch of attention for it. I told Carter we’d find him a girl this year.” I feel like I’ve been punched in the stomach. “That dude needs to get laid.” *Ugh*. I don’t want to think of Carter with another girl. It makes me feel weird.

“Ben, don’t be crude. Maddie’s sitting right here.”

“They’re friends, she gets it.” I do not get it.

“What about Beth? Won’t she be heartbroken?” Audrey asks.

“Nice one.” Bennett holds his hand out and Audrey high fives him.

“I don’t get it.” I’ve been dying to know who she is since she popped up on Carter’s phone.

“She’s the office manager at the main office of your dad’s business.”

I'm still not getting it.

"She's like a hundred," Bennett adds.

"Like on a scale of one to a hundred?"

"No, as in her grandkids are older than us." *Oohhhh.* "She shamelessly flirts with Carter."

"Did he ever meet up with her?" Audrey asks.

"Yeah, he handled it a couple days ago."

"Why did he need to meet up with her?" I've been dying to know.

"His dad accidentally brought the only set of keys to one of the work trucks with him when they drove up here. Beth really wanted it parked in the warehouse since they're closed all week. She drove up here to meet with him and get the keys." *Oh.*

"So they're not dating?" I ask. Suddenly I'm feeling relieved.

"God no."

"That would be weird having a step grandpa younger than you," Audrey adds with a laugh.

We load up into two cars and head downtown where the street is once again closed off.

"What amazing town event are we attending today?" Arthur asks. *Is that sarcasm?*

"Audrey's favorite, dancing in the street," Bennett tells him.

"What is that?"

"Dude, it's dancing... in the street."

"You just dance?" There's Arthur's judgy tone making an appearance, yet again.

"Yes."

"In the road?" He might be finally getting it.

"It's blocked off. There's no cars."

"But that's it?"

"There's food and beer and a full bar in the middle of the street," Audrey explains. Arthur groans.

"I don't think I want to look at alcohol today."

"Bad day yesterday?" Bennett asks.

"It was fine. Carter had me thinking I had food poisoning, so I ended up sitting in the park bathroom for three hours." The boys exchange looks as they try not to laugh.

"I could have sworn you had food poisoning. Guess you got lucky,"

Carter says apologetically. Nico turns away to hide his smile.

“I need some garlic fries,” I declare. I haven’t eaten much today and garlic fries sound delicious.

“No you don’t,” Audrey tells me. “They have new owners. Carter got some last year and they were pretty bad. He ended up feeding them to a pregnant cat.” I look over at Carter and I’m starting to tear up from how funny I think it is. It’s just so Carter.

“I’m sorry, you did what?”

“She needed nutrients, Maddie, she had eight babies to feed.” He’s defending himself, and I think it’s both adorable and hilarious.

“Oh! I have a picture!” Audrey pulls out her phone and starts scrolling. “Here!” She holds it out to me. Sure enough there’s a picture of Carter smiling, thumbs up to the camera, feeding a fry to a black and white cat who is either very fat or very pregnant. I don’t know why I think it’s so funny, but I’m laughing pretty hard at him.

“We’re doing street food again?” Arthur asks. “Didn’t we just have street food?”

“A couple days ago,” I say. *We ate street food, he ate pizza then ate with his friends at a restaurant.* Not that I’m upset about it or anything. Okay, I might be a little upset.

“Yeah, but there’s plenty of places to eat in this town, right?” I’m not sure what Arthur wants right now. Does he want all of us to load back up and drive him somewhere else to eat? That’s a whole thing. I’m kinda hungry at this point, and I’m not really wanting to drive around looking for somewhere to eat.

“There’s tons of places walking distance from here. You could go get some food then meet us back here,” Nico offers.

“Nah, I don’t really feel like walking.” *Well, now he’s just being difficult.*

Arthur finally settles on some chowder from one of the booths which is fine with me because I haven’t had any this trip. We sit at the tables in the street while we eat. Arthur burns his mouth on the chowder, and I have to teach him the strategy for how to eat it without burning your mouth. Carter walks over to join everyone with a big grin on his face.

“What did you do?” I know that face, he did something.

“Why would you ask me a question like that?” Answering a question with a question? *Yeah, he definitely did something.*

Just then the DJ announces a song dedication. I look over at Carter. The DJ says it's from Dr. Chase, who is definitely Carter... to his mother in law. I look over at Carter with a quizzical look. "Need You Now" by Lady A comes on. I smile and shake my head.

"Isn't this song about getting drunk and wanting to sleep with someone?" Arthur asks.

"Oh, it definitely is," I tell him.

"Didn't the DJ just say it was from a person to their mother in law?"

"He did." I'm staring at Carter who thinks he's hilarious.

"Carter likes awkward song dedications," Audrey tells him.

"Uh, I believe he said it was Dr. Chase." Carter says, still smiling.

"Everyone knows that's your fake name, dude, you use it when we go bowling," Nate says.

"Now I gotta burn that identity and start a new one."

"You make fake song dedications?" Arthur asks. "That's kind of lame. Do you do prank calls too?" Carter's eyebrows shoot up, and his smile fades. Audrey looks down awkwardly at her food. *Oh hell no, he's not going to talk to Carter like that.* I feel like a mama bear right now.

"That's rude," I say to Arthur.

"It's a bit juvenile, don't you think?" Arthur's looking at me with that judgy look.

"No. And maybe you don't have to say everything that *you* think." Arthur is scraping the last of his chowder out of the bowl. I don't think he's understanding what I'm saying. "Like how you feel about my appearance."

"Are you still hung up on that?" He wipes his mouth with a napkin and stands up. "Look, I get a little too honest when I drink. Some people can't handle it. Maybe you just need to be less sensitive about things." He looks over at Nate. "You ready to go, man?" *What?!*

"You're leaving?" *Again??*

"Yeah, Nick said he'd take me to Pebble Beach so we could go golfing." I look over at Nate, who is also not Nick, just like Nico wasn't the other day. *Does he think they're all named Nick? Does he think someone is named Nick, but he can't figure out who? What is happening?*

"It's the biggest tourist week of the year, there's no way you're getting into Pebble Beach."

"He plays in the NFL, we'll just drop his name and walk right on."

"Is that the plan?" Nate seems like this is new information. "Dude, I

play third string on a team in the midwest. You want a free beer at a bar in Iowa, you drop my name. No one here knows who I am." I look back over at Arthur.

"If that doesn't work we'll try a different golf course. Aren't there like ten around here?"

"You're going to *ten* golf courses?"

"Just until we find one that will let us in." Arthur points a finger at me. "We're good right?" We are in no way "good." I open my mouth to say no and he turns to leave with Nate.

"Bye, Nick!" Carter calls after them. I feel like I've been smacked in the face with a bag full of bricks. Audrey gets up and walks behind my chair. She wraps her arms around me.

"I'm really proud of you for trying to talk to him," Audrey says. My mouth is still hanging open. Words aren't coming out. I'm still trying to process what just happened. "Come dance with me. We'll make a plan to steal his car." Right now I want to drive it into the bay. Audrey grabs my hand and drags me out to the dance floor. Something is playing that is too slow to dance to, but not quite a fast dance. Audrey puts her arms straight out and we start dancing like we're thirteen at a junior high dance. I look over and see Mr. Butterfield ask Mrs. Butterfield to dance. They walk out to the dance floor, and stare at each other. "Aww, I think they like each other."

"I can't remember a Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield ever liking each other. That's so cute." At least someone around here is finding love.

The beat changes and I hear Justin Timberlake. Immediately I know this song. It's "Bye Bye Bye." Bennett, Carter, and Nico walk out with the confidence of actual boy band members, and I start cracking up. They start doing the full dance as the crowd starts to part. *These idiots*. A few lines into the song more people stop dancing and start to watch the boys. It's well rehearsed. They've been doing this dance for more than ten years. It's one of the only dances my brother can do well. They've got the arms and the stomps, and the kicking going. A crowd is starting to gather. It's mostly women. Carter looks over and smiles at me. He's loving this. I kinda am too. I love how ridiculous he is.

The song ends with one last jump from the guys, and people clap. The crowd starts to dissipate. Couples go back to dancing. Carter's still smiling and a little out of breath. Some of the women are lingering to talk to them. I start to walk over to Carter and a woman walks in front of me.

"I remember you from last year," she says to Carter. She's kinda pretty... I guess.

"I remember *you* from last year."

"I think your moves have gotten better."

"Maybe your eyesight has gotten worse." She laughs and touches him on the arm. *Are they flirting?* I start to walk over to tell him that his knee seems better today, and Bennett steps in front of me.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Going to talk to Carter."

"Talk to him later."

"Why?"

"He's talking to a girl."

"So I'm not allowed to talk to him?"

"Exactly." He starts to turn me away.

"Carter Davis? Oh my God! I knew that was you!" I turn back towards Carter because I need to see who is attached to this voice. Tiny little woman, big hair, big eyes, tiny little outfit. I know her. It's Krystle. I hate Krystle. "We went to college together. I'm sure you don't remember me."

"I remember you." *He better.*

"Oh, you're so sweet." I watch her discreetly pull a ring off her finger and slip it in her pocket. *Oh hell no.* I march right over to him and grab his hand.

"Dance with me." I grab him, and drag him far away from her. I pull him close and start dancing.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving you from her— again."

"She seemed harmless."

"You said that the first time."

"I did?"

"Yes you did, and she definitely wasn't harmless." I can't believe he doesn't remember the whole situation.

"I haven't seen her in years. I'm sure she moved on."

"Last I heard she married one of the guys on the team after we graduated."

"See, she's married."

"And I just watched her hide the ring in her pocket."

"What?" He looks around for her.

"Don't look for her. She'll come back. She's like a horrible boomerang."

"I think you're being a bit dramatic."

"Clearly you're not remembering her." I feel Carter's leg rubbing on mine. *What the hell?* I look down and find a black and white cat rubbing against his legs.

"Hey! It's your cat friend!" Audrey calls over to us from where she's dancing with Bennett. "Is she pregnant again?"

"Carter, I don't think that cat is pregnant. I think it's just a big cat," I tell him. The cat continues to rub our legs.

"Dude, I think that's a boy cat," Bennett says to us. "It has a mustache." I start laughing.

"Any cat can have a mustache," I say, still laughing. Sure enough, its fur has a little design like a mustache. "I think it remembers you and wants more food."

"I'll get you more fries, little buddy."

"Carter, don't feed the cat more fries."

"But it wants them."

"You are the most ridiculous person I've ever—"

"There you are!" *Oh good, Krystle is back.* "I was really hoping we could catch up."

"We're dancing," I tell her. As I recall last time we saw her she didn't want to dance with Carter.

"We could go get a bite to eat, talk about old times."

"We ate." I'm not letting him answer. I want her to go away.

"A drink then." That sounds worse. *Is she trying to lure him away? Get him drunk?* I pull Carter closer. I don't know what it is about her that makes my blood boil, but it does.

"He's not thirsty."

"Why don't you let him speak for himself?"

"Why don't you go home to your husband?" Her jaw drops.

"I don't know what she's talking about," she says to Carter. I definitely saw that ring.

"Stop trying to bang my boyfriend." *I have no idea where that came from. I haven't said that since college.* She just makes me so mad.

"I'm just trying to talk to him." A large guy walks up behind Krystle and puts his arms around her.

“Hey, Princess.” *Oooh, I knew it!* She tenses up, and sure enough that hand goes into her pocket and comes out wearing the ring.

“You made it!” Krystle says to the man I assume is her husband. *I freaking knew it.*

“Who are your friends?”

“This is Carter Davis, and his... girlfriend.” She says the word like it’s gross.

“Davis? Shit man, I heard stories about you.” *Everyone knows Carter.* “I heard you used to pull pranks in the locker room.” Carter laughs. I look at him. *I never knew that.*

“I like to keep things interesting. Did you play?”

“I transferred in after you left. People still talked about you though.” He laughs. “How long have you two been together?”

“Since college right?” Krystle asks. *Okay, maybe I took this too far.* I’m getting a little hot. “I remember you two being hot and heavy. How come you’re not married yet?” If there was a way to make her go away right now I’d love that. My brother is not too far away and I don’t want him to hear any of this.

“Yeah man, you gotta join the club. It’s fun being young and married.” I look over at Krystle who just a few minutes ago didn’t know what I was talking about. *Aren’t we a couple of liars?*

“How long have you two been married?” I stare at Krystle as he answers.

“Since college. We got married right before the NFL draft. I got picked, went out to celebrate, had a little too much to drink and fell down a flight of stairs. Blew out my knee and was never able to play again.”

“Oh man, I’m sorry to hear that.” Carter is all sympathy. He was lucky he could play again.

“No, it was such a blessing. We wouldn’t have been able to spend the time together that we do.” He’s smiling. He seems to love her.

“You would have made a great NFL wife,” I say to her in an overly cheerful tone. She knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“At least I made it to the endzone.” She smiles. *I hate her.*

“Davis, man, it was really nice meeting you, but I want to dance with my wife.” He pulls her away, and I have never been so happy to see someone leave. Carter tugs me closer. He’s warm and he smells amazing.

“Why do you let her get to you?”

"I don't know. I just hate her."

"I remember exactly how much you hated her." Heat rushes through my body. *Maybe I didn't handle it well the first time.* Suddenly I'm aware that our bodies are touching.

The song changes. Audrey comes over and pulls me away from Carter. She's so happy. We dance excitedly to Spice Girls. The cat keeps rubbing on Carter's legs. My brother does an awkward version of the cupid shuffle with us. Nico seems to have found a pretty girl to dance with. They're smiling as she shows him the moves. We let loose to "Shut Up and Dance." The music changes and the older crowd gets excited when the DJ starts playing The Twist. Audrey and I are twisting around as the older people are teaching the younger kids how to do the dance. Carter grabs my hand and pulls me over. I don't know why that boy's hips do it for me, but they do.

"I miss your dorky dance moves," I tell him.

"What like this?" He starts doing the sprinkler, and I start laughing.

"Yes, those. You never do them anymore."

"I save them for special occasions." He spins me around. We twist around the dance floor until the music changes again, and a slow song starts up. The sun has faded from the sky, the lanterns are lit all around us. I know this song. It's one we danced to at our prom with DJ Someone's Cousin. I see Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield start to slow dance. *They are so cute.*

"Dance with me, Maddie." Carter tugs me in close and I let him, despite the feeling that this is a bad idea. His warmth envelopes me.

"Who requested this song?" I'm trying to distract him with conversation so he doesn't see how nervous I am.

"I did." *Oh.* "We danced to it at prom." *I can't believe he remembered that.* He leans down and starts singing along to "I Swear" right in my ear. His face is touching mine. The lyrics are perfect. He's perfect. I feel his chest pressed against mine, and I swear I can feel the beating of his heart... or maybe it's my own. Suddenly I'm back at prom dancing with Carter in a rented tux.

My hand is clasped together with his, he's holding mine against his chest as we slowly move around the dance floor. I can feel his breath on my face, warm... inviting. *I just want one little taste. Just one.* But there's people here. Our brothers are here. *Just one little taste.* His lyrics start to veer off in the middle, but he's still keeping on beat with the song.

"You had it and you lost it," I say to him. He pulls back enough to

look in my eyes.

“I did, didn't I?” I don't think he's talking about song lyrics. He rests his forehead on mine. His mouth is right there. *Just one taste. Just one quick one.* His breathing is heavy, and I remember the way his breathing used to sound. Heat flashes through my body. His lips are right there... and so is... that cat? *Where did the cat come from? And why does it love him so much? Is this a different cat that looks the same? Is this one of the babies from last year?* I fall forward as the cat trips me, pressing me further into our embrace, and Carter and I stare into each other's eyes. The song ends with one final swear to love you.

“Thank you so much, everybody! We hope you had a great time, and we'll see you next year!” the DJ announces. The crowd starts to clap. We're still staring in each other's eyes. I could get lost in those eyes. Blue, like a deep ocean swell.

“Sorry, man,” Bennett says as he slaps Carter on the back. Spell broken. Moment over. I shake off all of the feelings swirling around inside of me.

“For what?” Carter asks, in a voice far steadier than I expect.

“I thought we'd find you a girl tonight.”

“I told you, I'm fine.”

I stare out the window the whole ride back home thinking about that last dance... about how I still want to kiss Carter. When we reach the house I try to peel off and head upstairs alone.

“Maddie, come sit with us on the beach,” Audrey calls out to me from the back door.

“I was thinking I would go to bed early.”

“I made jungle juice.” She raises her eyebrows at me. *Ugh.* She knows how much I love that. *Damn it.*

“Fine. But just one.”

Arthur and Nate are already sitting on the beach when we get there. The fire is lit, you can see the lights of the buildings on the other side of the bay. I see Arthur has located the bottle of Macallan our dads hid from him. Nate has a cup of something in his hands. He looks a little buzzed.

“Did you guys have fun golfing?” Audrey asks.

“We couldn't get in anywhere, so we came home,” Nate tells us. *During the busiest tourist week of the year? You don't say. Also how long have they been home, and why didn't they come back to hang out with us?*

Audrey pours me a cup from the pink cooler.

“Why don’t you get a nicer car?” Arthur asks Nate. I start sipping on my drink. It’s even better than I remember it. Nate’s across the fire from me, Arthur is to his side, and Carter takes the spot between Arthur and I.

“That car is brand new.”

“Yeah, but it’s like seventy five K, why don’t you get something flashier? You’ve got big league money.”

“Yeah, and I’d like to keep my big league money. If I invest it right I can live off of it long after my career is over.” He sips his drink. Nate sounds like a real adult right now. “Besides, people treat you differently when they think you have money.”

“I have a question for you guys,” Audrey says to the group. “Do people treat you differently when they find out about your dads’ business?” *Hmm... that’s a good question.* Their business is pretty big now, but the branches are located in central California, and not really north or south. So where I am no one really knows them.

“I’ve had girls start flirting with me when they found out about the business, because they thought I had money,” Nico says.

“I had more girls hit on me when they thought I was going to get NFL money,” Carter tells her.

“I’m so far north now, I don’t think anyone really knows the business up there. If I told people, they probably wouldn’t know anything about it,” I tell her.

“Remember those fancy freaking credit cards they gave us a few years ago?” Bennett asks.

“I used that thing a few times at bars for attention,” Nico admits.

“Did it work?” Audrey’s curious.

“Oh big time. Those things are fancy.”

“I dropped mine one time when I went out for drinks after work. That’s actually how Arthur and I met. I dropped the card, and he ran it out to me right as I was about to get in my car.”

“Maddie must have looked pretty fancy with her fancy credit card, and her fancy purse, getting in her big fancy car.” Audrey paints quite the picture. *Huh, I never thought about it.*

Arthur shrugs. “She looked a little fancy.”

Bennett stands up and pours drinks for Carter and Nico.

“Okay, the name of the game is Never Have I Ever.”

Nate groans. "Last time we did this I puked in the ocean."

"Never have I ever puked in the ocean," Bennett says with a grin. Nate makes a face at him and takes a drink. It's Audrey's turn since she's next to Bennett. Then it's me, so I have to hurry up and think of something good.

"Never have I ever played football." She smiles, and everyone else in the circle takes a drink. *Well, it's my turn now. That was quick.*

"Never have I ever.... given a lap dance." I look over at Audrey, because I know she should drink. She shrugs and tips her cup to her lips... and then my brother does too.

"Ew!" And then Nico holds his cup out and drinks. "Why are our brothers both drinking?" I ask Carter, in a sort of horrified voice.

"Did you give lap dances to each other?!" Carter's also slightly horrified.

"It was a drunken party in college." My brother is not answering the question. "We gave lap dances to some girls." He shrugs like it's no big deal. I look over at Carter. It's his turn, but I definitely want to see his face after that revelation.

"Never have I ever," Carter thinks for a second, "ghosted someone." He looks at me and smiles.

"Really? You're gonna pick on me." I hold my cup up. "Fine." I take a drink. Audrey and Nate drink too. "Ooohh! In your face, Cartigan, I'm not the only one!" I'm pretty into the jungle juice, and I'm sipping in between people's turns. Arthur's up next. I'm dying to see what he comes up with.

"Never have I ever... failed a class."

"I will proudly drink this drink," Nico says as he takes a sip. We're all laughing and looking around to see if anyone else is going to drink.

"Drink up, little sister," Bennett says to me. I look over at him. *How the hell does he know about that?*

"I've never failed a class." I look away from him and back to Nate whose turn it is.

"Don't cheat."

"I'm not cheating."

"What's he talking about?" Carter asks.

"Nothing." I shoot my brother a look.

"I'm talking about her failing that philosophy class in college."

"I didn't fail."

“You called Mom crying! I heard you!” Carter looks at me, and I’m trying to ignore it.

“Stop talking,” I tell my brother, because this isn’t just about a class that I didn’t fail.

“Play fair and drink your drink.”

“Why is this the first I’m hearing about this?” Carter is still staring at me.

“Probably because they failed her for skipping the final to drive you to your knee surgery.”

“Bennett!” Now I’m pissed.

“If you weren’t cheating I wouldn’t have to call you out.”

“I didn’t fail, they called it a ‘withdraw,’ gave me a W and I retook it online in the summer.”

“You retook the class? Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Carter’s upset. I am so mad at my brother right now.

“It didn’t matter.” I just want to move on.

“It did matter, you could have lost your scholarship.”

“She almost did.” Bennett’s making it worse.

“Can you please just stop? You’re not helping.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” There it is, old Carter. “Tell me everything” Carter. I look over at him, and I lower my voice a little.

“You needed me, I was there. Nothing else mattered.”

“Maddie—”

“Never have I ever slept on a sofa bed.” I look across the fire at Nate, and mouth “thank you” to him. I know I’m going to have to answer to Carter later— right after I bail out of jail for murdering my brother. Nico finishes off round one and I finish off my first cup of jungle juice. Audrey pours me a second cup as we start round two. By the end of round two I’ve finished my second cup. Carter’s on his second drink. Nate’s drinking in between rounds, and Arthur appears to be trying to finish off the bottle. Round three starts and I think people are getting a little silly. Bennett starts with "sharing drinks," Audrey goes with "peeing outside." My turn comes and I choose "change a tire." Carter's next, and he thinks about it for a long time.

"Never have I ever... dated a crazy girl." We all know who he's talking about.

"She wasn't crazy," Nico protests.

"She was definitely crazy," I inform him.

"She was... fun." Nico laughs. "Fine, she was crazy." He takes a drink. Arthur is up again.

"Never have I ever bench warmed in the NFL." *Well that's specific.* I look over at Nate who's been quiet. He gets quieter the drunker he gets. He raises his glass and takes a drink.

"You could be right there with me, Carter."

"I'm perfectly happy where I am."

It's Nate's turn, and I swear I see something pass across his face.

"Never have I ever made out at a house party." I look around at everyone as Audrey, Nico, and Bennett all take drinks. Okay, I know I'm not playing fair, but I can't drink right now. They're going to have questions, and if Carter drinks they may put it together and I can't have that. I try to casually look over at him without being too obvious. "Drink up you two." Nate gestures between me and Carter.

"What?" I should probably mention I'm really bad at lying.

"Drink up."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about you and Carter kissing at a house party." *Oh shit.*

"Us?" I think my voice went up an octave. *Talk like a normal person.*

"Yes, you."

"I don't think so." I'm waiting for Carter to save me.

"I saw you." *Uh oh.* "Nico and Audrey saw you." *Oh shit. Don't panic.*

"That? No, that's not what you think. Carter and I used to do this thing in college— if one of us was getting hit on the other person would pretend to be their date. One time this guy was being aggressive, he grabbed my arm, and said he didn't believe that we were there together."

"The guy in the red hat."

"Thank you, Carter. So yeah, we kissed one time after a football game just to sell it. It wasn't a big deal." I go to sip my cup. *Don't touch that cup right now.*

"I saw you at an ABC party at a frat house making out," Nate says. *Oh shit. I thought we were careful.*

"That wasn't us." I'm a really bad liar.

"You gonna cheat at this like you cheat at wave ball?"

"We don't cheat." At wave ball. Okay, I'm totally cheating right now, but come on, this is a whole can of worms that has been sitting in someone's

grandparent's cellar for God knows how long. I can't open it.

"You're seriously going to sit here and lie to our faces right now?" *Uh oh.* Nate's got a can opener. "He gave up everything to stay here with you, and you broke up with him and left him like it was nothing." *What in the hell?*

"What are you talking about? I didn't break up with anyone, we weren't together." I'm not looking at Arthur right now.

"Wait, you dated your cousin?" Arthur still doesn't understand who the family is.

"Still not cousins," Carter tells him.

"I'll draw you a family tree, bro," Nico says.

"Stop lying! I lived with him! I saw you on the sofa bed!" *Oh shit.* I don't like where this is going. My blood feels like ice water. He looks me dead in the eye from across the fire. "I shared a wall with him. I *heard* you. I know exactly what was going on." He rolls his eyes back in his head and moans out "Oh, Baby." *Oh my God.* My hand goes to my mouth. My stomach is sick, and before I can snap my head over to Carter he's on his feet heading towards Nate.

"You shut the fuck up! You don't talk to her like that!" I've never seen Carter this angry. Nate is out of his seat, and Carter shoves him. *Oh shit.* They never fight like this.

"You get in one bar fight and you think you're some tough guy now, Carter?" *WHAT?* Nate shoves him back. "We had a plan, and she ruined it, and now we have to baby her so she won't leave again?" *What is happening??* Bennett's on his feet.

"Wait are you serious right now? Did you touch my sister?!"

"Ben—"

"How many times did I tell you not to fucking touch my sister, Carter?!" He starts towards Carter. Nico stands up and gets between them.

"Don't touch my brother."

"Don't touch your brother, but he can touch my sister?" Bennett's mad.

"Calm down, Ben," Audrey says quietly. Bennett looks over at Audrey.

"How many other secrets have you two been keeping from me?" *Oh shit. Oh shit.* I can't watch them fight like this. I stand and start walking towards the stairs.

“Walk away again, Maddie! Just like you did before!” Nate yells. I hear something that sounds like a struggle. I think they’re fighting. *I can’t do this.* I climb the stairs, and start for the house. *Nope.* If this moves into the house they’ll wake our parents, and they’ll want to know what’s going on. It’s bad enough that they know. *God they know. They all know. My freaking brother knows.* I walk over to the sectional patio set, and sit down. I don’t know what to think or feel. I’m shaking from the cold or the panic, I’m not sure which. I thought we were better at hiding it. *Oh God, Nate heard us. He said he saw us.* I’m trying to remember exactly what happened on that sofa bed.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

“Are you okay?” Audrey sits down next to me and puts her arm around me. I shake my head because I’m panicking and words are failing me. “I’m sorry I didn’t help you, I panicked.” I move my hands to my eyes. I think I might vomit.

“How long have you known?”

“Nico and I saw you together the night we met.” *Shit.*

“And you never said anything?”

“I thought the whole bit about not being able to date was just a cover so your families didn’t know you were dating. I thought it was a secret.”

“We weren’t dating.” I’m still hiding behind my hands.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I am very very sure.”

“You two really need to talk.” I feel her stand up.

“Maddie.” It’s Carter, I can hear in his voice that he’s upset. His arms are around me and he pulls me to him. I can feel his warmth surrounding me and I already feel comforted. But I’m also mortified, and angry, and a bunch of other emotions I can’t name. I don’t even know what to say to him right now, so I just say nothing and sit there in silence. *I want to go home.* I want to get in the car right now— except I’ve been drinking... and it’s Arthur’s car. It shouldn’t be hard to convince him to leave tomorrow morning. “Don’t shut down, say something, scream at me, something.” I don’t think I can get words out.

“Carter.” It’s not quite a sob, and not quite a whine. It’s all I can manage to say to him.

“I know. I’m sorry. Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

“Everyone knows.” I pull back to look at him because I need to read the emotions on his face right now. His hair is messed up, his eye is red. “Oh my God.” He shrugs.

“I could use a punch in the face.” He’s trying to joke with me. He pulls his hand back and starts to push some hair out of my face. I grab his hand because his knuckles are red.

“Carter!” *Oh my God.* I’ve messed everything up, Bennett and Audrey, Bennett and Carter, Nate and Carter.

“Nate and I... had a little disagreement.” I bury my face in his chest.

“Who hit you?” I mumble into his chest.

“It doesn’t matter. I deserved it.” I pull back to look at him.

“You didn’t deserve it.”

“He told me what would happen if I touched you. He warned me. I did it anyway.” *Bennett.*

“Everyone knows.” I repeat it because I’m stuck on it right now. I just want his arms around me.

“I know. I’m so sorry.” Someone is walking through the yard towards us. I look over and see my brother. His hair and clothes are messed up, his lip is bleeding. His knuckles are red. I stand up to stop him from going after Carter again.

“You’re not touching him again!” I’m mad.

"I warned him what would happen. He made his choice."

"Now I'm making a choice. You touch him again." I point at Carter. "We're done. I don't care if you're my brother. Now you know what's going to happen— you make your choice." I look back at Carter. "You didn't do anything wrong." I see relief in his eyes. I turn to walk into the house. "I'm leaving in the morning. I'll see you at Christmas."

My feet don't stop until I reach the kitchen. There's extra jungle juice on the island. I pour myself a fourth cup, and chug the whole thing. Then I pour myself a fifth cup. I'm starting to not care about the fact that anyone knows. Climbing into bed with Arthur starts to sound like a really good idea about halfway through cup number five.

Chapter 14

Junior Year of College

Last Day of Finals

“Woooo!!” Miller wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He's pretty drunk. The guys start to hoist the next person in line up onto the keg. “Davis, man, you gotta do one.” A keg stand? Carter?

“Nah, man, I'm good.” He shakes his cup full of hard alcohol at Miller.

“Finish your liquor, then take her home and *lick her*.” He raises his eyebrows suggestively at me. *What the hell, Miller?* The guy is dirty, but this is a whole new level.

“Don't talk about her like that.”

“If you're not going to, I will.” Miller starts to strut over to me. Carter puts a hand on his chest.

“We talked about this.” *What does that mean?*

“You don't understand, Big D, I'm free. I'm done with tests, and papers, and all that bullshit. I'm getting wild tonight, and if she wants to get wild too I'm into it.”

“She's not into it.”

“I'm not into it.”

“Then I'm gonna go find a girl, and check something off my bucket list!” Miller walks away, and I give Carter a look. This party is a bit more wild than usual. It's the last day of finals. Summer break starts tomorrow. Carter and I drive to Monterey in the morning. He pulls me into him and kisses my temple.

“I'm sorry about him.” Ooh, handsy Carter, we've officially hit buzzed, then. There are three levels of Carter's drinking: handsy, public singing and dancing, and bitey... but like nice biting, in a playful way. He usually doesn't get bitey. I rarely even see public singing and dancing.

Usually he stops at handsy, which I am into. His hand starts sliding down towards my back pocket. *Yes, send that hand a little lower.*

"It's fine, he'll apologize the next time we see— Oh my God, is this the last time we're seeing Miller?" Carter shrugs.

"I dunno, maybe." *Wow.* Miller graduated. It's so weird thinking about never seeing him again. After three years with some of the guys on the team, it's strange to think we just won't ever see them again. "Are you ready for Audrey's party next weekend?"

Audrey graduated too... but I'm still going to see her, right? She's my friend... and she's dating my brother.

"Yeah. I didn't think her sorority sisters would drive three hours for a graduation party, but I really wanted to have it at The Manor." They all said they'd make the drive, so we're having it there.

"That was really nice of you to throw her a party."

"Let's be clear— our moms are doing most of the work. I wanted it to be nice, and they know how to throw nice parties."

"But still, it was sweet of you to offer."

"Her mom wasn't going to do anything. It's such a big deal. I wanted her to have a nice party." Carter kisses my temple again. *Ugh. I love handsy Carter.*

"Davis! Come play beer pong with us!" someone shouts. Carter looks at me and I shrug. *Why not?* We're pretty good at beer pong. Carter has his cup and Yang hands me some bottle of fruity something that I open myself because the guys know I only drink bottles that I open myself. If you're not drinking beer they'll let you drink whatever you want.

I sink my first two shots. My hand-eye coordination is pretty good. Carter sinks his first two. We're on fire. He gives me the Top Gun high five, and I see a girl staring at him across the table. Tiny girl, big hair, big eyes, tiny outfit. Like a really tiny outfit. *Are those children's clothes?* Her under butt is definitely hanging out of those shorts. My shorts are kind of short, but these... yikes. Her boobs are hoisted up to give her a small degree of cleavage. *Well, I have bigger boobs, so there's that.*

Our opponents sink a couple shots, so Carter and I have to drink. I miss my next shot, and as we wait for the other team to throw the ball Carter leans into me, reaching his hand over to my butt. He rests his palm on it, and gently scratches his fingers along my under butt. I see the girl still staring, sipping her drink. *This looks flirty, right? She'll get the hint?* But she's still

staring. Carter and I start sinking shots left and right. We're laughing, and high fiving. The girl walks over to our side of the table. *Ugh.*

We're down to the two final cups, I bounce the ball into one which counts for two cups.

"Woo!" I raise my arms up in the air. Carter picks me up and spins me around. Good, maybe this girl will get the hint.

"Carter!" *Nope, hint not taken.* He sets me down.

"Krystle." He knows her. "Maddie, this is Krystle, we had a couple of classes together last year.

"I helped him after his knee surgery," she says proudly. *Uh... she helped him? I recall driving him everywhere, to all of his appointments. I took him to the surgery, I lived on his couch with him for two months. She helped him? Interesting.*

"I'm gonna go get another drink. You want anything?" I ask Carter.

"Yeah, sure."

"Something kermel?" *There, I'll drop an inside joke, so she knows she's on the outside.*

"Sounds good." *Huh.* No laugh. And I highly doubt he wants something caramel to drink. *Is he into her?* "Krystle do you want anything?"

"I'd love a cosmo." *A what now? It's a friggen house party. There's beer and a bunch of random liquor and I'm supposed to pull a cosmo out of my hat like a damn magic trick?*

"Sounds great." I stand on my toes and kiss Carter on the cheek before I leave to go into the kitchen. *Cosmo? Really?*

I get to the kitchen and start looking for a drink for myself and Carter. There's bottles of fruity stuff, so I grab that for myself. I spy some Fireball. *Yes, Carter's getting Fireball. That'll get him a little gropey.* I pour him some in a cup, then look for a mixer. There's some apple juice. That should work. I splash some in the cup... then add more Fireball. *Aaand just a little more Fireball. There. That's good. Okay, what's in a cosmo?* I pull out my phone. Cranberry... okay, there's like a small amount of a cranberry raspberry combo. Fresh lime juice? That isn't happening. Vodka. Check. And cointreau? *Oh fuck off. I'm not doing this. Why am I doing this? She gets what I give her.* I look around and find a bottle of really crappy tequila. *dudeOkay... what sounds awful with tequila?* I look around and find a bottle of squirt that Sanchez usually brings to parties. *Love it.* I dump some into the tequila. Splash of tequila, way too much squirt. *And cosmo! Ta-da! I'm like a*

damn magician over here.

I walk our drinks back outside. Carter and Krystle have relocated to the patio furniture. She's got her hand on his arm. *Nope. Don't like that.* I walk over and hand him his drink, then hand her hers.

"Sorry, I didn't know what was in a cosmo." I hand her the cup of grossness. I sit down as she takes a sip. I watch her face for the disgust that will follow.

"Thank you! I love a paloma! My abuela makes them on hot days. This was really nice of you." *God. Damn it.* Carter starts sipping on his Fireball and splash of juice. He and Krystle start talking about their classes last year, and I'm trying to find any reason to jump in this conversation and steamroll her until she leaves. Her hand is still touching his arm. I'm worried that handsy Carter is going to get handsy with her right here in front of me.

"I'm going to get more of this," Krystle says as she gets up. *Ugh, finally, let's ditch her now while she's gone.* Miller comes by and pours a bunch more alcohol in Carter's empty cup. He sits down in a chair near us. He's pretty drunk.

"I just want to see it once," Miller says to Carter.

"Fuck off."

"How drunk do I have to get you to see it?"

"There isn't enough alcohol in the world."

"Come on, dude, it's on my bucket list."

"It is not."

"It is!"

"Show me."

"Well, it's not written down, but it's on there."

"What's happening?" I ask, because I'm so lost right now. Carter gives me a look.

"I just want to see the python one time and he won't show me."

"He's been trying to get a look in the locker room all year."

"Ew!" *That's gross.* "Eyes on your own junk, Miller."

"That thing has been a legend for three years, and I just want to see it before I go." Miller takes a drink.

"You see what I have to put up with? People are always trying to look at my stuff in the locker room. This is your fault." It's kinda my fault.

"Tell me how big it is," Miller says to me. *Damn it, why isn't Krystle here for the part of the conversation where Miller is suggesting I've seen*

Carter's python? Surely this would scare her away.

"She doesn't know," Carter says as he sips his new drink. *I definitely do know.* And because I'm a little buzzed and want to mess with Miller, I angle myself so Carter can't see me but Miller can. I mouth "it's huge" to him as I hold my hands about a foot apart.

"I fucking knew it!" Miller yells as he points at me. I laugh to myself and take a drink as Carter looks between us to figure out what just happened.

"What did I miss?" *Oh good, Krystle is back. Looks like we missed our window to ditch her.*

"We're just talking about Carter's giant dick," Miller tells her. *Awesome. So glad he decided to share that with her.*

"Oh, hello. Looks like I came back at a good time." *No. We're not talking about this around her.*

"I'm gonna go do a keg stand," Carter announces as he stands up. No he's not. He just wants out of this conversation. So now he's trapping me in it. *Thanks, best friend.* "You two make friends." He waves his finger in between us.

"I'm coming," Miller says as he gets up to follow. I see Carter pull out his phone on the way towards the keg. A moment later mine goes off.

Cartigan: Tell me what you think about her.

Me: Why?

Cartigan: She asked me to lunch, and I want to know what you think.

Me: Oh

It's one of those disappointed "you're seeing someone" ohs. The "I have to give up gropey mouths for *this girl*" oh. Well, time to switch strategies. Miller left a bottle of alcohol on the table. I pour some into her cup for her... like a lot. I start the conversation light, what's your family like, how many siblings do you have... easy stuff. She keeps drinking. She keeps talking, and I just let her. Some people like to talk. She loves to talk. I like to listen. She seems a little tipsy, and I think she's getting a little loose with her words.

"So what's your major?"

"English. I tell people I want to be a teacher, but I'm just waiting until I can find a man so I can drop out." *Jackpot.*

"Oh honey, aren't we all?" I'm playing along so I can get information

out of her.

“My family said if I wasn’t in school I had to work, and I. Don’t. Work. So I figured if I came here I could meet a man.”

“There’s tons of guys here.”

“And it only takes one time to get pregnant.” She winks at me. *Holy shit.* She looks down at her drink and swirls it while she asks. “So, what do you think of Carter?” *Oh, she thinks she’s pumping me for information.*

“Eh, he’s okay.”

“But you’re his best friend, right?” *Ugh, he told her that? I had a thing going here.*

“Best friends all our lives.”

“You think he might go to the NFL?” She takes a sip. She’s trying to be casual. Lots of people ask that question. And truly I don’t know, but I can clearly see what she’s after right now.

“I don’t know.”

“They’re saying he’s going to be a first round draft pick.” I’ve heard that. “He’ll need someone to help him manage all that money.” I think she means spend the money.

“He will.”

“I’m good with money.” She seems like she’s good at spending money. I wonder how many child sized clothes she can get with an NFL paycheck.

“You seem like you’re amazing with money.” I literally just met her.

“Thank you! Oh my God, I love you. I’m so glad we met.” I’m not. I hate her. Her drink is getting low, so I refill it. I hear a familiar sound and I look over towards the keg where Carter has started a medley of songs. *Public singing and dancing!! He’s tipsy. I love a tipsy Carter.*

Krystle groans. “He’s singing.”

She says it like it’s a bad thing. I love his singing.

“Yeah, he sings a lot.”

“But he’s bad at it.” *Bad at it? He’s not bad at it.* He’s never going to be on the radio, but he’s pretty good. She holds her hand up to her peripheral vision, to either block him out, or hide, I have no idea which. “You’re his best friend, get him to stop.” *Stop??*

“I love his singing.”

“He’s singing Christmas songs.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s May.” She takes a sip of her drink.

“He does that.” He does it a lot, actually. He sings Christmas songs all year. He sings a lot. He sings when he’s doing laundry, he sings when he’s happy, he sings when he’s tipsy. He’s Carter. That’s what he does.

“Why is he such a dork in real life? I thought he was supposed to be this cool football guy.” *Dork?* Okay, he’s a little dorky, but I’m here for it. I love his dorkiness. “Oh God, he’s dancing.” *Yesss!* I love the singing and dancing. “Maddie, make him stop.” *Stop? I’m not doing that.* Carter dances over to us, half smooth moves, half tipsy drunk. He circles his hand around a couple of times and holds it out to Krystle. “Uh, no, I’m good, thank you.” She sinks lower in her seat. Carter turns to me and does the same thing. I gladly take his hand and get up and dance with him. He starts to spin and twirl me around. *Oh, are we doing tipsy swing dancing? Love it.* He pulls me in for a second.

“So what do you think?”

“Of what?” I’m playing dumb. He’s tipsy, maybe he forgot.

“Krystle.” He gestures towards her with his head.

“Her?” *I hate her.* “Jury’s still out.”

"I think she's harmless."

"You think so?" *I don't think so.*

“Okay, well let me know what you think.” He spins me around again and I start laughing.

“Does she know we’re leaving tomorrow morning?”

“Uh... I don’t think I mentioned it.”

“How are you going to have lunch with her?”

“I’ll just drive back.”

“Three hours?” *For her?* “Does she know about The Manor?” You know, the fancy house that may make it seem like you have money.

“Nah. I usually don’t tell people about it. You know how people get.”

"I do. Suddenly they think I have money to buy them lunch, or spot them some cash. Uh, I don’t have money. My parents have money."

"Right? People change when they think you have money." Or they think you're going to get money, perhaps from the NFL. Carter starts singing the wrong lyrics to a Taylor Swift song, and I'm into it. I'm into all of this. How could Krystle not be? Yeah, he's a badass football player, but he's just goofy Carter. He spins me around one last time and lets me go. I'm smiling as I walk back to the patio set where Krystle is sipping her drink— and scowling?

That's a scowl, right? I should probably look up the definition of the word scowl.

"He will not be doing any of that when we're together."

"Any of what?" I'm trying to keep my voice nice, but I'm kind of over her shit.

"The bad singing, the dorky dancing, none of it." She drinks her drink.

"How are you going to do that?" She raises her eyebrows.

"My mom taught me ways to encourage positive behaviors and discourage negative behaviors." *What does that mean??* "She does it to my step dad all the time. He's almost trained." *Trained??*

"How do you do that?" I'm curious, but also horrified. Is there a word for that? She leans in to me.

"I can be very generous, or I can be withholding."

"I don't understand." She lowers her voice.

"Sex." *What?!*

"Oh." *She's going to train him to act the way she wants with sex??*

"I'm an NFL wife. I don't work. That boy's on his way to the big leagues. All I have to do is mold him into the kind of husband I want and I'm set." She looks so proud of herself right now. "I'd be nice to me if I was you."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'll control who gets to see him. And if you're on my bad side— *oh well*. I guess he's off limits." *What. In. The. Fuck. Is she literally saying to my face that she'll cut me out of Carter's life??*

Carter and some of the guys walk back over to us, they're talking about summer plans.

And suddenly I know exactly how to sabotage this with one innocent question. I stare into my drink, and project nonchalance.

"Carter, are you packed yet?" One question. No big deal. Just a little spider web for her to get stuck in.

"Almost, I can finish in the morning before we leave." *Come on... come into the web.*

"Where are you guys going?" *There it goes. I've got her.*

"Monterey," Carter answers casually. No, I want a better explanation than that... but in a subtle way.

"They spend the summer there," Yang answers. *Ugh, thank you, Yang. I always knew you were my favorite.* I watch Krystle, and you can see the exact moment she understands because her eyes light up.

“You *summer* at the coast?” Yes! She used summer as a verb, she gets it. She sits up a little straighter. She’s seen the dollar signs.

“We do.” Carter’s still playing it cool. He’s not the type to brag. But I need someone to brag juuuust a little right now.

“Do you stay in a hotel or something?” She’s doing that thing where she tries to act blasé while she gets information out of you.

“Our parents share a house.” He takes a sip. Now see, that could be a tiny little house, and I need her to know exactly how large this thing is.

“Yang are you coming up this year?” One more innocent question. He’s come before. It’s no big deal if he comes again. Everyone liked him.

“Hell yeah I’ll come. That house is phenomenal.” *Nice.* Now let’s gauge Krystle’s reaction. Also, I like his use of phenomenal. That was solid.

“You guys let people come stay with you?” she asks. We get that question a lot. People find out your family has a house at the coast, and suddenly they want to come stay with you like you’re best friends.

“Yeah, Audrey is spending the whole summer with us. Our brothers are there, Carter’s cousin Nate.”

“Like in bunk beds or something?” I can’t tell if she’s judging or fishing.

“We have our own rooms.”

“Maddie has to share a bathroom with this guy,” Yang tells her. *Thank you, Yang.* We do share a bathroom, and we play gropey hands and gropey mouths in there during the summer.

“You have to share a bathroom? How many bathrooms are there?” *Judging? Fishing?* I still can’t tell.

“Five?” Yang isn’t sure.

“Six,” I correct.

“Six?!” Careful Krystle, your mask is slipping. She fixes her face, but I’m sure Carter saw it... that greedy look on her face.

“Their dads own Two Guys and a Meatball.” *Nope.*

“That’s not right.” I’m trying not to laugh. I can see Carter thinks it’s funny too.

“Meatball Movers?”

“There’s no meatballs involved,” Carter says laughing.

“Whatever,” Yang says as he continues. “They have this crazy house they stay in all summer.” I need to get Yang a really nice Christmas gift this year. Krystle is trying to act aloof, but I know what I saw.

“I didn’t realize you were going to be gone all summer. I could come up and visit. We could do lunch.”

“Yeah, we could probably do that.”

“It is a long drive though, just for the day... I could stay the weekend... if you wanted.” *Stay and not leave? I’m hearing “stay and not leave.” Invite herself up for the summer?* That’s a little aggressive. Carter doesn’t like aggressive women. Let’s see how he feels about this.

“I dunno.” He rubs his hand on the back of his neck. That’s what he does when he’s uncomfortable. *Awesome. He’s uncomfortable.* “I mean... all the rooms are taken. Yang will end up in the office probably. There’s not really anywhere for you to sleep.”

“I could sleep in your room.” *Inviting herself to stay the summer in his bed. That’s a bold strategy. Let’s see what happens.*

“Uhh... there’s already two of us sharing the bathroom. A third person might be too much.” *That’s his excuse? That’s terrible.* “Plus I’d have to sleep on the couch, sometimes that makes my knee hurt.” *Oohh is he trying to tell her he doesn’t want to share a bed with her? And couch knee pain, Carter? These are all terrible. He’s so bad at excuses.*

“We could share a bed and see how it goes.” She’s trying to play coy. I don’t want her near his bed.

“I’m gonna go do another keg stand.” I’m trying not to laugh. Carter’s never done a keg stand. He’s just trying to run away again. The second he’s out of ear shot Krystle slides over towards me.

“Get me into that house.”

“What?”

“I need you to get me into that house.”

“Why?” *Because she doesn’t want to spend the summer in the heat? Because she wants to try and trick Carter into liking her? All of the above?*

“I have the tiniest thong bikini.” *Not surprised.* “The back part is metal like a necklace, with rhinestones on it– trust me, I get a lot of attention in it. When he sees me in it he’ll realize how much he likes me.” *Pass.*

“I can’t get you in the house.”

“You have to.”

“I can’t.” *We’re not friends. I’m not doing her any favors. She just gave me a thinly veiled threat about cutting me out of his life and I’m supposed to help her. Who does she think she is?*

“You need to do this for me. Remember, you have to stay on my good

side?” *Uhh... I'm pretty sure she should be concerned about staying on my good side. And is she threatening me?*

“It didn’t sound like he wanted you to come.”

“He wants me there, he just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Well, when he figures it out he’ll invite you.”

“You really need to try harder than this to please me.” She’s getting a little mad. “I can very easily cut you out of his life.” *This again.* “You’re just the friend. I’m the one he’s going to be marrying.” *Marrying? We’re at marriage already? They haven’t had lunch yet! Jeez, chick, get a hold of yourself.*

“You might want to start with the date part first, then move into the marriage part.”

“And you might want to watch your tone.”

“Take a hint, he doesn’t like you.” She narrows her eyes at me.

“I will be at that house.” *No she won’t.* “In that thong bikini.” *She’s gonna get hypothermia.* “All summer.” *Does she plan on washing it?* “And by the time I’m done with him he won’t remember your name.” *We share a bathroom!* “I am an NFL wife. Carter Davis is a first round draft pick. I am endzone, and you are friendzone.” *Oh. Hell. No. What did she just say to me?* I get up from my chair.

“I’ll show you friendzone.” I turn on my heel and walk straight towards Carter. I’m pissed. *This stupid girl thinks she’s going to get him to forget me? She thinks she’s going to marry him and cut me out of his life?* Carter stops talking as I approach. He knows I’m pissed. I pull him towards me by his shirt.

“Hey, Baby.” The words barely leave my mouth before my lips are on his. We’re kissing. It’s sloppy and trashy, and I don’t care. I want her to see my tongue down his throat. I turn him so his back is to her. I look over his shoulder at her as I move to his neck. I start kissing and sucking on his neck. I watch her face fall. I lick from his shoulder to his ear and I watch her jaw drop. Carter tilts his head down.

“I take it you didn’t like her.”

“I just saved you from a messy divorce and eighteen years of child support payments. You gonna show me how grateful you are?”

“So grateful.” His mouth is back on mine and he's walking backwards towards the back door of the house. I break our kiss long enough to look back at Krystle. Carter grabs my hand, and starts tugging me forward as he walks

backwards towards the door. I resist just enough that she can see he's pulling me forward.

"I'm so sorry, he just remembered he has a paper that he needs my help with." Finals are over, there are no papers. It's the worst excuse, and I know it. But I want to rub it in her endzone face. He's not hers. "So nice to meet you."

"So nice." She smiles the fakest smile at me. I let Carter pull me through the door.

We kiss as we walk back to his house. Sloppy, needy kisses, hands roaming all over each other. We break apart long enough to open the door. The lights are off, no one is home. The guys will be out all night celebrating the end of finals. He throws me over his shoulder and climbs the stairs. We close the door to his room. He pushes me up against it. His hands are in my hair, strong and confident. My desire is like wildfire burning uncontrolled. I think he can feel it. I certainly can feel his, thick and hard in his pants. I reach over and rip his shirt open. I have no patience for it tonight. I want to taste him and touch every inch. I want to feel him shiver and shake as I drag his release from his body. I want him to feel so strongly that every single piece of him is mine that even Krystle feels it wherever the hell she is right now.

His hands grip my ass, rough and needy, his mouth is on my neck, sucking and licking. I love when he's like this, taking what he wants with no apologies. But that's not what I want tonight. I gently push his body off mine. I strip my top off and toss it to the side as I advance on him, wildfire burning in my eyes. I unbutton my shorts and drop them on the floor with my panties as he strips off his pants and boxers, freeing his length from its prison. I will never get used to the sight of him like this. My heart thunders in my chest. I shove him back on the bed, and I crawl seductively towards him.

"I love when you look at me like that." I swallow the end of his sentence as I cover his mouth with mine. He reaches back and flicks the clasp of my bra open and drags the straps over my arms. I glide my slick entrance over his hardness and a groan escapes him. We stopped using condoms months ago after he found my birth control and we both got tested. Neither of us is sleeping with anyone else, so we just stopped. He breaks our kiss for a moment. "Is that for me?" He's talking about my arousal.

"Yes." I rock my hips back and forth teasing him. I want him dying for it. "Tell me your mine." I whisper it at his mouth.

"I'm fucking yours," he tells me. "Always." I guide him to my

entrance and I lower onto it. *Oh my god.* He feels amazing. I sit up as I start to rock my hips. *Mine.* He sits up too and pulls me towards him until his mouth is on my chest, sucking, biting. *Yes. All mine.* I keep up the rhythm. I want to make him forget *her* name. My lips find his ear.

“I want you to come so hard you black out.” His hands grip me tighter. I swear I feel him get harder.

“Jesus fuck. You keep talking like that and I will.”

“Good. I want you breathless and spent, and then I want you again.” He makes a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl and my flames burn white hot. I’ve never wanted anything so badly. I can feel my body tensing up as I hurtle towards release. My legs start to falter and I’m losing the rhythm. He twists and rolls me onto the bed, and suddenly he’s on top. I’m no longer in charge, and for a moment I think about taking control back. I want him to know he’s mine. He thrusts deep and I immediately abandon all thoughts of control. He may be mine, but I’m his, wholly and completely. He starts to thrust at a fevered pace as his mouth starts sucking on my neck. “Oh, Baby.”

“Tell me you're mine.” He thrusts deep and I know without a doubt I’m his.

“Always.” He keeps up the pace and I can barely think or remember to breathe. I’m racing towards the edge.

“Say it.” His words are breathless on my skin. I dig my fingers in his back. I’m so close.

“I’m yours.” He thrusts deep inside. I moan out his name with no regrets. My release sets him off. He bites down onto my shoulder. I can feel him shiver and shake, and I know he’s mine.

∞∞∞∞∞

I wake the next morning with the light in my eyes. I take a deep breath, and I feel Carter stir next to me.

“What time is it?” he asks, his voice thick with sleep.

“Ten.”

“Shit, we need to get going.”

I roll over towards him and bring my lips to his. “I don’t ever want to leave this bed.” He smiles.

“My lease is up in a couple of days.”

“Let them try and kick us out.” He laughs.

“I need gas on the way out of town. We can stop by that station on Cedar. It’s right by the freeway and has that coffee shop you like.”

“You have my attention.”

“I’ll buy you one of those cinnamon coffees you like, and a breakfast sandwich.”

Carter probably has a little bit of a headache from drinking last night. Usually he just chugs a coffee and he’s good as new.

“Deal.”

“Let me throw all my bathroom stuff in my bag. Can you pack the sheets? Our dads are sending a crew at noon to pick everything up.”

I groan. “Fine.”

Carter gives me one last kiss before he leaves the warmth of the bed. “Thank you, Baby.”

I have an outfit laid out to drive to the coast, jeans, a tank top, and a sweater. I tug it on, and rip the sheets off the bed. It’s a little sad to be packing up his room. We have the whole summer together, and he’ll be right back here next year, but it still feels a little sad. This room is always our little sanctuary away from everyone else. I don’t bother to fold the sheets before I pack them because they’ll definitely need washed, and I don’t want to mistake them for clean ones when we open the box. Carter’s in the shower washing off, but the door is open like usual.

I grab my toothbrush and start brushing my teeth as I take glimpses in the mirror of his body in the shower. *He is so gorgeous.* Carter finishes his shower and packs the last of his stuff into his suitcases. We load his car to head for the gas station, giving the house one last glimpse as we leave.

We pull in the gas station ten minutes later. *Ugh, it’s hot already in this sweater.* I tug it over my head.

“Oh, shit.” Carter seems a little alarmed.

“What?” I’m looking around to see what’s happening.

“I think I got a little rough with you last night.”

“What?!” He gestures at my cleavage area which is now very visible in a tank top. “Oh shit.” There’s hickies all over my chest.

“I am so sorry.” His face is so apologetic.

“I’m not sorry.” I shrug. “I’ll be wearing sweaters all summer, no one will see.” He smiles devilishly.

“Then I can make new ones all summer.” *Uh, yes please.* “You want to get the gas while I get the coffee?”

“Sure.” He gets out of the driver’s side and I hop out of the passenger’s side. I walk around the car as he finishes swiping his card. Carter wraps his arms around me, and kisses me on the lips. *Yum.*

“Let’s go back to bed,” he whispers at my lips. *Yes please.*

“We can’t, we have to go.”

“Fine.” He lets me go, and smacks me on the butt before he turns to jog into the coffee shop. I smile as I turn back to the pump to get the gas. My eyes stop on a girl staring at me. Messy hair, sunglasses on, giant cup of Dr. Pepper in her hand. She’s staring. It’s Krystle.

“Oh, hi! Katelyn?”

“Krystle,” she corrects in an overly sweet voice.

“So sorry we had to run out last night. We had to pack, you know how it is.” That wasn’t the lie I gave her last night. Her gaze lowers to my chest full of hickies. Yep. She knows.

“Hey, Maddie!” Carter yells from the door of the coffee shop. “Bacon or sausage?”

“Bacon!” I smile. “Love you, Baby!”

“Love you, Baby!” He turns and goes back inside. I look back at Krystle, still smiling. *Yeah, he’s mine.*

“So you and Carter?” I give her a noncommittal shrug. We still have two semesters left, and I don’t want her trying to date him, but I’m not willing to feed her a lie about us being in some sort of relationship either. She rolls her eyes and mumbles something about a waste of time.

“Good luck finding yourself an NFL husband.” I’ll be sure to spread it around the team next year that she’s a gold digger.

“So nice meeting you, Maddie.” She’s all sarcasm and bite. And I want to rub it in just a little that she’s not coming to the coast and will spend the entire summer in the heat away from Carter.

“You too. Try to stay out of the heat.”

Carter returns with the coffee and breakfast sandwiches. We spend the whole drive singing along to oldies, and sipping on our coffees. Carter stops dating after that.

Chapter 15

Present Day

I have no idea what time it is when I wake up in a haze. Arthur's warm arms are wrapped around me. It's the best I've slept all week. I'm wearing his t-shirt, no bra, no pants. One of his arms is under my neck, his hand is resting precariously close to my bra-less breast. The other hand is tucked under the hem of his t-shirt resting gently at my hip. His fingers are just about to touch the front of my panties. Yes. This is what we needed. Arthur's issue with bed sharing has put a real damper on our physical relationship. Who wants to get hot and heavy with someone only to have to sleep on a couch or leave? This isn't so bad right? He could get used to it.

He shifts a little, and flexes the fingers close to my nipple. *Yes. Just move those a little more.* He shifts the hand on my hip and it moves closer to my center. On my next breath, I arch my back and inch my nipple closer to those fingers. Then I move my lower back so my butt closes some of the space between us. I can barely feel the brush of his morning glory against the soft skin of my cheeks. I just need a little less space between us, so I take another breath and push my chest forward a little. I feel the heat of his fingertips through the thin t-shirt covering my skin. He flexes his fingers a little and they ghost across my aching nipple. *God yes. Just a little more.* I slide my butt back just a little closer, eager to feel him pressed against me.

He stirs a little and a slight groan escapes him. Heat pools in my lower half. His hand moves, and he's cupping my breast in his hand. *God yes.* His fingers start gently stroking through the shirt, slow, teasing. He slides his body closer to mine and I feel him pressed against the lace of my panties.

"Mmmm..." He buries his face in my hair and takes a deep breath in. *Is he smelling my hair?* He never does that. I like it, it's sweet. The hand near my hip slides lower, fingers trailing down the lace front of my panties. *More of that please.* His other fingers have found my nipple and are lightly caressing it. I arch back into his length some more until it's firmly pressed

against me. “Mmm...” He takes a deep breath in and thrusts his hips towards me, grinding it against me. His lower hand ventures even lower, seeking something else that I want it to find. His mouth finds my neck and he starts kissing me, sweet at first, then slightly open with a tongue gliding across my sensitive skin.

I move my hand back behind me until I find his hip. I slowly sweep my hand across his pants, teasing him for a moment. I’m going to reach behind me and see how excited he is to see me. His mouth opens a little more on the next kiss, and I let out a soft moan.

“Mmmm...” His mouth is back on my neck kissing me, but I swear I heard him say Maddie. *No, that can’t be right. Arthur doesn’t call me Maddie—*

“Carter?!” I pull back from him and almost fall on the floor. “Get out of my bed!” I grab the blankets and pull them over me. I can see his face now. *Yup! Definitely Carter!* He crawled into my bed last night? He’s still waking up, his eyes heavy with sleep. One of them is turning a lovely shade of purple. “Boundaries, Carter!” I’m probably being loud, but he deserves it. “Get out of my bed!” I yell again, because he didn’t get it the first time. He shakes his head to wake himself up.

“This is my bed.” *What? No.* I look around. *Holy shit, it’s his bed.*

Memories of last night start coming back. I went to Arthur’s room to try and crawl into bed with him. He was completely against it, and I left, slightly sad, and came back to my room. *Then what?* I went to the bathroom to get changed for bed, found Carter’s shirt... smelled it, and put it on. *God, that’s weird.* Then decided to climb into his bed. Okay... not as horrible as I thought... still not great... still crossing boundaries... still in Carter’s bed. *Shit!*

I jump up, and run— literally run through the bathroom to my room. He’s right behind me, chasing me. I collapse on the floor by the foot of my bed. Of all the people I’ve been in my life: the girl who made out in Reaper’s rusted bean mobile, the girl who got handsy with Carter at the frat house, this— this is the person I never wanted to be. I’m in a relationship. He’s literally in this house, and I’m sleeping with The Python. *Oh God, I felt the python.*

Don’t cry.

Don’t cry.

Shit. I’m crying. Carter’s right there on the floor with me.

“Hey, hey, hey.” He cups my face in his hands and wipes the tears.

“Carter.” His name is a full whine.

“Nothing happened.” I give him a look.

“You touched my boob.”

“I’ve... touched them many times. It’s not a big deal.”

“I felt the python.” He tries really hard not to laugh.

“You’ve... felt it many times.”

“I’m a cheater.”

“You’re not a cheater. Nothing happened.” I’m still giving him a look, because this was absolutely not okay. “It’s you and it’s me. Nothing else matters. I never told anyone before, and I’m not going to tell anyone now.” The tears are still coming, and he takes his sleeve and wipes them.

“You never told anyone before?”

“Never.”

“Why?” *Because he’s ashamed of me? Of us?* He’s quiet for a long time, and I’m pretty sure I’m right.

“Because it was no one’s business but ours.” He pauses again for a moment. “Because what we had was special, and beautiful, and I didn’t want anyone ruining it.” I didn’t expect his answer to be so sweet. I stare at him, because I have absolutely no idea what to say. I also didn’t want anyone ruining it. I wanted it to be just ours. “Come on, let’s get you in some clean clothes, and I’ll make you some pancakes to soak up the rest of the jungle juice.”

“No pancakes!” I do not need our after sex pancakes right now. Not with a house full of people who know about our after sex pancakes.

“Waffles then.” Carter gets up and I rub my face with my hands. He walks over to my dresser and pulls open the top drawer where I keep my underwear. “Jesus Christ, is this what you wear now?” He pulls out a pair of lace panties and holds them. “Okay, I need to stop touching these... so I’m just gonna... grab two things that look like they go together... okay here.” He has a black lace bra and matching panties in his hand. “If you look like that and dress like this, you must be getting it all the time.” He laughs to himself and holds out the underwear to me. I reach for them.

“You’d think so.” I give them a little tug, but he grips onto them. *I probably shouldn’t have said that.* His eyes change, and I can’t quite read them.

“Are you unhappy, Maddie?” I tug on my underwear again, but he’s

not letting go.

“Boundaries, Carter.” I pull my underwear free from his hand. “No talking about our sex lives.”

“Or lack thereof.”

“Can we please just forget that all of this happened?”

“We’re definitely going to forget that my penis made you cry.” He starts rummaging around my clothes and tosses an outfit at my feet. “Waffles, five minutes,” he says as he walks out of my room and into the bathroom. I check the time, it’s still early. No one is up yet. I can eat some waffles and wait for Arthur to get up so I can tell him we can leave. He’ll probably be relieved. After I tug my clothes on and brush my teeth, I meet Carter in the kitchen. I sit at the island while he mixes up waffle batter. It feels like old times. Except it’s not. I need to remember that. The waffle iron is plugged in and warming. He’s just about done with the batter when I hear our moms walking through the living room. *Great.*

“Ooh, what are you two up to?” Carter’s mom asks as they reach the kitchen. *Nothing! Definitely not bed sharing like we were told not to do when we were kids!*

“Waffles!” My mom is excited.

“We got that boysenberry syrup yesterday at the farmers market!”

“And the fresh strawberries!” They look at each other, and at the same time exclaim “Whipped cream!”

“We’re taking over,” Carter’s mom tells him as she tries to bump him with her hip, but she’s too short and it hits him mid thigh. He doesn’t even move.

“I’m cooking in here!” She reaches up and grabs him by the chin.

“What happened to your eye?!” Carter looks sheepishly at me.

“Maddie said I folded the towels wrong.” *What?!* My eyes go wide. He looks over at me. “I promise I’ll fold them right next time.”

“I did not hit him!” Our moms both look over at me. “I didn’t!” His mom releases his chin.

“He probably deserved it.” *He didn’t.*

“He does fold the towels wrong,” my mom adds. Carter’s mom grabs a spatula out of the utensil holder and starts threatening her son with it.

“Now leave before I beat you harder than Maddie did!”

“I didn’t hit him!” Carter smiles at me as he walks out of the kitchen. “I hate you so much.”

“Please don’t hurt me!” He fakes like he’s flinching. I give him my “are you kidding me” face. Our moms set to work on the new version of waffles that we will be having. Nico strides into the kitchen and stands next to me. He also has a purple eye on the opposite side as Carter. His knuckles are discolored. *Great.*

“I heard we’re having waffles.” *How?? This literally just happened.* I look down and don’t say anything to him, because I’m still self conscious about what happened last night. My entire body flashes hot. I’m very worried that he’ll know I was in Carter’s bed. He knows everything. *Don’t think of the python. Don’t think of the python. Damn it, it’s all I can think about now.* “What’s wrong with you?” I give him a look.

“Nate told everyone about our... *personal business* last night.”

“So? Everyone knew about my *personal business* with that girl in the bathroom at the China Garden.”

“We were having lunch with you.”

“So?”

“She was the hostess. She sat us at the table.”

He shrugs. “She was a nice girl.”

“You knew her for twenty minutes.”

“An amazing twenty minutes. That was the best food I’ve ever had.” I rub my hands over my face and hold them under my jaw. I need to apologize to Nico, and I feel really awkward about it.

“I really appreciate you keeping our secret all these years.”

“It’s no big deal.” Except it is.

“It is, and I’m really sorry for putting you in a position where you had to lie to Bennett.” His face turns serious, which is so unlike Nico.

“I knew what I was doing. It’s not your fault.”

“You two are really close and I messed that up.”

“You think that was a big deal? We fought over a girl in college, and we’re still friends. We’re fine.”

“Bennett didn’t seem fine.” I try to hide my face behind my hands. Nico puts an arm around me. He feels eighty five percent Carter right now. He leans down to whisper in my ear. Okay, ninety percent.

“If you two want to be together, screw what everyone else thinks. Be together, they’ll get over it.” I shake my head and try not to cry.

“It’s not like that.”

“Are you sure? Because it sure looked like that from the outside.”

“I’m sure.”

Carter walks back over to us. “Hey!” He points at Nico’s eye, and Nico points at his eye. These two are a mirror image of each other right now.

“Does your hand hurt?” Nico asks, like it’s no big deal.

“Worse than the time you closed it in the car door.”

“Damn, that sucks.” Carter reached over and they give each other a quick hug and a pat on the back.

“Thanks for having my back.”

“Eh, I kinda love you both.”

“That’s it? You guys are fine?” I ask, confused.

“We’re totally fine.” Nico waves a finger back and forth between them. *Wow. That was easy. If only it was that easy for me.*

My mom walks over to them with a stack of plates and napkins. “Set the table, please.” They grab the stack and walk out towards the patio.

Carter’s mom walks over to us with a fancy cup of coffee. She slides it halfway between her and I on the counter.

“Hey, Maddie.”

“Yes.” This feels like a trap.

“You remember when you were kids and the boys would be up to something and you would always be honest when we would ask you about it?” She slides the cup a little closer.

“Yes.” I’m being lured in.

“Do you want to tell us why the boys have matching black eyes and messed up hands?” I look over to my mom to get me out of this. *Nope. They’re in this together.*

“Not really, no.”

“We thought you might say that.” She starts to slide the coffee away from me. *Oh, that’s how it’s going to be.*

“Just give her the coffee, we know she slugged them both.” Carter’s mom slides the coffee to me.

“I didn’t hit them.” My mom shrugs.

“They probably deserved it.” *I’m gonna poke Carter in his black eye.*

Nate shuffles into the kitchen with a groan. His hand is on his forehead. He goes to the fridge and grabs a swing top bottle of artisanal Gatorade. I avoid looking at him as he turns to leave the kitchen.

“Honey, are you okay?” Carter’s mom asks her nephew. He groans again.

"I'm going to lay down on the couch."

"You want some food?"

"In a little bit." He shuffles out of the room. The moms turn to me. *Uh oh.*

"Madison," my mother starts.

"Yes, mother." Apparently We're being formal this morning.

"How many boys *don't* have punched faces?" I sip my coffee, and hold up one finger with a shrug of my shoulder, because I'm pretty sure Arthur didn't get hit.

"Remember when we could punish them?" Carter's mom asks.

"It was so much easier when we could punish them."

My mom starts whipping whipped cream— by hand. She's the only person I've ever seen do this. Carter's mom gathers a bunch of syrups, fruit, and whatnot and places it in front of me.

"Here, go put these out on the table, and talk about what happened last night— loudly."

"Our ears are very old," my mom says with a smile as she starts forming soft peaks with the whipped cream. *Uh, pass. I'm going to stay right here and eat some waffles like I haven't eaten in a week, then I'm going upstairs to pack.*

"I'd really rather not."

"Good, then we can grill you until you tell us what's going on." Carter's mom is smiling at me and leaning on the counter. They definitely have an agenda.

"I'll be outside."

I grab my coffee and the whatnots and bring them outside to the patio table. I'm just going to drop these off and then go hide on the sectional of the conversation set until waffles are done. Nico and Carter are talking fantasy football as I set everything down. When I turn to the sectional, I see Nate laying down. *Damn it, I thought he meant the couch inside. Now I'm trapped here at the table, or else I have to go back inside and get grilled by our mothers. Fine.*

I sit down at the patio table as our dads step out the back door.

"I told you, I put it there yesterday, and it's gone." My dad turns to us. "Who keeps getting into our bottle of Macallan?"

"What the hell happened to you two?" Carter's dad has noticed the black eye epidemic we have. Carter looks over at me and grins. *Don't do it.*

“Maddie hit us.” I look over at our dads.

“I didn’t hit them.” Carter’s dad shrugs.

“They probably deserved it.” I look Carter right in his black eye.

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.”

“I have... hateful... feelings towards you.”

“No you don’t.” I groan internally because he’s right.

“So is anyone going to tell us what’s actually going on?” my dad asks.

“Nope.” The word comes from all three of us at the same time. *Well, at least we’re in this together.*

“Can you at least tell us who keeps taking our scotch?”

“Arthur.” There’s the gossipy Nico I know and love. At least he can keep one secret.

“So he’s buying us a new bottle, right?” My dad looks at me expectantly.

“A big, expensive one,” Carter’s dad adds.

“To get back in our good graces.”

“I will buy you a new bottle,” I tell them. It’s the least I can do.

“I care more about the black eyes than I do about the scotch. So who’s going to start talking?” We all look at each other, and avoid looking at our dads. Why do I feel like a child who’s in trouble? Probably because they’re treating us like children in trouble. The patio door slides open. *Thank God.* It’s Audrey. She slides the door shut behind her. Her eyes look tired, and suddenly I feel immense guilt. That’s definitely my fault. She and Bennett were probably up last night fighting, or at the very least talking... unhappily. She pauses by my chair and we hug for a moment.

“I’m sorry.” I probably owe her a bigger apology than that, but I don’t know what else to say right now.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” I hug her tighter.

“Neither did you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.” Audrey and I finally let go of each other. She moves around to sit next to me. I move my coffee over to her. She grabs it and takes a sip. She needs it more than I do.

“Clearly you’ve upset Audrey with whatever you did last night.” I’m pretty sure Audrey is my dad’s favorite. “So the groundings will start now,

and continue until someone tells us what happened.”

“We’re grown ass adults, you can’t ground us,” Nico tells him.

“Watch me.” *Oh, sweet Jesus. Why does everyone in this family need to know everything?* The door slides open again and Bennett walks through.

It. Gets. Quiet.

Really, really quiet. I can hear the seagulls cawing in the distance. I just stare down at the table, because I don’t even want to look at him. And judging by how I’m reacting to just seeing him, I’m clearly still mad at him. Bennett’s lip is split and his cheek is bruised. He sits across from us with barely a glance towards Audrey. *Awesome. I’ve ruined their relationship.* This is literally the reason I left. This moment right here. I was trying to avoid ruining everything, and yet I somehow managed to do it anyway. *I don’t want to do this. I want to run upstairs, and pack my bags and drive—damn it, it’s Arthur’s car. Where the hell is he? I need him to get his butt out here so I can get ready to go.*

I have no idea where to look right now. My heart is beating a little fast, and I’m waiting for someone, anyone, to do something to get through this tension. Just then, Bennett breaks the awkward silence.

“Are you seriously leaving this morning?” *That’s not what I wanted.* I don’t really want to talk to Bennett, so I sit there in silence. “Maddie?” He’s irritated.

“Yes.” *Fine. You want to do this in front of everyone? Have it your way.*

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” My dad is a little worked up.

“It’s the pageant tonight,” Carter says, as if that changes anything. “You love the pageant.” I used to love it, but now I don’t think I can stomach sitting through it.

“People change, Carter.” I push my seat back. “I’ll grab some food on the road.” But not really, because Arthur won’t let me. You know, “traveler’s diarrhea” and all. Is it still called that when you’re going home? Whatever, Arthur can tell me all about it on the way. I get up from my seat and start for the back door.

“Maddie, wait.” It’s Carter. I look back at him with unapologetic eyes.

“I’ll see you next summer Carter.” But probably not. I’m regretting promising him to come back next year. I guess I have a year to decide what I want to do. I continue through the door, past our mothers who are getting

ready to carry food outside. I can hear them saying things to me, but I ignore them. I can't be in this house anymore. I can't be around Bennett, or Nate. I need distance from Carter. Beck specifically said that my relationship with Carter was the reason he stopped calling. That's what I was afraid of, that our friendship would ruin my dating life. And there's Beck, literally telling me that it ruined our dating life. I was right. This friendship we have is unhealthy, and clearly we just can't do boundaries. So I'll have to do it for us both.

I reach my room and close the door. My suitcase is in the closet, I set it on the bed, but instead of packing I sit down next to it and start to cry. How am I literally exactly where I was four years ago? Because despite the fact that I felt like everything had changed, it seems like nothing has. If I walk away from Carter, I walk away from everyone. No Christmas Eve, no Easter. No Lantern Festival. Lonely dinners alone instead of Thanksgiving because I'm avoiding Carter. He's going to have a wife, and kids, and a life here without me. I just can't stomach that. I can't sit here and watch him have everything I want but can't have.

I stand up and start for my closet. I didn't pack a lot this time because I wasn't staying for the summer. There's very little in the closet. Then I guess I'll wake Arthur and wait for him to pack. My fingers touch my sweater just as my door swings open. I turn to yell at Carter about boundaries. *Not Carter. Bennett.* Well, I hope he enjoys awkward silences because I have nothing to say to him right now.

"What the hell are you doing?" *We're off to a good start.* I tug the sweater off of the hanger, and he grabs it out of my hand. I don't know what I expected from him, he's not Carter, he doesn't have a gentle touch. I try to grab the sweater from him and he yanks it away. *Great, we're full children right now. Maybe Dad will ground me from leaving the house too.* I glare at him, still unwilling to talk to him. "You're just going to leave? Just like that?" I reach for the next sweater and he pulls it away too. *Fine! I'll just buy new clothes.* I turn and walk towards the dresser. "I can't believe you're doing this to him *again.*"

"Dad will be fine." I open a drawer and he shuts it.

"Not Dad, Carter." He throws his name at me like a dagger and it sticks straight in my chest.

"Yesterday you punched him in the face."

"And today you punched him in the heart."

“Carter’s fine.” He’s being a bit hypocritical considering how he was treating him twelve hours ago.

“You didn’t see the look on his face when you said you wouldn’t see him for a year. A freaking year, Maddie? You made him wait four years to see you and you just take off with a ‘see you next year.’ Really?”

“You’re the one actually beating him up.”

“Oh, so now this is about me hitting him?”

“It’s absolutely about you hitting him! He didn’t deserve that, Bennett!”

“Oh, he deserved it.” He’s gesturing at me with my own sweaters and for some reason that makes me more angry. “I told him not to touch you and he did it anyway.”

“So which is it, Ben? You like him or you hate him, because right now it seems like both.” I’m dying to hear the explanation for this.

“He shouldn’t have touched you.”

“I’m a grown adult! I made a choice!”

“He knew, Maddie. I told him, and told him what would happen, and he did it anyway.”

“What’s so awful about two consenting people sleeping together?” He groans.

“I don’t want to hear about it.” *Well, he wanted to talk!*

“He was nice, and he was respectful, which is probably more than the girls you met at house parties got from you and Nico.”

“Hey!” His eyes narrow at me, like he’s offended. “We were always respectful.”

“Tell that to the person cleaning the bathrooms at China Garden.” Bennett laughs quietly and sits on my bed. He starts fiddling with my sweaters that are still in his hand. He’s not looking at me anymore.

“I thought you two had a fight. I didn’t know you broke up.” There’s a gentleness to his voice, almost sad.

“We didn’t break up. We weren’t together.” He looks up at me.

“I’m sorry, you weren’t dating you were just—”

“Two consenting adults, yes.” He puts his hand up and shakes his head.

“I don’t want to hear about your consenting.” I sit down on the bed next to him, and take my sweaters out of his hand. This time he lets me.

“I just can’t do it, Ben.” My voice is softer, mirroring him. Almost

sad, probably because I am sad.

“What?”

“Be around him anymore. I’m never going to have something real with someone if I have this messed up relationship with Carter. We’re too close to each other. It hurts our actual relationships... and if I stay here with him I’m never going to have a real shot at happiness.”

“Maddie.”

“What man is going to want to date me when I have a best friend I can’t stop—” I look over at him. “Consenting with.”

“Can’t you just talk to him?”

“Bennett, I have spent this entire trip trying to set boundaries with him. We’re not good at it. We just keep falling into the same old habits.” He raises his eyebrows at me. I hit him with the sweaters. “Not *those* habits.” I sigh deeply, letting out all my stress about being here. “We just can’t have a normal friendship. The only thing that works is space.”

“Maybe it worked for you, but it hasn’t worked for him. He’s been miserable without you.”

“And I’m miserable without him, but we can’t keep doing this to each other.”

“Can you at least try to come back more often than just Christmas?” I look down and shake my head. I start picking at lint on my sweaters.

“I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Because it hurts too much. He was my best friend, and now I have to keep myself away from him... I miss him like crazy.” There I said it, that thing I’ve been feeling for four long years.

“And he misses you like crazy. Can’t you just make it work?” I shake my head.

“Imagine you couldn’t be with Audrey and you had to see her all the time.”

“Is that what this is about?” I get up off the bed, and walk to my closet.

“It’s about a lot of things.” I look over at him, his punched face is sad.

“I’m sorry that I hit him.”

“You should be, and you should be saying it to him.” I’m right and he knows it.

“Fine.”

“I’m sorry I was gone for so long... It just hurt too much to come home.”

“I wish you would have told me sooner.” I glare at him.

“So you could have punched him sooner?”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have punched him.”

“Ben.”

“Fine. I definitely would have punched him.” He walks over and gives me a half hug. I hug him back. We’re not very touchy feely with each other, that’s more of a Davis family trait. “I love you, and I’m sorry about what happened.”

“I love you, you big jerk.” I sigh and pull him a little closer. “And be nice to Audrey. She’s been good to you,” I say into his shoulder.

“Audrey kept secrets from me.”

“She was just being a good friend. She loves you.” He groans.

“Fine. Are you really leaving?”

“I just need some space from Carter. When Arthur gets up I’m heading home.”

“He’s already up.” I was just down there, I didn’t see him.

“What? Since when?” I pull away from my brother to check his face and see if he’s messing with me.

“He’s been up for hours.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s playing Call of Duty.” *That doesn’t sound right.*

“How do you know that?”

“We’re friends on Steam. I saw him on there this morning.”

“I don’t understand what that means.”

“It means when you’re friends it tells you when your friend is online and what they’re playing.”

“He’s just in the office playing video games?”

“That’s what he’s been doing all week.”

“All week??” I’m getting mad again.

“Yeah, he’s got a whole set up in there.”

“What?!”

“What did you think he was doing?”

“Sleeping!” I let out a frustrated groan. “He’s been in there playing video games all week instead of getting to know the family?”

“I see him on there all the time.”

“I cannot believe this.” I start for my bedroom door.

“Where are you going?”

“To yell at Arthur!”

I practically stomp down the stairs as I make my way to the office. I throw the door open without knocking, and sure enough there’s Arthur sitting on the bed with a laptop in his hands and a Red Vine hanging out of his open mouth. He seems a little surprised to see me in his room.

“Hi, honey,” I say, full of venom and vitriol. I’m angry. He pauses his hand on the keyboard and looks over at me.

“Do you need something? I’m in the middle of a match.”

“Uh, yeah, your time and attention getting to know my family.” He groans and tosses his laptop on the bed.

“I spent plenty of time getting to know your family.”

“You spent plenty of time getting to know your video games! You missed the welcome brunch our moms threw you!”

“What welcome brunch?”

“Exactly! You didn’t even know about it because you were too busy in here!” I can’t believe he’s missed all of these opportunities to get to know my family because he was in here playing video games. Something he could do literally any other time.

“Why are you acting like this is such a big deal? I’m on vacation. Why can’t I do what I want on vacation?”

“The whole reason we came was so you could meet my family!”

“After last night I’m pretty sure you brought me here to make your cousin/boyfriend jealous for breaking up with you.” My mouth drops open, and my brain can’t form words. *Did he just say cousin/boyfriend??*

“First of all, he’s not my cousin. How many times have we told you we’re not cousins?!”

“This is the first time.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the *hundredth* time. But you don’t listen to me, so I shouldn’t expect you to know that.”

“I listen to you.”

“You absolutely do not listen to me. When we got here you were going on about staying in some fancy hotel. When did I ever say to you that we were staying in a fancy hotel?”

“I’m pretty sure you said it.”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t because we have never *ever* stayed in a hotel

here.”

“You said we were coming out here, and it sounded like we were going to have some fancy vacation. I thought we were going to stay in fancy hotels and eat fancy dinners, and go out on yachts.”

“Yachts?! Do you have any idea how much a yacht costs?! My family doesn’t have that kind of money.”

“But they have money, and I was expecting something a little– nicer than this.” *Why in the hell would Arthur think that we were taking some fancy million dollar vacation?* And then I realize why. My stomach turns sick.

“The card.”

“What?”

“The credit card I dropped at the bar the night we met.” That fancy freaking credit card our dads gave us.

“What about it?”

“You saw the card, the purse my mom got me, the car, and you thought I had money.”

“You have money.”

“My parents have money.”

“Same difference.”

“But not stupid amounts of money, not yacht money. We didn’t have money growing up, I told you that.”

“Well you have money now, and I was expecting that we would be spending some of it instead of eating street food at stupid town events.” The words “stupid town events” hit me kind of hard. I knew he wasn’t enjoying himself, but hearing those words is tough. I love the town events. I love all of it.

“So you meant it the other day when you were talking about being wined and dined. You just want me to spend money on you.”

“What’s so wrong about that? I work hard, don’t I deserve something?”

“It’s not our money!”

“It’s just money, what’s the big deal?” I’m seeing a completely different side of Arthur this trip. Maybe it was a good thing we came, because I wouldn’t have seen this.

“If it’s just money then why don’t we ever spend your money? Why is it that I’m always paying for things?” He’s quiet for a long time. “Because it’s just money when it’s other people’s money. But when it’s your money

then it's a big deal." A horrible realization sets in. My hands are starting to shake, and I try to steady them. "So you've just been using me all this time?"

"What? No. I like you."

"Do you? Because it kind of seems like you don't. Especially when you tell me that you don't like my hair or my makeup. It definitely doesn't seem like that when you pay more attention to other girls than me, or when you tell me you want me to clean your apartment and then leave."

"You're being a bit dramatic."

"I'm being dramatic? You've literally been using me for money, and I'm being dramatic? Really?"

"I'm not using you, I just expected you to spend some of your money on me. It's two completely different things." *It's not, it's really not.* I look over at the wall, to the photo of Carter with his hands over his heart. My insides melt little, and solidify the thought in my head. *That's love.* Whatever incarnation it is, it's love. This— this isn't love.

"You should go."

"Go back to my game?"

"Go home, Arthur."

"We're staying until Sunday." *Sweet Jesus.*

"Not anymore."

"I drove you here."

"I'll find my own way home." I wouldn't want to ride back with him anyway.

"You don't mean it." He turns to go back to his game.

"I mean it. And if you don't start packing I have a brother, three fake cousins, and two dads who would love to repeat it to you."

"Madison." He gives me a look that says he thinks I'm being dramatic.

"It's Maddie. You better start packing." I turn and walk out the door. Pretty much everyone is in the house, and I'm sure they all just overheard that. *Awesome.* I avoid looking at everyone as I make my way out to the conversation set that Nate seems to have vacated. The anger starts to fade, the adrenaline dies down, and all that's left is sadness.

Chapter 16

Lantern Festival

Four Years ago

“Remember that movie Ghost?” We’re sitting on the raised up section of beach at Lovers Point, camp chairs scattered all around our home base. Everyone is wrapped in blankets. It’s cold this year. Even the seals seem to be hiding from the weather. Carter’s sitting next to me wrapped in his green blanket sipping hot cocoa out of an insulated travel mug.

“With Patrick Swayze?” my mom asks.

“Yes!”

“And that pretty girl!” My dad starts snapping his fingers as he tries to remember.

“Baby!” Carter’s dad yells. My dad points at him like he’s right.

“That’s Dirty Dancing!” They’re so bad at this.

“Jennifer Beals!” My dad thinks he has it this time.

“That’s Flashdance! You’re not even close.”

“I loved Flashdance,” Carter’s mom says. “I cut the neck off my sweatshirt after I saw that movie.” *How did one question turn into a whole thing?*

“We were necking at that movie.” My mom gestures between herself and my father. *Nope. Don’t need to hear about that.*

“No, that was Dirty Dancing,” my dad corrects her.

“No, it wasn’t.” My parents are trying to remember which movie they were making out in. I lean over towards Carter.

“It’s like herding cats.”

“They’re stepping all over the punchline of your joke.” He hands me his mug of cocoa and I’m grateful. It’s really cold out here this year, but I don’t want to leave. I love the pageant too much.

“My particular brand of humor is unappreciated by this family.” I take

a sip of his cocoa and try again. “No, Ghost, with Demi Moore.”

“Demi!” My dad points at me. “I knew it was her, I just couldn’t think of her name.” *No he didn’t.*

“There’s that scene where they’re sitting at the pottery wheel and he has his arms around her.”

“Ghosting,” Carter chimes in. “You know all about that, Maddie cakes.” I roll my eyes at him and continue.

“So Carter and I were re-watching it the other day, and he says that ghosting is romantic in any scenario, and I think he’s wrong.”

“There’s definitely things you could do that wouldn’t be romantic.” His dad seems to have taken my side.

“Grocery shopping!” Carter’s mom yells.

“Oh no, that’s definitely romantic.” Carter’s messing with us. “You push the cart together, you reach out and grab things off the shelves. Totally romantic.”

“Digging a ditch!” my mom yells.

“Digging a grave!” my dad yells. I start laughing. This is what I was hoping for.

“No, I’m into the ditch digger.” Carter loves ridiculous ideas. “He’s probably all buff from digging ditches all day. He can work without a shirt on, and wipe sweat off his face with his arm.”

“Nope.” I’m not into it, but I am laughing.

“Oh come on. What does that rate on your chili pepper scale?”

“My what?”

“That scale they give to your romance books with the chili peppers. That’s gotta be a five.” I widen my eyes at him.

“That scale is for sexiness.”

“That’s sexy as shit.”

“No, sexy in a different way.”

“She means actual sex,” my mother explains. I start feeling hot and sweaty. This conversation has taken a turn.

“Look what you’ve done,” I tell him.

“I’m gonna email your romance ladies about writing a book about a sexy ditch digger. You’d read the shit out of that book.” I hesitate for a second.

“Okay... I’d give it a shot.”

“See! Five chili peppers, easy. I should get a job giving people ideas

for romance books.” He’s being cute and funny, and I kind of want to kiss him right now, but our parents are around. “What?” His voice is a little quieter. This is just for me.

“Nothing.”

“You’re giving me a look.”

“I give you lots of looks.” I sip his hot cocoa and hand it back.

Nate walks over to us in a wetsuit. He’s been out in the water most of the day. Carter’s mom jumps up to hand him a towel.

“How are you out in that water right now?” she asks as she wraps the towel around him just like when we were children. The boys tower over her and she has to stand on her toes now, but it still feels the same. Nate’s mom always has to work, so she never makes it out here. Our moms were his moms all summer. Even now as adults they still seem like his moms.

“The wetsuit keeps me warm.” Nate grabs the towel and starts to dry off.

“There isn’t a wetsuit thick enough to get me in that water.” I have no interest in exiting this blanket anytime soon.

“Carter, you should come out, the waves are sick.”

“I think I’m gonna stay on dry land for a while.” He moves his chair in front of me, I know what he’s doing, he’s trying to steal my warmth. He kicks his shoes off and slides his legs under my blanket so his feet are on my chair. I do the same and we toss his blanket over mine. It’s so much warmer this way. I used to rest my legs on top of his before his knee surgery, but since then I’ve been too afraid, so I put them both to the side. He starts rubbing my hip with his foot. It’s really sweet. I tuck the blanket all around his feet because he likes it that way. There’s a new book on my phone app I’ve been really into, so I pull it out and start reading. “What are you reading?” he asks me as he pulls out his phone.

“I don’t want to say.” I look down at my phone, and avoid looking at him. I have his full attention.

“It’s it really filthy? Six chili peppers? Seven?”

“The scale only goes to five!”

“Yeah, six and seven means it’s off the chart.”

“It’s pretty smutty.”

“I want to read it when you’re done.” He smiles at me in a way that makes me tingly.

“What are you offering in return?”

“A dark version of Harry Potter, with a ‘will they won’t they.’”

“Hmmm...” I’m considering it, but I’m not a hundred percent sold.

“You’ll like it.” He usually knows what I like.

“Okay, fine.”

Bennett and Audrey return from their dinner, the rest of us ate a while ago. She grabs a blanket from the stack of blankets our moms brought.

“You two look cozy.” She smiles at us.

“It’s so much warmer this way,” I tell her.

“Ben, share a blanket with me.”

“It’s two blankets.” I raise my eyebrows at her.

“Two? Oh my God, we’re doing this.”

“You’re going to get sand all over the chair.” Bennett is complaining.

“You take your shoes off,” I explain. He’s new to the concept of blanket sharing apparently.

“And smell your stinky feet? Pass.” Audrey fakes being shocked and smacks him on the chest.

“Get your stinky feet over here and warm me up,” she tells him.

“When are you two starting work?” Bennett asks us as he flips a chair around to face Audrey’s. I look over at Carter for the answer because I haven’t heard. He shrugs his shoulders.

“I don’t know.”

“Hey, Dad!” Bennett yells to our dad. Both dads look over at us.

“When are these two lazy sacks starting work?” I stick my tongue out at him like when we were kids and he does the same back.

“Well, I figured they’d want to enjoy the summer since *it will be their last*.” He says it in a creepy voice like we’re in a haunted house. Carter’s dad gives an evil laugh in the background. *These two*. “I don’t know. We wanted to start you on trucks first so you get an idea of how the job goes, like we did with Nico and Bennett.” He looks over at Carter’s dad and they seem to be having a silent conversation.

“I don’t want them in the trucks when it’s a hundred and ten degrees outside,” Carter’s dad tells him. “They’re not used to the heat, they’ll get sick.”

“Fine, I guess you’re right.” My dad turns back to us. “Let’s say September and we’ll nail down an exact day later.” *Nice. Extra long summer.*

I look back down at my phone as an email comes through. It’s from Randall Wayne. He’s a friend of one of my professors. Randall owns some

company up north. He was looking to hire someone and my professor thought I'd be a good fit. I told them both I already had a job lined up. I spoke with Randall for a little bit on the phone last week, and I thanked him for thinking of me, but reiterated that I had a job.

I open the email and read what it says. He said he enjoyed my interview the other day. *Interview? I thought we were just chatting on the phone.* He's offering me a job at his company... blah blah blah. I close the email and go back to reading my book. I am a little proud though. I had wondered to myself if I could have landed a job on my own. My current job was clearly handed to me. I'll have to show Carter later.

Carter's mom and my mom are messing with some of the lanterns over at the table. They have a ton of them set up for the pageant. There's a specific moment when everyone on the beach turns on the lanterns. Our moms have theirs all rigged up to turn on by remote when it's time. My mom keeps messing with some of them, and the remote. They both look a little flustered.

"What's up with them?" I ask Carter whose head is buried in his phone.

"What?" I gesture towards our mothers.

"You need some help?" Carter calls over to them.

"I think the remote batteries are dead," his mother tells him.

"I don't see the extras in the bag. I think we left them at home." My mom makes a sweet face. "Sweets...?"

"Yes." He's faking like he's annoyed.

"Can you two run to the house and get our batteries?" He lets out a fake groan.

"Fine." He yanks the blankets off our legs.

"Hey!" The cold air hits me in a rush.

"Come on, Mads, let's leave the freezing cold beach for the warmth of the house." *Well, when you put it that way.*

"You mean I get to thaw out? Sold." I get up and follow him to his car. Someone is going to snag our parking spot the second we leave, but whatever, we can walk a few blocks.

We hop in Carter's new car. I tap the tassels hanging from his rear view mirror and watch them sway. I just put them up there a couple weeks ago after we graduated.

"I still can't believe this car," I tell him.

“My car? Have you seen your car?” I laugh a little to myself.

“I’m afraid to drive it.” He glances over at me with an amused look on his face.

“Why?”

“What if I wreck it? I can’t afford to fix it.” He laughs to himself as he pulls out of the parking spot. I lean back and rest my head on the seat.

“You’ll be fine.”

“It’ll be fine as long as I leave it parked in a garage with like three locks on the door.”

“If you wreck it, I’ll trade you cars.” I roll my head against the seat so I can look at him.

“You wouldn’t trade me for a busted up car.”

“You wreck it, I’ll trade you. Promise.” Carter always keeps his promises. *God, he’s the best.* I stare at him for probably too long as we drive back to the house.

We walk through the door and Carter starts digging around the battery drawer for the ones our moms need. It’s so much warmer in here. I start grabbing the other items on the list they texted to me while we were driving here. He finds the batteries as I finish grabbing the last item.

“You know what I just realized?” he asks me with a devious tone. I know that tone... my body knows that tone, and has responded accordingly.

“What?”

“We’re the only ones home.” *Ugh, yes.* He walks over to me. “Hey, Baby.” He drops the batteries on the table as we start kissing. I’ve been dying to kiss him for an hour, probably more. *Our parents won’t notice if we’re gone a little extra time, right?* We make our way up to my room where we lock the doors and warm each other up.

When we’re done I lay naked on his bare chest while I listen to his heart return to normal. *I will never get enough of him.*

“Hey, Maddie?” He wraps his arms around me. I am so much warmer than I was at the beach. His fingers start gently stroking up and down my arm.

“Yes.”

“Where are we gonna live when we get home?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, *where are we going to live?*”

“Well, you’ll go back to— Oh, shit. Where are we going to live?” I

was about to say that he'd go back to the house he's lived at for four years except... he won't. We're done with college.

"Are we going back to our parents' houses?"

"Oh, ew, no." I love my parents, but I haven't lived in their house with them since high school. That feels so weird.

"What other option do we have?" *Uh oh. I hadn't thought about that.*

"Until we start working, we don't have any money." *He's right.*

"I don't want to live with my parents again."

"Me neither. I think once we start working I'm going to look for a place."

"I'll go with you, I don't want to live with my parents forever."

"You think you'll be okay living on your own?" *I don't really like the sound of that.*

"I don't think I want to live alone."

He takes a deep breath. "Okay, I'm going to say this, but you can say no, no hard feelings."

"Okay." I'm not sure what he's getting at.

"You think we could be roommates?"

"Huh." I hadn't thought about it.

"You can say no."

"I'm thinking, don't rush me." I start weighing it in my head. Our brothers are roommates. They don't have a spare room. Audrey has a roommate already. Carter and I get along. "I basically lived at your house last year. I think we could probably get along."

"We could get a cute little house, try it for six months. If we don't like it, we find new places to live and stay friends, no hard feelings." It's a solid offer. And frankly the only offer I have at this point.

"Deal." He holds out his pinky and hooks it to mine. "A pinky promise, Carter?"

"It's the most sacred of all promises."

We manage to find our clothes and make ourselves look like we didn't just have sex. Carter drives us back to the beach where we find a spot not too far from the one we vacated. Must be our lucky day. We walk down the hill back to our home base on the beach.

"What took you two so long? The sun is setting soon." *Oh good, his mom noticed.* I try not to look at her so she won't read my face and know what we were doing.

“Maddie was enjoying the warmth too much.” *Me? He wanted to stay for round two.*

“Uh, I think that was you, Cartier.” He hands our moms our haul, and we go back to our shared blankets. It’s possible that it’s colder out here than it was before. We return to reading our books, and we trade when we finish. Carter starts my filth book, and keeps sneaking looks at me over my phone. I’m not sure if he’s enjoying it, or getting ideas. I don’t hate either one of those scenarios.

As the sun sets, some of the lanterns come on. As soon as the pageant starts, they’ll all shut off and the beach will go pitch black.

“Hey,” Carter whisper-yells to me.

“What?” He’s interrupting my reading, and he was right, I’m enjoying it.

“You want to watch from the path like we did when we were kids?” I love it up there. It’s the best view of the stage. There’s a walking path and a stone wall you can put your lantern on. It’s a really good spot.

“Sure.” A few minutes later Carter drags me from his book and we walk up to the path together. There’s a big crowd starting to gather. We set our lanterns up on the stone wall.

As soon as it’s dark enough, the pageant starts. It’s a cutesy little play they put on every year telling the story of Mr. and Mrs. Butterfield. They have a row of fake houses on the stage, and the girl who’s been playing Mrs. Butterfield all week is the star of the show. She comes out on the stage, waiting for her Mr. Butterfield to come home, and then the stage lights dim as the lighthouse light “burns out.” Then she runs from fake house to fake house knocking on doors. They have local theater kids play the townspeople. They get to do their own reactions to Mrs. Butterfield waking them up. Sometimes it’s funny. Then they all run out to the stage with their lanterns and Mrs. Butterfield yells out “Mr. Butterfield, please come home,” and on the word “home” all the lanterns come on including the ones on the beach. It’s so beautiful. Then someone brings Mr. Butterfield in on a boat, they declare their love for each other, and fake kiss. It’s adorable.

Mrs. Butterfield has just walked outside to wait for her husband when Audrey and Bennett push their way through the crowd to us.

“Oh, this *is* a good spot,” Audrey tells Bennett. I turn to her and playfully shush her. She smiles and nudges me, then leans over to whisper. “I’m dying to see the kiss. I think they hate each other.” I raise my eyebrows

and nod enthusiastically because I'm *very sure* they hate each other. They haven't looked happy all week.

Bennett has his hands gently resting on her shoulders and I feel a pang of jealousy. I've never had that. I glance beside me at Carter who's staring at the stage. We get to the part where Mrs. Butterfield starts knocking on the doors and the first kid is hilarious. I move my hand a little and I can feel Carter's hand next to mine. It's warm, and inviting... and just right there. I could just reach over and hold it. *It's no big deal, right?* We've done way more than just hold hands... but we've never held hands. My heart starts beating faster as I contemplate my choice. Mrs. Butterfield is knocking on the doors and the kids are killing it this year. I reach over and slip my hand in Carter's hand— and he immediately pulls away. *Oh. Okay. I didn't think it was a big deal, but I guess it is.* He leans forward on the rock wall and rests his forearms on it. My heart is still pounding, but not for the same reason. *What is this?* People are laughing and I can't even focus on what's going on. Carter looks back at me.

"You okay?" I nod.

I'm not okay. Tears are prickling at my eyes. *What the hell is going on with me right now?* He turns back to the play, and I want to ask him what the hell that was for. *Why am I angry? He didn't want to hold my hand, so what? And now I'm crying. What is happening?*

"You are not crying right now." *Great, my brother noticed.*

"I just love them so much." Now I look like an idiot. My stomach is sick, and I want to go home. As in, I want to run away and go home right now... and cry. *Why do I want to cry? I don't understand what the hell is wrong with me. I haven't felt this way since... since Ty and I broke up in high school. But that was different, because Ty and I were dating, and Carter and I are just fr—*

Oh.

My.

God.

I'm in love with Carter. I put my hand up to my mouth as the lanterns turn on. *Oh my God. How did this happen? Oh my God.* Carter reaches over and turns my lantern on for me. He looks back at me again.

"What's wrong?" he whispers, his face aglow in the fake candle light. I shake my head because I can't form words. He turns back to the play. Big thick tears are falling down my face, and curling under my chin. I only cry

this hard when something truly awful happens. This— this is truly awful.

How could I let this happen? How many many times have we given that speech about how we can't date? How many times have I said the words "we just don't feel that way about each other" to people? I knew what this was from the beginning, and I knew what it could never be. It could never be us holding hands on the beach like Bennett and Audrey.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

My heart feels like it's in a million pieces as I continue to silently cry. I don't want anyone to see me and ask me what's wrong.

Mrs. Butterfield leans in hesitantly for the kiss. Mr. Butterfield kisses his hand and shoves it at her. The crowd laughs. Everyone starts to clap, and I stand there unmoving. I have to pull myself together. The crowd starts to move as soon as the applause ends. Carter grabs our lanterns and turns them off. I'm grateful for the darkness as I wipe my tears with my sleeves. We make our way back through the crowd to base camp and start to help our parents pack up. I gather the blankets and bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. Nico starts stacking more blankets in my arms.

"You okay?" I look up at him and my eyes start to water.

"I'm not feeling well." It's a good enough lie.

"Audrey's cold. Why don't you two head home, and we'll pack up?" I nod and take my stack of blankets over to where she's loaded down.

"Maddie, I'm freezing. Let's wrap ourselves in all the blankets and ditch clean up." She grabs three blankets off the stack and wraps them around my shoulders before doing the same to herself and loading back up with her stack of stuff. Bennett's car is parked very close by because they got here at dawn. My brain can barely tell my feet to move. We load up the car and head home in mostly silence. Audrey is talking here and there, and I'm just numbly staring out the window.

When we reach the house, I dump my stack of blankets in the laundry room because our moms like washing the sand out of them after they've been to the beach.

"I think I'll skip sitting on the beach tonight. It's too cold. I'm here all next week, we have plenty of time for chilling at the beach." Audrey's voice is barely audible over my thoughts. I nod to her and continue up the stairs to my bedroom. "Are you okay?" she asks from the first floor as I continue up. I

don't think I ever answer her.

I close the door to my bedroom and sit on the edge of my bed. I stare at the tiny flowers printed on the bedspread and they blur as the tears start coming again. *How could I let this happen?* Just a couple of hours ago we were on this bed and he was asking me if we could be roommates. *Oh God. I promised him we would try. How am I supposed to do that? How am I supposed to live in the same house as him? How am I supposed to go to work with him every day, and come home to a cute little house with him every night knowing I'm completely in love with him? It's going to destroy me.* I wipe my tears with my sleeve again, and pull out my phone. I pull up Randall Wayne's email and read the full email, then put the phone next to me on the bed.

If Carter and I live together he's going to assume that we'll just continue with things like they have been for the last— oh God, has it been three and a half years? Have we really been sleeping together for that long? How did I let this get so bad? I hang my head and start rubbing the tiny flowers on the bedspread with my finger. I have no idea why I'm doing it, but I can't stop. My entire body feels heavy, and I don't think I could stop crying if I wanted to. I don't want to, because I feel this horrible mix of pain and rejection— and I guess stupidity, too, because this is definitely my fault.

Carter walks through the open door to our bathroom.

“Hey, Mads, you wanna watch this documentary about a con artist I just— what's wrong?” My head is a ten ton block, and I can't lift it up. I keep rubbing those stupid flowers with my finger. “Tell me what happened.” *I messed up and fell in love with you. I messed everything up.* “Maddie?” His voice is a mix of concern and irritation. *It's his own damn fault for barging in here like he owns the damn room— like he always does. Forty five minutes ago I didn't care— hell, a couple hours ago we were naked in this bed together and I was staring at these flowers in a different way.* “Maddie, say something.”

“I got a job offer.” It's not what I should be saying to him right now, but it's all I can get out. My voice is thick with pain.

“That's all?” He laughs. “Well congratulations.” He laughs again, and he sounds relieved. “You're going to let them down gently, right?” I could say yes. I could say yes, and laugh with him, and watch that stupid documentary with him. I could finish the summer here, and we could move in together. We could be happy. We could eat take out together and watch movies on some crappy bed that was all we could afford. We could keep up

gropey hands and gropey mouths when no one is around. I could have this. I could have him... sort of. It wouldn't be a relationship, but I could deal with that. We'd never get married or have kids, but I could be okay with that... right? As long as I could still have a piece of him.

I hear someone walking outside my bedroom door. It's Audrey. She yells out to Bennett that she's going to bed, and then she yells "I love you," and something inside of me breaks. I want that. I want a real relationship out in the open for everyone to see. I want to yell "I love you" in front of people and not care. I want someone who wants to hold my hand at the Lantern Festival. I want kids. I can't say the words out loud to him, so I just shake my head no.

"Wait, what?" I don't have it in me to say the words I should be saying right now. "What do you mean no?"

"I want something for myself." I want *someone* for myself, but I can't get those words out.

"Maddie, a few hours ago we were talking to our dads about which day we'll start working for them and you're talking about taking another job? We've planned this. For years. Why are you just now bringing this up?" *Because I just now realized I want to be in a relationship with you.*

"I hadn't decided if I was taking the job." I didn't want the job then, I didn't care about the job then.

"Okay." He starts pacing around the room. "You're scared, that's fine. I'm nervous. It's new. You'll be fine. I'll be there with you."

"I'm taking the job, Carter." I guess I am, because I just told him I was. He stops pacing and looks at me.

"Maddie." His voice is an amalgam of fear and pain. "We're still living together though... right?" I can't look at his face. He has this look he gets when he's in pain and I can't see that look right now. It'll break my resolve. Instead I reach into his chest... and I break his heart.

"The job is in Sacramento."

"What?!" I swear I can hear the pained look on his face. "What do you mean it's in Sacramento?" I can't answer him. "Maddie, that's two hours away from us."

"Three," I correct him.

"Three?! You're moving to a city we went to on a school field trip one time?! By yourself?! Three hours away?!" I just nod, because I can't justify this to him, not without telling him everything and I just can't. He

starts pacing around again. “You’re just freaking out. You’re just having a post college freak out. You’re going to be fine.”

“I’m taking the job, Carter.” He doesn’t seem to believe me. He stops, and turns to look at me.

“What is going on? We were fine a few hours ago, everything was fine.” I can’t give him the answers he needs so I just sit there in silence. Everything he says feels like a blow to my insides. *I deserve it. I screwed this up, but I can’t ruin the family or the business because of my mistake. I can walk away. I just need to get away from Carter long enough to get over him. Maybe a few weeks... okay, maybe a couple of months... and a bucket of ice cream— two buckets. Three months and three buckets of ice cream. Fuck, I can’t do this without him.* “Maddie?” He’s still waiting. I’m still not talking.

He drops to his knees in front of me, and forces me to look at him.

“You have the summer to think about it. Just think about it.” I drop my gaze back to the bed.

“The job starts Monday.”

“Monday?! You’re telling me this right now— at ten o'clock Friday night, and the job starts *Monday*?” I nod again, because the heartbreak in his voice is killing me, and the tears are already coming. He drops his forehead onto my lap, and starts talking against my legs. “Just tell me what’s going on... please.” I reach my hand up to stroke his hair. At the last second I pull back and drop it back on the bed. *No more.* No more touching, I can’t handle it. “Fine.” He sighs, and I know he’s accepted that I’m going. “I’ll go with you, we’ll find you a place. I can finish the summer there while you get settled. We’ll have an adventure.” I want that. I want him to come, and to live with me, and greet me when I get home. I want cinnamon roll pancakes and the smell of his body wash in the shower.

“No.” He looks up at me.

“What do you mean no?”

“I’m going alone.”

“Alone? To a city you don’t know?”

“Yes.”

“Maddie!” *Fuck I hate this. I don’t want to live in this moment. I want it to be over, and I want to be in the next moment where I’m picking up the pieces of this moment.*

“I’m leaving tonight. By myself.”

“Tonight?!” He’s looking at me like I’m crazy, and I guess I am

because those words just came out of my mouth and I guess I'm doing it. "You can't wait until the morning? Or Sunday?" I shake my head. He sighs deeply. "Fine. Just call me when you get there." I can't bear to look at him when I say the next part, so I drop my gaze to the bed, I reach into my chest... and I break my own heart.

"No."

"No?" He sounds like he can't believe what he's hearing. "You're not going to call me?"

"No."

"Fine, I'll call you every half an hour so I know you're safe."

"No."

"Try and stop me!"

"I just need some space." *There. Maybe that he'll understand.*

"Space?" He's not understanding. "Space from me?" I nod because I don't want space from him. I want the opposite of space from him, and if I open my mouth I'll take it all back. This heaviness has set into my limbs and I feel like I can barely move. I slowly wipe a tear from my eye. "Is this because I didn't hold your hand?" He's quiet. That scares me more than when he was being loud a minute ago.

"No." *Yes. But not in the way he thinks.*

"I am sorry that I didn't hold your hand. And clearly I've hurt you, but please don't punish me like this." I don't mean to punish him, but clearly I am, and I feel like garbage for it.

"I just can't do this with you anymore, Carter." He grabs my hands with his. His hands are so much bigger than mine and they swallow them up.

"I won't touch you ever again. I promise I won't." *Shit, I think he might cry.* I can't deal with guys crying, it tears my heart out. "And I'll be the best man in your wedding, and I'll treat your kids like they're my kids." He grips my hands in his and lowers his head to my lap again. "Please. Please don't do this." *Be strong. Walk away. You're never going to find something real if you're still in love with Carter.*

I pull my hands from his. I look at him, this giant of a man, sitting on the floor. I've reduced him to rubble. He looks the way I feel inside. Decimated. I stand and he stands with me.

"I'll leave in the morning." He reaches out to wipe a tear from my eye and I pull away from him. *No more touching.* I swear I see him wipe a tear of his own. He takes a step back from me.

“Thank you. Just sleep on it, and decide tomorrow.” I nod at him. He leaves my room without another word, but a small glance. The second the door closes I pull my suitcase out and I start to quietly pack. I’m not leaving tomorrow. I just wanted the conversation to be over.

I pack all of my things and leave just after midnight when the house is quiet. Yes, I left in the middle of the night like the coward I am. In my defense, I was heartbroken and in shock. I ugly cry the entire drive. Around two in the morning Carter must have discovered that I was gone because he starts calling... and calling... and calling. I don’t pick up. Somewhere before four in the morning I reach the cheap hotel where I’ll live until I find a place. Carter has started texting by then. I block his phone number with the intention of unblocking it as soon as I’m over him. I text my parents to tell them where I am, that I’m safe, and I took a job. My dad starts texting me like crazy when I won’t pick up the phone, so I turn my phone off for the next week.

I cry every morning, and every night. At work I’m numb. I barely eat anything. I can’t sleep at night. On the rare occasion I do sleep, I get about an hour and wake up to cry. Six months go by, and I’m still a mess, because I’m still in love with Carter Davis. The next six months I cry a little less. After a year, the crying stops, but the numbness never does, and I’m fully convinced that I won’t ever feel anything the way I used to. Because I’m still in love with Carter Davis.

Chapter 17

Present Day

The sounds of waves crashing on the beach can't drown out my thoughts. I doubt anything can. How could I not have seen Arthur for what he was? Probably because I was too blinded by the fact that someone actually wanted to be with me. Too excited at the prospect of having someone here who I could openly call my boyfriend. Too overjoyed that I had a hand to hold at the pageant. I'm never going to find someone to fill that criteria. How is something so simple too much to ask for in this life?

"Maddie?" My mom's disheartened voice breaks through my thoughts. I turn my gaze to her. "Arthur's gone."

"I guess everyone heard everything, then."

"We did." I turn back to the blue ocean below the horizon. I haven't left the patio couch in what feels like forever. "Your father and Bennett had some very specific curse words for him as they *escorted* him to his car." *Yeah, that sounds like them.* "Escorted" seems like a fancied up version of what actually happened. "I'm really sorry." I'm not sure why she's apologizing. This is my fault. "I didn't realize how hard it was going to be for you kids to date because of the business." I shake my head.

"Don't apologize for your success. All of you have built two thriving businesses and I am very proud of how successful you are." I wipe a tear from my eye.

"But clearly it's making your dating life harder." I hate that she's blaming herself for this situation.

"This is my fault for not seeing Arthur for what he was... and his fault for looking at me and seeing dollar signs."

"Maddie, you know the odds of dating only one person your whole life and marrying them?" I don't answer, because she has a point, but I don't want to admit it. "Low. Very, very low. I dated a lot before I met your dad. I dated a lot of duds. I was a magnet for losers. I didn't think I'd ever find

someone. You'll get there." I shake my head, because I truly don't believe that anymore.

"I don't think I'm ever going to find someone, Mom." She moves to stand closer to me. College was probably the time for that. I wasted all my good years with Carter. I wipe more tears from my eyes. "Not everyone gets someone." I see her wipe at her own face. Now I've made my mom cry. I sniff and turn as far away from her as I can so I don't see her tears and start bawling.

"Maddie, there's someone out there who's perfect for you."

"And he doesn't love me the way that I love him." I don't know why I said it. Maybe I'm feeling brave because I'm not looking at her, maybe it's finally time to tell my mom the truth. She comes over and sits next to me on the patio couch.

"It's that why you left?" I nod, and start swiping more tears away. *How am I still this broken hearted over Carter all these years later?* "Oh, honey." She wraps her arms around me. "I'm so sorry." And then I'm just crying in my mom's arms like a little kid. "You'll find someone who's perfect for you, and loves you back."

"No one is ever going to be him."

"No, they won't. What you two have is a really close friendship, and maybe that's all it is. No one else will ever be the same, but they'll be good for you in different ways." I don't want anyone else. I don't want different. I just want Carter.

"I just can't be around him. It hurts too much."

"Okay." No argument, no bargaining, just okay. "We'll work it out so you can come without having to be around him." Now I wonder why I didn't just have this conversation with her four years ago instead of running away. It could have been easier if I had had their help avoiding Carter.

I hear the back door open, and I know who it is without having to look. My mom looks. She releases me and starts to stand up. I want to grab her and pull her back to me.

"I think you two need to talk." Did she not hear what I just said? I don't want to talk to him. I want to avoid being in the same city as him so I don't risk bumping into him. She gets up and walks over to the back door where he's standing and staring. "Arthur went home," she says quietly to him. "Be nice, Sweets."

"I'm always nice."

“You know what I mean.”

My mom goes inside the house and Carter lingers by the back door for a while. For a moment, I hope that he'll just go back inside and leave me to wallow in my sadness alone. But he's Carter, and he doesn't. Instead he walks over and pushes himself between my back and the back of the couch.

“Carter!” He wraps his arms around me, and holds me in place. “Boundaries!” I try to wiggle free from his hold.

“No, no boundaries, not when you're sad.”

“You can't just erase the boundaries when I'm sad.”

“Yes I can.”

“That's not how it works. They're all the time boundaries, not some of the time boundaries.” He grabs my hand with his and starts rubbing his finger on my palm. He's warm, and familiar, and all the things I want right now. But I need to stop this before I make my heartache worse. No matter how good it feels.

“Now that you're staying we can talk.” It's not a question anymore. I shake my head and smash my lips together because the tears are going to start back up. I can't handle the “I love you, but I'm not in love with you” conversation right now.

“No to the talking?”

“No to the staying. I'm going home.”

“Good, you need to come home.”

“No, Carter, I'm going home to Sacramento.” He falters for just a second while he's rubbing my hand. It feels so nice, I don't want him to stop.

“I think we both know that's not home.”

“It's my home now.”

“Well, you can't go back because you don't have a ride.”

“I'm taking the bus.”

“You are not getting groped by a stranger on a bus.” I can't hold in my laugh. “Fine, if you want to go home, I will drive you.”

“You're not driving me.”

“Then take the Mercedes.” That's not a bad idea. It's an extra car. They can pick it up next time they have a moving job near Sacramento.

“I'll think about it.” I peel myself off of Carter and get up. He grips my hand tighter.

“Stay for the pageant.” I don't want to stay for the pageant. He broke my heart at that pageant, and I don't want to relive that. “You love the

pageant.”

“Not anymore.”

I tug my hand free of his, and walk into the house. It's after lunch already. I need to pack and figure out how I'm getting home before the rest of the day gets away from me. My feet drag up the stairs. I'm pretty slow moving today. My heart is heavy, and so is the rest of me.

When I reach my room, I close the door and move my suitcase four entire inches. There's absolutely no reason for it other than I'm flustered. I stare at it and contemplate packing, and instead opt to lay on my bed for a while. At least in here I can be alone.

I stare at the room that feels unfamiliar to me, grateful that I don't have the tiny blue flowers on the blankets staring back at me. I think about using the Mercedes to drive home. That would mean having to face our dads again in the not too distant future when they come to get their car. It also means questions, and probably them knowing I'm in love with Carter, because my mom won't be able to keep that to herself. Maybe they'll send Nico and Bennett. That's not horrible. Maybe they'll send Carter. *Nope. Don't need that.* So I abandon that idea. By the time I pull my phone open to check the bus schedule there's only one bus left today with room. It's in the evening. Fine. At least I'll avoid the pageant, and the feelings associated with it.

There's a knock on my door. I know it's not Carter because he'd just bust in here like he owns the place. I don't know what to say to whoever it is. “Go away” sounds like a viable option. I'd really prefer to just be alone right now. There's another knock. *Ugh.*

“I'm sleeping!” The door opens, and Nate stands in the doorway.

“You are definitely not sleeping.” He gives me a look from his busted up face. He looks like he went twelve rounds with George Foreman. I'd like to press his face in a George Foreman grill right about now. I sit up, suddenly with the energy of a triple shot espresso coursing through my veins.

“No. Get out.” I make a shooing motion with my hands.

“Maddie.”

“No! Get out of my room with your asshole attitude and your punchable face.” He stares at me, unflinching.

“I'm not Carter, I'm not just going to walk away because you refuse to talk to me.” I walk over to my closet to start pulling clothes out to pack them in my bag despite the fact that my bus doesn't leave for a few hours.

“You’re seriously leaving again?”

“What do you care, Nate? Clearly you didn’t want me here.” I’m starting to raise my voice a little. Right now I don’t care. I’m so unbelievably angry with him about what he did. I’m not thinking clearly.

“You can’t just keep running away when things get hard!”

“I can do whatever I want, Nate! Because I am an adult!”

“You’re sure acting like a child, running away with their stuff in a bindle tied to a stick!” I almost laugh at bindle, but I remind myself that I’m pissed at him, so I glare at him instead.

“Get out of my room!” He doesn’t move. “Did you just come in here to fight with me?!”

“Yeah! I’m pissed at you!” Nate shuts the door behind him with a little force.

“Well, I’m pretty pissed at you too!” I throw one of the sweaters in my hand at him and he catches it in the air.

“After everything that you put everyone through for the last four years you’re just going to take off *again*?!”

“Yes, Nate! I am going back to my home, where I live! Isn’t that the same thing you do when you’re working?!” I’m gesturing at him with the other sweater the way that Bennett did to me earlier. I hope it makes him as mad as it made me. He had no right to do what he did.

“That’s different!”

“Name one way that that’s different!”

“I don’t get to choose what team I play for! I would rather be here with everyone than in a different city halfway across the country!” He’s gesturing back with my sweater, and damn it, it pisses me off just as much as it did before. Why did I give him ammunition for this?

“Well, I would rather be here too, but that’s not how life worked out!”

“Don’t act like you didn’t choose that! You had a good thing here, and you just stomped on his heart and fled!”

“I stomped on *his* heart?!”

“Yes!”

“He stomped on *mine*!” Nate flinches for a second, and I think he’s going to stop yelling at me.

“Bullshit.”

“Bullshit?! Really, Nate?! Why do you think I left?!” I’m clearly more angry than him right now.

“Because you’re a heartless—”

“Because I was *heartbroken!*”

“Bullshit! You’re gonna stand here and feed me a load of crap so I forgive you for what you did. No. He would never have broken up with you!”

“We weren’t together! We were never together, Nate!” I have no idea why he has this stuck in his head. It never happened.

“Stop lying! I saw you!” He’s worked up again. I drop my voice down.

“You saw us hooking up! You never saw us dating!”

“I saw what I saw!” He’s lowered his voice a little too. Thank God. At least he’s giving me a small amount of privacy with this particular topic.

“And was it absolutely necessary for you to tell everyone what you saw? Really, Nate?”

“Everyone already knew!”

“Did Arthur know?! You know, the boyfriend I brought here to meet my family?! Was it necessary for you to tell him that I was *sleeping with Carter in college?*!” I whisper-yell the last part at him because the last thing I need is for my parents to find out.

“Maybe he needed to know!”

“He needed to know?! I never told any of the girls you hooked up with about all the other girls you were hooking up with! How could you do that to me?!” This is the part I really want to know. Why would he do something so awful to me? We were never close like I am with Carter, but we always got along fine.

“Did you really think it wasn’t ever going to come out?!”

“Yes! That was my business! Not yours! He was the first real boyfriend I’ve had since high school, Nate! High school! And you ruined it!”

“I ruined it? From the sounds of it this morning I did you a favor!” Now I’m really angry. Rage boils up inside of me.

“A favor?!” I throw the other sweater at him, and grab two more to throw at him. “You did it on purpose, you asshole!” I throw the first one at him. “You announced to everyone that I was hooking up with Carter! How fucking dare you?!” I throw the second sweater at him. He now has a handful of sweaters. I go to grab more.

“Stop throwing sweaters at me! I’m out of hands!”

“Never!” I’m running out of sweaters to throw at him, so I grab a shirt which doesn’t have the speed and weight of a sweater. “You ruined my life!”

He's using his arms to deflect the shirt because his hands are full.

"You ruined mine first!"

"How the fuck did I ruin your life?!" I grab for more shirts.

"We had a plan and you ruined it!" I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about.

"What plan?!"

"He was supposed to come with me!"

"Who?!" I stop throwing clothes at him.

"Carter!" I fold my arms over my chest, my hands still clutching my shirts... just in case.

"What are you talking about?"

"Carter and I were going to go to the NFL together. Both of us." I stare at him, because I'm not sure if I believe him. Carter never really talked about his feelings about that— at least not with me. "We were always a team, the two of us. And when it came time to go, he didn't want to." Nate walks over and sets two fistfuls of sweaters in my suitcase. His voice is calmer now, almost sad. "He told me that he didn't know what team he'd end up on and he'd have to leave you behind. I told him you would go with him." I would have. I would have followed him anywhere. "He said he didn't want to drag you across the country and away from your family. *Because you love your family.*" He gives me a look as he says the last part, sarcasm maybe. It's a dig, that's for sure. I stare back at him.

"I would have gone." I would have.

"I know you would. That's what I told him." He grabs my desk chair and sits in it. "He gave up everything for you. And you just left him."

"You're acting like I asked him to. I had no idea any of this was happening."

"I know that you left him and you refused to speak to him, or even listen."

"Nate, I had to." I sit on the edge of my bed and face him. I start fiddling with the shirt in my hands because I don't know if I have the guts to say these words out loud. "I left because I was heartbroken, and I couldn't be around him. It hurt too much."

"Carter would never hurt you. He loves you."

"He loves me..." I dig deep, and force the words out, "but he's not in love with me." I look up at him, eyes shining with fresh tears.

"Oh." It sounds like maybe he's finally getting it.

“Yeah.” I dab at the tear at the corner of my eye.

“I saw you two at the beach that day, you looked pretty in love.”

“I thought everything was fine. We were talking about future plans, and everything was... good. And then... and then I realized that I had fallen in love with him, and he hadn’t.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.” I start picking at the shirt in my hands. “It just sort of happened.”

“The hooking up thing?” I can’t believe I’m talking to him about this.

“Yeah, that too I guess.”

“I just thought you two were secretly dating and hiding it from the rest of us— poorly I might add.” I groan.

“We thought we were being discreet.”

“That sofa bed was not discreet.” I look up at him and glare.

“I didn’t know you were there.”

“With the reputation that you two had, I just thought you were into some weird stuff.”

“What does that mean? What *reputation*?”

“You know... that thing you used to do in college.” He’s acting like I’m supposed to know what he’s talking about.

“What thing?” Nate looks at the ceiling for a second and takes a breath.

“I can’t believe you’re making me say this out loud.” He drops his eyes back to me and lets a sigh out. “People used to say that you two liked to watch each other get hit on.”

“What?!” I shake my head, because I don’t know what that means.

“What are you talking about?”

“The guys on the team... and some of the other guys... thought that you two were dating... and it was just kind of known... that you liked to see the other person get hit on and then...” I hold my hands up and shrug because I don’t know what that means. “And then go home and...” he gestures with his hands, “go crazy on each other.” My eyes go wide.

“What?!” I shake my head in disbelief. “Nate!”

“What? I didn’t start the rumor.”

“You didn’t stop it either!”

“I thought it was true!”

“We had a reputation for being weirdos and you thought it was true?”

He laughs.

“I’m sorry, but look at it from an outsider's perspective— you would come to parties together, and pretend like we didn’t see you kissing at the last one. Then someone who didn’t know the situation would hit on one of you, the other one would get all worked up, and then you’d start making out like animals.” I’m horrified at this description.

“First of all, animals don’t make out.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Second, I am both mortified and horrified at this story that you just told me about myself.” He laughs again.

“I’m sorry, I thought that you two got off on seeing someone hit on the other person.”

“Nate!” I hit him with my shirt, because all these years he’s thought this of me and he never once asked.

“Why didn’t you just ask us what was going on?”

“Because I didn’t want a description of it, you weirdo!”

“Oh my God! I cannot believe that people thought this of us.”

“Yeah, Carter in particular. Everyone knew him, and he had quite the reputation. I saw it deter quite a few girls— but there were also some who were into it.” *Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you Carter Davis: sex pervert.*

“Oh my God! Is that why people would offer to let us use their rooms?”

“Maybe?” He shrugs.

“Oh my God, Nate! People thought I was into that?!” He laughs again.

“Yeah, it’s pretty funny.”

“Funny?!”

“I mean if it’s not true, it’s pretty funny.”

“I don’t think it’s funny! I want to call all those people and tell them I’m not like that!”

“It was years ago, who cares what they think?”

“I do! Oh my God, I have to tell Ca—” I was about to say I have to tell Carter, but that’s probably not a good idea. I stand up and shake my head. “You can tell him.” I laugh to myself. “Tell me how he reacts. I really want to know.”

“You’re going anyway?” *Why does no one believe me?*

“I have to, Nate. It hurts too much to be around him. I’m not sure if I’ll ever get over him.”

“I know he won’t get over you.”

“Stop, you know it’s not like that.” I toss the shirt in my hands into my suitcase.

“Maddie, he was a wreck when you left.”

“I was a wreck too, I just wasn’t here for you to see it.”

“Maddie, he didn’t come out of that room for days.” I don’t want to hear about this.

“Nate, stop.”

“Just listen.” I don’t want to listen, I don’t want to hear how I messed up my best friend. “I barely saw him eat. He wouldn’t talk to anyone. I don’t think he said a word the rest of the summer. He’d be up running in the middle of the night because he couldn’t sleep. I thought for sure he’d change his mind and go to the combine with me. He just kept thinking you’d come home. I don’t think he dated for like two years after you left.” Nate telling me about Carter dating is like a gut punch.

“We were best friends. It was hard for both of us.”

“No, it was more than that.” He pauses for a moment. “What exactly did he say when you told him you were in love with him?”

“Huh?”

“What were his exact words when you told him.”

“I didn’t– I mean we didn’t... talk about it.”

“You didn’t talk about it?!”

“Why would we? I knew where he stood!” Off to the side, not holding my hand.

“You left and didn’t even tell him why?!”

“We didn’t need to have a conversation about how we felt. I knew how he felt.”

“Did you? Unless he said the words ‘I don’t love you like that,’ then you don’t know.” He’s giving me a look like he thinks he’s right. He’s not right. People always think they’re right in these situations. He was on the outside looking in. You can see all kinds of things on the outside, it doesn’t make them accurate. Nate gets up to stand. “Before you leave, just tell him you’re in love with him, and see what he says. It can’t be worse than it is now.”

“It could be so much worse, Nate.”

“Not for him.” He walks over to me and holds his arms open. “I’m sorry I outed you to everyone.” I could be mad at him, hell I should be mad at him, but instead I choose to let it go. I’ve known Nate for a long time.

“I’m sorry I left the way I did.” I lean into him and hug him.

“I didn’t know what was going on. I guess I get it now.” He hugs me for a long moment. I’m going to miss him when I’m back home. I guess I can watch him on TV on Sundays. “I’m sorry about your boyfriend too— and for starting that cousin dating rumor.” I pull back from his embrace.

“Why did he think we were cousins?”

“I don’t know, but I went along with it every time he said it just to mess with you.” I shake my head.

“I’m going to go back in time to college and spread a rumor about you.”

“If it’s anything like the one you spread about Carter I’m fine with it.” He laughs. Nate has this stupid laugh that he gets when he really thinks something is funny. Clearly he thinks this is really funny. He grabs me on the shoulder and shakes it a little. “Talk to him before you go.” I nod at Nate, he turns and leaves my room. Immediately I start to wonder who heard what we were talking about. Carter’s probably at my bathroom door with a drinking glass to his ear.

I spend the next hours hiding in my room and slowly packing. I’m kind of embarrassed about what happened with Arthur this morning, and I’m worried my mom has told the whole family I’m in love with Carter. I slowly pack all my things in my suitcase, and keep checking the time. The whole family has probably been at the beach for hours. Normally they would have left after breakfast, but my Arthur problems probably threw a wrench in their plans. After checking and rechecking my suitcase about a half dozen times I figure it’s probably time to call for a ride to the bus station.

I carry my suitcase down the stairs. The lights are mostly off. There’s a dim light coming from the kitchen for when everyone returns home, otherwise it’s dark. All the lanterns are gone. It feels weird not saying goodbye to anyone this time, but my bus leaves before they get home. It feels so different in this house than it did when I got here. The back door is wide open and the cold air is coming in. I leave my suitcase in the living room and walk over to close it. I barely see Carter in the faint glow of the kitchen light. He’s standing on the patio, an unlit lantern in his hand.

“Carter, what are you doing out here?”

“Waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me outside in the dark?” I laugh a little, but he’s not laughing. He’s serious. My heart starts to pick up speed, because I’m not sure what’s going on right now, but he’s making me nervous.

“Maddie.” My name is sad on his lips, almost pained, and I’m scared of what the next words are. “You’ve been my best friend since before I can remember.” I’m a little less scared, but my heart still feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest. “You were my crib mate, my book buddy, and my cheerleader at every football game.” I can feel my lips turning up into a smile. He’s being really sweet. I’d expect him to be nervous, but he seems very confident at this moment. “You were my rock, and my safe place to land when things got hard. You were always there when I needed you, and I never realized how much I’d grown to expect you to always be there for me.” He swallows hard, and I can see him struggling just a little now. His blue eyes are barely visible in the dim light, but I can see them full of sadness, and something else, something I don’t recognize, something I’ve seen a lot this week. “Until you were gone.” *Oh.* “I was never good with words, or having hard conversations. I should have told you that I appreciated you.”

“I knew.” He never had to say it. A smile flashes across his face for the briefest of moments and then it’s gone. I just want to stare in his eyes until I figure out what that look is.

“I think I was in love with you before I knew what love felt like.” I’m a little shocked at what he just said, but I’m also painfully aware that he just said ‘was’. “But I never said it to you. I was too afraid to say the words, and cross that boundary.” He takes a deep breath. “Maddie, I want to cross every boundary with you. I want to hold your hand in public. I want to kiss you in front of everyone we know, and maybe some strangers too.” I let out a little laugh. There’s tears starting to well up in my eyes. *Is he really saying this to me right now?* It’s possible I fell asleep on my bed and none of this is real. “You’re my heart and my soul, you’re my guiding light back home, and I have missed you every hour of every day that you’ve been gone.” He pauses for a long moment. *It’s love. That’s what I see in his eyes. Love. How could I have missed that?* “Madison Moore, please come home.” On the word “home” he lights his lantern, just like at the pageant. I nod at him because I can’t form words right now. I knew I was going home the second he said he loved me.

The tears in my eyes start to spill over, when eight more lanterns light

up behind him. There's our moms and our dads, Nico, Bennett, Audrey, and Nate, all holding their lanterns in the yard. And suddenly about a hundred more lanterns turn on all around the yard... lighting my way back home. I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. I look back at Carter, and he's already moving towards me. Our mouths crash together like waves crashing on rocks. He tastes like home, and I don't ever want to stop kissing him. He pulls away and rests his forehead on mine. His fingers are gently running through my hair. "No more hiding, no more Baby. Just you and I, for the world to see."

All this time I was thinking he wasn't in love with me. I was wrong.

"You promise?"

"I promise." I know he means it, even if he didn't say baby. Even if he never says it again, I know he means it.

"I love you, Carter."

"I love you too, Maddie." And he kisses me again, in front of our parents, and our brothers, in front of Audrey and Nate. No shame, no hiding, just us.

Our families walk over to us, smiling. *Okay, maybe this isn't as bad as I thought it would be.* My mom hugs me first, as Nico pats Carter on the back. I wipe tears away from my eyes.

"I told you you'd find someone," she whispers in my ear. Carter's mom practically shoves her off of me so she can hug me next.

"I knew you two would find your way to each other someday."

"Well maybe you should have told me," I say as I wipe more tears from my eyes. Our moms laugh. My dad walks over, and he tilts his head to the side like he used to when he'd ask a question when I was little.

"So this is what this was about?" I nod as I wipe more tears away.

"Yeah."

"Well next time you get your heart broken can you just tell us instead of running away?"

"Next time?" Carter asks loudly. Everyone laughs. Audrey and Bennett come over and hug me, together at the same time.

"Little Moore!" Nico gives me a big hug and smooshes my face against him. Nate hangs back, and waits for everyone else to finish before he approaches me.

"I told you he loved you."

"Yeah yeah yeah." I hold my arms out because maybe I don't love his

tactics, but I still love him. Nate gives me a hug.

“Now talk, you two! Before we lock you in a room somewhere,” my mom says to us. She starts herding the family into the dimly lit house.

Carter reaches his hand out to me and I take it happily. I’ve never held his hand before. It’s warm, and it feels like home. He pulls me over to the same couch we were on a few hours ago. He sits behind me the same way he did before, and throws a blanket over our legs. This time I let myself sink into him. I let myself feel his warmth, and smell his scent. He smells like a shirtless guy chopping firewood in the forest, and I don’t ever want to stop smelling it. He starts rubbing the palm of my hand with his fingers the way he did before, but this time it feels different.

“Why didn’t you go with Nate to the NFL?” Carter groans.

“Is he still mad about that?”

“Yes. At me, apparently.”

“There’s no reason to be mad at you.”

“Why didn’t you go?” I don’t want to feel like I ruined something so big for him.

“I don’t remember exactly what I said to him. I was always undecided about going. There were a million reasons not to go, and in the end I just thought it was best if I didn’t. After what happened with my knee I just felt like I was going to ruin my body for something that was his dream and not mine. Time with you and my family was more important than money and football.”

“I like that answer.”

“Tell me what he said to you the first night that scared you so badly.”

“Who?”

Carter laughs. “Arthur.”

I laugh too, because I’d almost forgotten about him. “He called you a cocky football douchebag.”

“Jesus. He wasn’t messing around. I mean, cocky maybe a little, football definitely, but douchebag? Damn.”

“He also called you a football asshole.”

“Well, I definitely don’t regret messing with him. I do regret not escorting him to his car with your dad and Bennett.” He leans over and kisses my cheek. “If he wanted to call me chicken shit for never asking you out for real then yeah, I’d deserve that, and I’d own it, but douchebag asshole is pretty harsh.”

“You did try to ‘Hey Baby’ me at the bar.”

“It was an emergency! You know how Bree gets.”

“I do.” Carter kisses me again.

“But that’s not the part that upset you.”

“It was not.” I sigh, because this is the heavier stuff... the hard stuff, and I’m not good with the hard stuff. “He said that you probably had an incurable STD from all the girls you were indiscriminately sleeping with in college.”

“Wow! That is harsh. I’ll be right back, I need to go drive after him and have a few words with him.” He fakes like he’s about to leave and I pull him back to me.

“I just... started thinking that maybe you were sleeping with other girls in college.”

“Maddie.” He pulls me closer to him.

“Tighter,” I tell him. I want to feel his arms so tight around me that it almost hurts. He tightens his arms around me and leans down towards my ear.

“Did I ever make you feel like I was using you?”

“Never.” I don’t even have to think about the answer. “But after I left...” *Ugh. Dig deep, and just say what you feel.* “I started wondering if there were other girls.” He lets out a breath.

“Maddie. Never. Never ever. You were it for me.” I can feel his breath soft and warm on my ear. I can feel how uncomfortable he is talking about these things. I am too, but maybe we should have had this conversation a long time ago. “You were my first and only in college.” *What?* I pull away to look at his face.

“I was your first and only?” He nods.

“Yeah. I told you, I didn’t want anyone else.”

“You were *my* first and only.” I can’t believe we never said this to each other.

“I was your first?”

“Yes.” I turn back to look at the yard all lit up with lanterns.

“I didn’t know that. I would have been...” He shifts uncomfortably beneath me.

“What?”

“Nicer, or gentler or... something, I don’t know. Different.”

“You were perfect.”

“I don’t think so.”

“All the stories I hear from girls about their first time, it was always awful. You were perfect.”

“Wait, why did we get tested if we had never been with other people?” I laugh, pretty hard, because we should have talked a long time ago.

“Because we’re idiots who couldn’t talk about anything.”

“I thought for sure you and Ty had.”

“We hadn’t.”

“Well, I didn’t know that until this week.”

“This week?”

“We never talked about it!” *We are so stupid.*

“I thought you had with what’s-her-name from high school.”

“We barely started dating before graduation, and then we were long distance for months. I never saw her again after graduation.”

“We are so stupid.”

He runs his finger tips back up my palm. “Maddie, were we dating?”

I turn to look at him again for a moment. “Were we?”

“Okay, let’s talk it out. We were... fucking?”

“Ew”

“Screwing?” I start giggling, because all of this sounds bizarre coming out of his mouth.

“Boinking,” I offer with a laugh. He starts cracking up.

“Is that what you told people? That we were *boinking* in college?” He seems to find this hilarious, which I guess it is.

“I never told anyone about us.” My answer seems more serious than we were a moment ago.

“Why not?” He runs his fingers on my arms, and I almost forget to answer his question.

“I think the same reason you said this morning. It was something that was just ours, and it was beautiful, and I didn’t want people giving their opinions and ruining something that was ours.” I lean my face on his arm, so I can feel more of him pressed against me.

“Okay, so we were boinking.” I laugh, pretty hard at hearing him say that. “Exclusively.”

“Oh, definitely exclusive boinking. I barely ever kissed anyone in college.”

“I had no interest in anyone but you after what happened with

Krystle.” I groan loudly at the mention of her name. “You were so mad.”

“Mad and jealous.”

“That was the best sex of my life though.” I’m about to smack him on the arm, but I stop myself because he’s right.

“Yeah, me too.” I’m a little embarrassed, but it’s Carter, so I just laugh.

“Why did you hate her so much?”

“Because she called me friendzone.”

“What?”

“She told me she was an NFL wife who didn’t work, and she was endzone and I was friendzone.”

“You never told me that. That’s pretty messed up... but also kind of clever.” I elbow him in the ribs.

“I just got crazy jealous. She said she was going to come here all summer in some crazy thong bikini and she was going to *boink* your brains out until you forgot my name.”

“Forget *your* name?”

“Yes!”

“Did she hear the part where we share a bathroom? Was I supposed to be like ‘excuse me person showering naked, I’ll just be over here brushing my teeth.’”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure people didn’t know that that’s how we shared a bathroom.”

“Well, apparently people thought lots of things about us in college, so who knows what they thought about the bathroom sharing.”

“Did Nate tell you?!” Carter groans.

“What the hell?” I’m glad he’s as shocked as I am to learn about our reputation.

“I guess it did look weird to outsiders, but what the hell?”

“Apparently you liked to watch me get hit on.”

“Me? You’re the sex pervert.”

“Well everyone already thought I had a giant penis thanks to you.”

“I told one girl! One!”

“Do you have any idea how many girls asked me to see it? Guys would try to look at it in the shower. I’m going to get you back for that.”

“You already did! Everyone thought we were perverts!” He starts laughing pretty hard. “You deserved that.”

“I probably did.” He takes a deep breath, and I feel the exhale against my neck. It tickles and I shiver a little from it. He pulls the blanket up because he thinks I’m cold.

“Okay, so senior year we were two perverts committed to boinking only each other. What about before that?”

“These descriptions of us keep getting worse and worse.”

“We’re just two weirdos who didn’t know we were dating.” That’s not any better.

“Freshman through junior year we were seeing other people.”

“I had old what's-her-name from high school during freshman year.”

“You can’t remember her name?”

“I’m sure it’s written down somewhere.” *I love this boy.* “But the point is, we were dating other people.”

“But not seriously dating.”

“God no, everyone but us sucks.”

“They did suck. That one guy only wanted to talk about you.”

“Who brings twelve dollars on a date?”

“Thank you!”

“God, I missed you.” He kisses my cheek again, and he keeps kissing me until I start laughing.

“I missed you all the time.”

“Really?” He seems surprised, and it makes me a little sad.

“Carter, I missed you so badly I could barely function.”

“Good, then maybe you won’t leave me again.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Okay, so we were seeing other people who weren’t as awesome as us, and sleeping together in between.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not dating.”

“Then what’s dating?”

“Going out and like... doing stuff. Together.” He seems to be forgetting how much time we spent together.

“We did all kinds of stuff.”

“Like what?”

“We ate at restaurants together, sometimes you’d cook for us. Oh! Batting cages! We used to love that.”

“God, I loved batting cages. And miniature golf. That was fun.”

“You used to come up behind me and try to teach me how to hit the ball.” I already knew how, he just thought he was funny. “And Valentine's Day!”

“I was always good to you on Valentine's Day!”

“That's what I'm saying! You were always really nice.”

“Because I felt bad that you didn't have a boyfriend.”

“Well, apparently I did have one!” We both start laughing.

“We are so stupid.”

“We are the dumbest people ever.”

“When was the first time you looked at me and had unfriendly thoughts?”

“That's a good question.” I have to pretend to think for a little bit, because I absolutely know the answer to that. “The summer when we were fourteen. I saw you outside running around with Nico and Bennett, you took your shirt off and were drinking water out of a bottle. Then you poured it all over yourself, and I realized that you had become this hot guy at some point. What about you?”

“We were thirteen—”

“Thirteen?!”

“Shut up and listen.” He's laughing so hard he can barely get the words out.

“You shut up!”

“Then how will you hear the story?!” *God, I missed us.*

“We were thirteen,” he pauses because he's still laughing, “and I saw you in a tank top.”

“That tank top really did it for you, huh?”

“God yes.”

“Are you being serious or are you joking?” I can't tell because he's still laughing.

“I'm dead serious. That was the first time I realized you were a girl.”

“You mean it was the first time you noticed I had boobs.”

“Semantics.” I shake my head and roll my eyes.

“Fine, college, when did your feelings change from friendly to unfriendly.” He takes a deep breath and I feel him shift from silly to serious.

“It was the night I kissed you the first time.”

“That night?”

“I was riding a wave of adrenaline from our winning streak. That

game was so close, and finally I was able to push us ahead right before the end. I look up in the crowd, and all I want is to see your face. You're there, like always, but there was this guy sitting next to you."

"What guy?"

"I don't know, some guy."

"Oh, him! He was asking for my Biology notes."

"Well I didn't know that, I just knew I saw you, no parents, and this guy trying to make a move on you and... I don't know, something inside of me just changed... and I needed him, and everyone in that stadium, to know you were mine."

"And everyone on live TV." He groans, and buries his face in my shoulder.

"I forgot about the cameras."

"I forgot about the cameras!"

"And then all of a sudden this little thing turns into a big thing."

"I saw it on ESPN."

"So did I! My parents recorded it and made me watch it five thousand times. They showed my grandparents."

"Oh God."

"I was so embarrassed. Now there's a giant picture of it in the office."

"Well, I'm glad you did it, because it changed everything between us."

"I wanted to kiss you so bad that night. I almost did it outside the locker room, but I panicked and didn't."

"I knew you were acting differently outside the locker room!" He rubs his face along the back of my neck.

"I knew that I wanted more from our friendship, I just didn't realize for a really long time that it was because I was in love with you."

"How long?"

"Embarrassingly long. I think I had feelings for you for a long time. I used to make you say the part about not feeling that way about me just to remind myself that it wasn't like that with us."

"I realized at the pageant when you didn't want to hold my hand."

"Maddie, I am so sorry."

"I know, I know."

"Your brother was right there, and I panicked."

"It's fine. I still love you."

“I still love you.” He kisses me on the cheek. “Can we do the ghost thing next time we go to the grocery store?” I start laughing really hard.

“We are never doing that.” He turns and kisses me on the lips. It feels so normal. No hiding, no boundaries, just us.

Epilogue

One Year Later

“Wait, wait, wait. You were doing it on purpose?” We’re sitting at basecamp at Lovers Point. It’s starting to get dark, the pageant is going to start soon. It’s colder than it was last year. Carter and I are sharing a blanket, we’re cuddled together in a double chair. No face to face this year. Everyone seems to be used to us dating now. There wasn’t much of an adjustment. We were always weirdly close, and by that I mean in love with each other. I moved into Carter’s house a few months after I moved home, but we do not share an office at our dads’ company— boundaries. His arm is around me, and he’s gently stroking my hair.

“We had to do something to get you back here.” Audrey is acting like she’s so innocent in this. She pushes her dark hair back as the wind blows it across her face. Her engagement ring sparkles in the light. She finally agreed to marry Bennett. They both seem really excited, they’re getting married in the fall. No snow will be involved. Audrey seems to have accepted that he loves her, and she’ll make a good wife. “My strategy just involved giving you alcohol.” She looks up and away as she takes a sip of her cocoa.

“You were trying to get me drunk.” I know I’m accusing her, but that’s exactly what I’m hearing.

“Yes, and you wouldn’t drink it! I tried with the bloody Mary the first morning and you barely touched it.” I laugh and shake my head. “Then I tried the berry lemonade because you usually love that.” She’s smiling even though this was totally devious.

“I do love it.”

“I even added extra vodka, so you’d get a little tipsy and make out with Carter, but you didn’t drink enough.”

“You wanted me to get drunk and cheat on my boyfriend?”

“Ex boyfriend,” Carter corrects me.

“He wasn’t an ex at the time.”

“So finally I had to break out the big guns, and make the jungle juice.”

“Maddie can’t resist jungle juice.” I know Carter is smiling without having to look at him. I can hear it in his voice.

“I really can’t.” The wind blows against my face, and I snuggle closer into Carter. I’m not mad. How can I be? I have him and that’s all that matters.

“Then Bennett came up with the Never Have I Ever, and that *really* got you drinking.” Bennett holds his hand up, and she high fives him.

“I thought you didn’t know we were dating before that.” He punched Carter in the face that night.

“I didn’t know. I thought she wanted to get you drunk so you’d get over whatever you were fighting about.”

“Parents too?” I look over at our parents who are busy talking about other things.

“They had their own agenda,” Audrey tells me. “Your dad had a less than gentle approach.”

“I’m aware.”

“I just reminded him that if he wanted you home, he needed to use a softer touch.” She looks so proud of herself. “Carter bought up all of the bus tickets so you couldn’t leave until late at night.” I look over at Carter with a smile on my face.

“What? I had to do something. You were going to leave again before I told you how I felt.” I turn to Nico with accusing eyes. He’s got his arm around his new girlfriend. She seems really nice... I haven’t noticed any crazy yet.

“So what was your part in all of this?”

“Distraction!” He waves his hands around like a magician. I roll my eyes.

“We all took turns luring Arthur away from you so you two would get back together,” Nate adds. Nate’s sipping a swing top bottle of Star-lyte, our moms’ version of Gatorade, available at a fancy grocery store near you. Don’t worry, Carter gets a kick back because he gave them the idea.

“You were mad at me, and you were still trying to help?” I’m surprised that Nate was helping with this scheme considering how angry he seemed. I feel a little bad for Nico’s girlfriend who is having to try and keep up with all of this.

“Life sucked when you two were broken up.” I can’t believe I wasted

four years without him. I will never ever have enough time with him.

“Yeah it did.” I give him a quick kiss.

“So how long were you two broken up for?” Nico’s girlfriend asks.

“Four years,” I answer without thinking. It feels weird to just say it like that without the whole “we were just friends” thing.

“That’s a long time.”

“It was a long time, but we’re making up for it now.”

“Hey,” Carter whispers in my ear. “You want to watch from the path?”

“Always.” We grab our lanterns as we get up. Everyone follows us up top. Carter and I set our lanterns on the rock wall.

The pageant starts and the lights go out. It’s the first time I’ve seen it since I left five years ago. Mrs. Butterfield is hamming it up this year. She’s a bit over dramatic, especially for this. It’s not Shakespeare. The first couple of theater kids aren’t doing amazing, and I start to wonder if I’ve lost my love for this. The third one opens the door, and kills it. *Nope, I still love this stupid play*. The townspeople all come out to the stage with their lanterns, and my favorite part is coming.

“Hey,” Audrey nudges me. “You think Mr. Butterfield hates this?”

“Oh, definitely. He hated every minute of this.” I love a surly Butterfield. I reach over and turn on my lantern when Mrs. Butterfield asks Mr. Butterfield to come home. Audrey nudges me again.

“What?” She’s distracting me from the play, and surly is about to fake kiss hammy. She points over to my side. I look over and I see Carter, down on one knee. Box in his hand. *Oh my God*. I look over at Audrey who was definitely in on this, then back at Carter.

“Maddigail.”

“That’s not my name.” But I’m going to cry anyway.

“Bolivia.”

“That’s a country.” Now I’m going to cry, but I’m also laughing a little, because it’s just so Carter.

“Jo-Ann.”

“You’re not even close.” I’m crying, and laughing ridiculously hard.

“Peter.”

“That’s Bennett’s middle name!” He’s so ridiculous.

“Moore.”

“You got one.” He opens the box, and instead of a ring there’s a key

inside.

“Will you fix up a cottage with me?”

“What?” He pulls the key out and hands it to me.

“You bought a cottage?”

“I bought The Cottage.” I look at the key for a minute, and then realize he means the one from when we were kids.

“I love that house.” I’m crying all over again.

“I know. It needs some work, but I thought we could do it together.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He kisses me, right there on the beach, in front of people we know, and some strangers we don’t know. And then he holds my hand and finally, finally, I get to hold a boyfriend’s hand at the Lantern Festival.

THE END

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About The Author

Brooke Kane

Brooke Kane is a California native and true crime podcast addict (seriously, is there a patch for podcast addiction?) who loves a good story. Hearing a good story, telling a good story, Brooke is here for it. She is so excited to share her love of romance with you.

When she's not dreaming up a new book, Brooke enjoys sporting events, gal pal trips with her Bestie, and spending time with her husband and toddler.