



TO BE
YOUR
GIRL

rae kennedy

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CHAPTER 1

“THE FUCK?” HIS VOICE IS ROUGH.

And annoyed.

He steps out from the darkened doorway and into the tiny hallway, wearing only tight black boxer briefs. He is also literally standing a foot in front of me. I try to back up a bit but I don't have anywhere to go. Did I mention the hall is minuscule? I'm trying not to stare but the fixture in the ceiling puts out an impressive amount of light and every bulge and indent under his taut skin is illuminated—perfectly highlighting the clearly defined V just above the waistband of his boxers.

Don't stare at his crotch!

I gaze up his body, over his smooth abs and muscular chest. Then I see his arms. His broad shoulders and lean, cut arms are covered in full-sleeve tattoos.

He looks up, still acclimating to the light, one eye closed and the other squinting in my direction. His jaw is angular and defined, his mouth full with just-right pink lips. His dark blond hair is short on the sides and quite a bit longer on top, mussed all over. Fuck, he is gorgeous.

I'm going to be living with...this?

Tuck comes up behind me, placing his large warm hand on my shoulder. "Hey, looks like you already met. Great." He looks happily between us. "Haley, this is my roommate, Cade. Cade, this is Haley. She's moving in with us, remember?"

I stick my hand out and notice it shake a little. Wow, I need to get a grip on myself. He's just a human man—just the sexiest one I've ever seen in real life.

And he's mostly naked.

He looks at my hand then back up to Tuck. "Right," he says as a skinny blonde in a hot pink dress steps out of his room, carrying her shoes, her hair disheveled and makeup slightly smeared.

She doesn't seem to notice us standing there, or me with my arm still outstretched like a total moron.

"I had fun, Cade. Call me later?"

"Don't have your number." He yawns, eyes still half-shut, and steps back into his room, closing the door on the three of us.

Um...okay.

The blonde doesn't seem particularly dismayed, nor does she acknowledge us. She just turns and walks down the hall then out the front door. I turn to Tuck.

"What the hell was that?"

His face scrunches. "Sorry...but you'll probably have to get used to that. It's kind of a recurring thing."

"Maybe I should have looked into the on-campus housing."

"Stop being a baby. This makes way more sense. We're only five minutes from campus, you won't have to pay rent, and as an added bonus, I get to keep an eye out on my kid sister." His grin is easy and infectious. I have missed it. All I can do is roll my eyes and swat him across the arm.

“Ouch!” he says, rubbing his bicep. “You’ve become violent since I moved out.”

“Well then, guess I can look out for myself.”

Tuck humphs in disagreement. “Let’s go get the rest of your bags.”

He practically sprints down to his truck. I take more care going down the old concrete steps, which are cracked and buckled from the large maple trees in the yard. When I reach the street, Tuck has already managed to sling all four of my bags over his shoulders, the straps haphazardly crisscrossing his torso. Balancing on one foot, he stretches his long arm across the passenger seat. The bags all shift to the left and he stumbles for a second before retrieving my purse. He turns around triumphantly, his big smile revealing the deep dimples in his cheeks.

“Are you going to let me carry anything?”

He tosses over my purse.

I roll my eyes at him. “Seriously?”

“I got this.” He starts waddling up the steps, covered in my luggage.

If he wants to be my pack mule, I guess I’ll let him.

I look up at the house, my home for the next two years. It’s a one-story bungalow with shingles painted some earthy color that I can’t quite make out in the dark—maybe a green? The lit front porch is painted all white with thick square columns. It is adorable—not at all how I had pictured Tuck’s bachelor pad.

The warm August breeze sweeps through my hair and rustles the trees overhead as I follow Tuck up to the front door. In the entryway, a few pairs of boots and sneakers are lined along the thick baseboard. A black leather jacket and set of keys hang on the wall above a small bench. Around the corner is a modest kitchen with cream-colored cabinets which look like they have been painted over a hundred times. I don’t see a

dishwasher, but the kitchen is bright and clean and smells faintly of oranges. It opens to the living room where there is one charcoal gray sofa, a flat screen television that takes up half the wall, and a worn, cognac-colored leather club chair in the corner.

The wood floor squeaks as Tuck emerges from the hallway.

“Hey, all of your stuff is in the room. Want a tour?”

“I think I just took it.”

He returns my smile. “Yeah, it’s not much, but it works. Here...” He ushers me down the hallway and points to the first door on the left. “I’m sure you gathered this is Cade’s room.” He points across the hall. “And this is yours. Next door is the bathroom and the last door down there is my room.”

“Only one bathroom?” Shit.

“No, there’s one attached to my room, so you’ll be sharing with Cade.” The look on my face must convey my horror because he adds quickly, “But you can always come use mine. Just...knock first.”

“You’re just as gross as you were at thirteen.”

He winks at me. “Thanks, sis. Why don’t we get some sleep? Cade and I’ll both be at work in the morning but afterward, I’ll show you around town a little and then to campus. Okay?”

“Sure.”

“Night, Hale.”

“Night, Tuck.”

I shut the door to my new room behind me. It is small, of course, but very clean. A full-sized bed sits in the middle with just enough room for a nightstand on each side, right between the light blue-gray walls and lacy white duvet. A worn-out dresser stands across from the bed. I’m afraid to open the closet and decide to wait until tomorrow to be disappointed. The windows, however, are large and stretch from floor-to-ceiling with a deep sill where I can definitely sit and read or study, and

the thick white moldings are everywhere and beautiful. I can work with this.

Being in Tuck's house feels weird. Leave it to me to be almost done with my Bachelor's then decide to transfer universities. Probably should have stuck it out, but I just didn't love the school and didn't click with any of the students in my program. Tucker had been ecstatic when I told him I'd applied to his alma mater. He is the main reason I'd decided on it. I've missed him since he moved out when he was eighteen.

Sheesh, that was over eight years ago.

I fall across the bed and let the pent-up stress from the move and the car ride dissolve into the soft mattress. The bedding smells like fresh laundry and the warmth envelopes me. I climb in without even taking off my clothes.

* * *

I AWAKE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING WITH SOFT LIGHT FILTERING through the lush green leaves of the trees outside my window. On the street, Tuck's truck is already gone. The house is quiet.

I take a lingering shower—the hot water doesn't die out after five minutes like at my last apartment and I feel like testing the limits. I dry my dark brown hair and let it hang in loose waves down my back. The waves aren't tight enough to be called curls so I usually just straighten my hair, but the straightener is still packed and I don't feel like fishing for it.

Back in my room, I put on some cute little briefs. They are white with yellow polka dots and yellow lace around the edges. I put on a tank top and then look around for my gray sweats. Three bags later I still haven't found them. Shit.

I give up and stalk out to the kitchen. What-the-fuck-ever. I'm starving.

There seems to be plenty of food in the house—lots of produce and dried pasta, but not much ready-to-eat. No cereal. Hmm. I bend over, searching the fridge. Guess I can make eggs or something.

“Whoa!” An unfamiliar deep voice is right behind me.

I yelp and jump back, hitting my head on a fridge shelf. Cade is standing in the kitchen, fully dressed, his blond hair brushed back smoothly on top of his head, shaved short on the sides. He has a wide, mischievous grin on his face. His eyes flicker quickly down to my undies then back up to my face.

Holy fuck. I can completely freak out right now or I can keep calm and act like it's nothing. I'm cool. I don't care that this stranger is staring at me in my underwear—it covers more than my swimsuit. No big deal. We're going to live together. I should just get over it. I steady my expression and put on a nonchalant smile.

“Hi. Um...you startled me.”

“I should say so.” His eyes go to my bare legs again, not so subtly this time. “Haley, right?”

“Yeah.”

His smirk is devious. He puts his hand out to me.

“It's nice to officially meet you,” he says. I take his hand and shake it firmly. His warm fingers curl around mine with equal insistence and a shiver runs up the inside of my arm.

I am being silly. Let's get this over with. I place my hand on my hip and put my little polka-dotted undies on full display.

“Well, it's only fair after I met you in your underwear that you get to meet me in mine.”

Cade bursts out a hard laugh, slapping the counter as he looks back up at me. “Fair enough,” he agrees, his smile showing through his eyes and it seems much warmer and more relaxed than it had just a moment ago. Of all the things I saw last night, I hadn't noticed his eyes. They are so blue.

He moves around me easily to grab an apple off the counter. "You won't find me complaining about it. Tuck might have a different opinion though..."

His gaze is definitely lingering on my panties, then up to my tank top. Am I wearing a bra? No. The refrigerator is still open behind me and my skin has gone prickly and my nipples are stiffening. That is my cue to go.

"Uh, I'll catch you later." I haul ass out of there. I can hear him chuckling from the kitchen behind me. Nice.

* * *

TUCK AND I HEAD OUT SO I CAN GET TO KNOW MY NEW TOWN and school a little bit. Class will start in just a few days and I am a bit nervous, but the campus is beautiful with huge oak trees standing out against a backdrop of stately brick buildings all laid out on rich green expanses of lawn.

The small downtown is also cute. It's packed with students and intellectuals looking around the shops and boutiques, sketching on benches, and playing street music. The excitement of a new school year is palpable.

We arrive home after grabbing a quick slice of gooey, greasy pizza for dinner. I have just walked in the front door, left sandal still in hand when a half-naked girl tears around the corner. Awesome.

"You are such a jerk, Cade. I never want to see you again!" She fumbles to get her heels on and stomps toward the door.

"That was sort of the point of the conversation we were just having." A shirtless Cade emerges after her, his face completely unaffected as he shrugs her off and turns back toward the living room. Poor clueless girl looks even more upset than before as she runs past me and out the door.

Yep, and I am just standing here holding my shoe. I have a feeling this is going to get old. On the plus side, I note that he never seems to let them overstay their welcome, so at least I won't have to try and pretend to get along with any of these girls over breakfast or something. That would be awkward. I decide I will just ignore them as they seem to do me and not worry about it.

But I can't ignore the smug look on Cade's face, who has slung himself over the couch, still sans shirt.

I walk over to him. "So...you're kind of a dick."

Cade's eyebrows rise incredulously and he opens his mouth as if to say something but then abruptly shuts it. His eyes narrow and he cocks his head to the left, studying me before a smile creeps upon his face. It is similar to the mischievous one he gave me when ogling my underwear.

"Was that a question?"

"Nope. Just an observation."

"Well. You've got me figured out then, don't you?"

Tuck walks in behind me. "Who's got what figured out?"

"Oh, Haley here's got me pegged. Called me a dick."

Tuck unsuccessfully stifles his laughter. "I'm guessing this has to do with the girl who passed me on the way out? Sorry, man. She's pretty good about calling out bullshit."

"Oh, I got it." Cade nods. "There are some perks to living with a chick though, aren't there, Dots?" He turns toward me, that stupid smile on his stupid pretty face.

"Dots?" Tuck looks confused.

"Never mind," I say, and then turn to go to my room, hoping neither of them notices the heat going to my cheeks.

Yep, he's a dick. Nailed it.

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST WEEK OF CLASS IS FAIRLY UNEVENTFUL. THE SECOND week, however, is when I meet him.

He sits next to me just after the professor has started the lecture.

“Do you suppose he wears the same pants every day or that he has multiple pairs he rotates?” he whispers, hunched down all sneaky.

I look at our professor. Milt Trobaugh does indeed seem to wear the same pair of itchy-looking pea-green wool pants every day. He pairs them with about three different cardigans he cycles through, all in different shades of brown. I can’t help the grin that turns up the corners of my mouth as I whisper from behind my notebook like a third grader.

“I think it’s the same pair, but that he washes them every night—with his one cardigan and one pair of socks.”

Then he smiles at me. A big, gorgeous smile with perfectly straight white teeth. They stand out against his tan skin. He has beautiful, big dark brown eyes with dark hair that just curls at his ears. His nose is straight, his features sharp and masculine. The

spark in his eyes is playful, friendly, even child-like. His cologne is maybe a little heavy, but it smells amazing.

“I’m Adam.”

“Haley.”

“Haley. That’s a pretty name. Perfect for a very pretty girl.” His appreciation is so sincere I can’t help but go all giddy googly-eyed at him. I may have also giggled.

Professor Trobaugh clears his throat and begins talking a little louder—definitely giving us the evil eye. Adam and I try hard to stifle our snickers. He opens his hand to me under the table.

“Nice to meet you, Haley.” His voice sounds so sensual when he whispers my name.

“You too.”

His thumb strokes the back of my hand just once before we let go. Wow.

When we get up to leave, his arm brushes mine and we exchange silly grins again.

“Hey, I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah, definitely,” I agree.

I have to wait until Thursday to see him again. He sits in the same spot next to me like it is no big deal. We muse about Professor Trobaugh’s lazy eye and how he got it through some crazy professoring accident, no doubt. An unlikely Indiana Jones.

On the way out of class, I don’t see Adam, even though I am totally looking. He must be lost in the sea of coeds all rushing to get the hell out of here. I am halfway to the quad when he catches up to me.

“Hey!” he says, a little out of breath.

“Hi.” I slow so he can walk with me.

“I was wondering if you wanted to... I don’t know, get some coffee or something? Sometime?” He looks hopeful but a little nervous.

“Of course!” Too eager. “I mean, yeah, I’d like that.”

The joy on his face is boyish and heartwarming.

"I have a couple hours until my next class. Are you free now?"

Now? Yes, please. "Sure. I'm done for the day."

We walk over to a little coffee shop just off the edge of campus. It is cramped but cozy. There are tiny teal side-tables and yellow stools surrounded by mismatched chairs and cushions in varying shades of red, orange, and pink. Students are huddled in groups, reading and chatting and working on laptops. It is all grandma-friendly and hipster-cool at the same time. We go up to the counter and I am hit with warm aromas of cinnamon and butter, coffee and vanilla. The pastries in the display look like flaky, glazed-over heaven.

I order a caramel macchiato and decide to forgo the pastry. He doesn't need to see me drool this early on—best to leave a little mystery. When I reach for my purse to pay, Adam puts his hand over mine. It is soft and warm and covers mine perfectly.

"Let me get it."

"Oh, no that's fine, but thanks."

"I want to get it for you."

Is this a date? He really wants to purchase my coffee. So I let him. He leads me to a cute little table in the corner that is decouped with doilies. There are two rickety wood chairs with spindle legs that are all different colors and shapes—and lengths, I suspect, from the constant teetering back and forth.

"I've never noticed you around campus before this year. You're an anthropology major, right?"

I nod.

"We would have had some classes together before. I think I definitely would have noticed you."

"Yeah, I just moved here. It's my fourth year of college but I have a couple more to go since not all the credits from my old school transferred. I have to make up a few prerequisites and

core classes, but I'm on track for the most part." I am totally babbling. But gratefully, he smiles and nods and doesn't act the least bit disinterested in my boringness. In fact, he seems enthralled by everything I talk about—even my addiction to Jane Austen and other classic novels.

"Oh, yes!" He feigns a British accent and fans his face. "That Mr. Darcy sure is handsome!"

I balk. He knows who Mr. Darcy is? *Pride and Prejudice* is my favorite. I am telling him this when he starts chuckling at me.

"You are just too cute. I'm glad I could surprise you. I haven't read the book but I've watched the movie like a million times with my mom."

A warm gleam shows in his eyes when he mentions his mom. Oh man. Sexy, smart, and treats his mother well—that is the trifecta. I am done for.

We talk for another hour about everything, it seems. He makes me laugh and is kind enough to laugh at my not-so-funny jokes. He somehow finds every opportunity to gently brush my arm, touch my hand, and lean close when he reaches to get some napkins. Every time I can feel his warmth and smell his wonderful cologne, I am dizzy with his proximity. More than once I have to stop myself from leaning over and smelling the spot right behind his ear above his neck. I do resist, though.

My macchiato is long gone but I don't want our time to end. He seems to be lingering as well. We get up to go and he holds the door open for me. The air outside is cool and crisp in contrast to the warm, embracing aroma in the coffee shop.

"Hey, so I can give you a ride home...if you want."

I'm glad he doesn't want to end it either. "Sure."

* * *

WHEN HE PULLS UP NEXT TO THE HOUSE, I EXPECT HIM TO SAY goodbye, but he gets out and rushes around the front of the car to open my door. I don't think anyone has ever done that for me before. He takes my hand to help me out but doesn't let go as we walk up the path. My hand fits perfectly into his. By the time we stop at the front porch, I feel giddy and my legs are like Jell-O. He sticks his hands in the pockets of his light, fitted jeans and looks at me through his lashes with a sheepish grin.

"I was wondering if I could get your number?"

He has the nerve to look uncertain of my answer as if we hadn't just had the best time together. He is standing there in his soft gray crewneck sweatshirt that perfectly complements his tan skin. He could have just walked out of a J. Crew catalog and onto my porch. What else am I going to say?

"Yes! Of course."

A smile lights up his face as he takes a step closer. I can feel his heat radiate toward me. He hands me his phone and I quickly enter my info then hand it back to him. He takes it, our fingers just barely grazing each other, sending a little jolt of electricity through my arm. Stepping closer, he leans in. The smell of him is intoxicating. His face is just inches from mine. I tilt my head a fraction toward him. My heartbeat quickens and my hands feel clammy. He goes right in and brushes his lips softly against my cheek. When he pulls back, he has that cute boyish smile on his face again. Then he turns and walks down the steps.

* * *

I FLUTTER IN THE DOOR AND TWIRL INTO THE KITCHEN. IN FACT, I twirl right into Cade, who I don't see standing right in front of me. I haven't seen much of him since I moved in, mostly just in passing. I can't quite figure out his work schedule and he is often out until the early morning hours. Whoring it up around town,

I'm sure. Bumping into him and almost knocking myself into the counter is not ideal.

"Whoa, Haley. Apparently, we shouldn't meet in kitchens."

"Hmmm." I can't keep my grin down.

"You're beaming today." He looks me up and down.

"Yup." I glide past him to grab a pan. "And now I'm going to make dinner."

"Oh? I'll stay out of your way then." He moves around the bar and sits on a stool, looking at me intently. "What are we having tonight?"

"We?" He hasn't been home for dinner before.

"Duh." Cocky grin. "Do you want some help?"

"Uh, no. I think I can handle it. I'm just making some fettuccine alfredo." I start filling a large pot full of water for the pasta. I give him a look I'm sure reads as *you can't possibly be serious about helping me in the kitchen*. Growing up, my mom worked evenings, so Tuck and I learned to fend for ourselves early on. I cooked dinner most nights and am more than proficient in the kitchen.

"Okay. I'll just watch then."

I suddenly feel a little self-conscious as I begin melting the butter for the béchamel sauce. Is he going to sit there the whole time and stare at me?

He is.

With a smug-ass grin, I might add.

The alfredo sauce is almost done—it just needs to thicken up a little. I am stirring it when he interjects.

"You know what would make that even better? A pinch of grated nutmeg."

I look at him like he is fucking nuts. He is obviously fluent in facial expressions because he starts laughing at me.

"Seriously, just trust me."

I narrow my eyes at him, studying him for a second. His clear blue eyes are looking right into mine, relaxed. Fine. I turn and start rifling through the spice cabinet for the nutmeg.

“No, no.” Cade gets up, walks over to the freezer, and retrieves a little baggy. Then he grabs a micro-planer from a drawer. They have some fancy cookware for two single guys. He comes over to where I am standing in front of the stove and playfully bumps me over with his hip.

“Fresh is always best.” He grinds a couple dashes of fresh nutmeg into the white sauce and stirs it in. He gets a spoon from the drawer to his right without even looking and tastes a lick. “Needs salt.” He adds some salt with one hand and stirs with his other. He has pushed up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows, exposing the myriad of black and gray tattoos on his defined forearms. I admire how his muscles flex under his tattooed skin as he works. This time when he tastes it, he gives a nod of approval. I am staring at him the whole time like he has just killed a kitten in front of me.

He glances over to me, that perfectly sexy smug smile on his face that kind of makes me melt and want to slap him at the same time. “Tuck hasn’t told you anything about me, has he?”

“Um, no. Not really.”

“Hmm. So you have no idea what I do?”

“No.” Obviously.

“I’m a chef.”

Well, shit. Now I look like a stuck-up bitch.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m the sous chef at *La Mer* downtown.”

“Oh.” I am a little lost as to how to respond to that.

“Oh?”

“I guess I figured you worked at like a tattoo shop or something.”

“You know, I always thought that would be kind of fun—but then I have to remind myself that not everyone coming in for a tattoo is going to be a hot chick. There are a lot of sweaty guys you’d have to touch, too.”

That is more like the Cade-response I expect.

“Is that all you guys think about?”

“Pretty much.” He shrugs. “Hey, you know what would be great in this? Prosciutto. I just picked some up the other day. I’ll make it.”

He is like a giddy little boy getting ingredients out of the fridge—a very adept little boy who is seriously skilled with a knife and hot frying pans. I watch him render the prosciutto until it is crispy and smells amazing. He totally took over but I don’t mind.

“You want some salad with this or something?” he asks.

“Uh, sure.”

“There’s some lettuce in the fridge. If you’ll clean it and chop it up, I’ll make some dressing. Caesar okay?”

“Yeah.” I begin getting the salad ready. I have never been bossed around in the kitchen before but I’m not about to complain.

By this time, my stomach is rumbling. Cade whips up some dressing in a small food processor, blending in olive oil after adding the anchovies. Seriously? Who keeps anchovies lying around the house? A professional chef, I guess. Suddenly all the gourmet-quality equipment makes total sense.

* * *

BEST. DINNER. EVER.

We sit at the tiny bistro table situated in front of the bay window in the kitchen. Cade tells me about how he and Tuck met at a party his second year at the university. They were both trying to hook up with the same girl. Neither of them managed

to close the deal. Apparently, she had a boyfriend. A big boyfriend—who was very jealous—but they did get matching black eyes.

Cade has an easy laugh that lights up his whole face. We are having such a nice time talking I almost forget he is a total dick. The food is delicious, and I decide I won't argue with him again about telling me what to do in the kitchen. Only in the kitchen, though.

"That was amazing, Cade. But you know now you'll have to make me dinner every night."

"Oh, that's how it works, is it?"

"Yup."

His smile is wide and gorgeous, but his eyes are devious. "That could probably be arranged—as long as you don't mind eating at weird times. I usually work the swing shift at the restaurant."

"I'm pretty flexible."

His eyes widen a fraction. Uh-oh. He definitely read more into that than I intended.

"I meant my schedule!"

"Of course you did." He sits back with a placating nod and licks his bottom lip. Oh shit.

My phone rings and I jump in my seat, forgetting what that sound is for a second. A phone? I don't understand. When I go to answer it, I don't recognize the number.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Adam."

Ahh!

"Oh, hey. How's it goin'?" Keeping it casual. Good call.

"Uhh, great. It's not too soon for me to call, is it?"

I'm sure my face lights up like a little girl just given a pony as I step away from the table and into the hall.

"No way." Pshaw, call me anytime you want.

“Good, because I was wondering if you would go to dinner with me tomorrow and I was hoping to catch you before you made other plans.”

Plans? What the hell are those?

“No plans. I’d love to go to dinner with you.” Embarrassing, jumping-up-and-down dance party in my head.

“Cool! Pick you up at seven?”

“Sounds great.”

“See you then.”

I am practically skipping when I come back out. Cade is at the sink rinsing off the dishes.

“Good call then?” he asks.

“Uh huh.” I can’t hold in my squeal. “I got a date for tomorrow!”

His face falls just a fraction. “Already backing out of our standing dinner arrangement?”

“I guess you’ll just have to make me lunch or—no! Even better, breakfast!”

“Deal.” He returns to laid-back Cade who is unaffected. “So, who’s this date with?”

“A guy in one of my classes. We went out to coffee today. His name is Adam.”

“Oh, so that’s why you have that same shit-eating grin on your face as earlier.”

“Hey!” I smack him across the shoulder. “Be nice. I like him.”

“He sounds dreamy,” he says, but the playfulness from before seems to be gone. After he finishes with the dishes, he rather abruptly walks toward the door, grabs the black jacket and leaves without a glance back or a goodbye.

Later that night, I figure out where he went when I hear him and someone in heels stumble down the hall and into his room. Followed by noises worthy of a porno.

Fucking fantastic.

CHAPTER 3

THE NEXT MORNING I FORGO THE SHOWER AND JUST PUT MY hair up, throw on my most comfortable pair of thread-bare jeans and a zip-up hoodie. I only have two morning classes then I will be able to spend the rest of the day getting ready for my date.

As I round the corner from the hall, a savory scent wafts over from the kitchen and makes my mouth water. But the kitchen is empty. As I get closer and the aroma becomes richer and saltier, I know it is coming from the kitchen, but there is no food and, more noticeably, no Cade. I approach the counter and then see a note.

*Had to leave early this morning but I never go back on a deal.
Breakfast is in the oven.*

-Cade

I open the barely warmed oven and sure enough, oh my good lord. Eggs Benedict. I split my fork down the center of the perfectly poached egg, the bright yellow yolk oozing out slowly. I don't usually like a runny yolk but this one is so smooth and

creamy. The hollandaise sauce is rich and the perfect balance to the salty ham. I devour it. So quickly and unladylike that I am glad no one is here to witness it.

Before I leave for class, I scribble him back just under his note.

That was ridiculously delicious. Thank you. But if you keep this up it's definitely going to go straight to my butt.

-Haley

* * *

MY SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR ANNOUNCES THE NEXT ASSIGNMENT: group project. I'd rather slam my head against this table. It would be easy. If I hit my head hard enough, I might be excused from this assignment...

I look around the room. Everyone seems relaxed enough, chatting happily with smiles on their faces. The handful of people in my immediate vicinity have already paired up. I don't know anyone's name. Making new friends has never been my strong suit. Probably has something to do with my resting bitch-face. My heart beats faster. I fucking hate group projects.

"Haley!" A tall blonde comes over to me. She has a huge, toothy smile and bright blue eyes. In fact, her eyes are a little far apart for her face, but she is unusually pretty. "Do you want to partner up with me?" She sits in the seat next to me, her smile lights up her whole face. She has a small gap between her two front teeth and faint freckles on her nose. Her long hair is thick and straight, the light bounces off it like a halo.

I have no idea who this glow-y chick is.

I blink at her a couple times. "Uhh, sure."

"Ohmygosh! How rude of me. I'm Court."

Court turns out to be a great partner. We have our project roughly outlined by the end of class, our respective parts to research over the weekend, and a plan to reconvene in class Monday.

“Hey, do you want to come out with me tonight? My roommates and I are going to go grab a few beers and watch the game.”

Is it that obvious I haven’t made any friends yet?

“That sounds like fun, but I have plans tonight.”

“Next time then!” Court waves and heads off in the other direction.

* * *

WHEN I GET HOME FROM SCHOOL I AM EXHAUSTED. CADE IS STILL gone and Tuck is at work. There is a huge merger going down at his firm and he has been going in early and working late every night. He also admitted to me that he is “sorta” seeing this girl named Ali. And for just “sorta” seeing this girl, she sure takes up a lot of his time.

I’m going to take a nap. Then I will be all well-rested for my date.

The nap is a good decision.

I spend way too long getting ready—much longer than normal. I style my hair with my iron to amplify its natural curl and then grapple back and forth about whether to leave it down or put it up. Maybe only half up? Everything I do only seems to make it worse so I just leave it down by default. I do a gray smoky eye with dark mascara that makes the gold flecks in my light brown eyes stand out.

I stare at the clothes hanging in my closet. I own exactly four dresses, but I don’t want to wear any of them. I need to go shopping. I go with the navy dress I wore to my cousin’s wedding

because it is sophisticated but still hugs my body in all the right places, showing off my slim waist, adequate cleavage, and flowing down just a few inches above my knees. I finish off the look with my silver four-inch heels that make my short legs look sexy and actually give me some height so I can walk amongst the normal-heighted people.

In the living room, I wait for Adam. I know the house is empty but I still feel all disappointed there is no one here to tell me how great I look. You know, just a little ego boost before the big date. Standing there alone all done-up, I suddenly feel incredibly nervous and jittery.

I need a drink. Wine.

There is some chardonnay in the fridge and I happily pour myself a glass. It is cold and crisp and goes to my head quickly. Wine usually doesn't make me so giddy, but then I remember how I slept through lunch. Figures.

As I finish the glass and prepare to pour myself another, I see the note on the counter. Cade has added to our running correspondence—he must have come and gone while I slept.

I can tell you from first-hand knowledge—you don't need to worry about your ass.

-Cade.

It's just the wine that is making my cheeks so hot. Really. At the end, he has drawn a little winky face. Winky face? I find the dichotomy of tattoo-covered Cade drawing me a winky face inexplicably hilarious. The giggle emerging from my lips sounds foreign to me.

Wow, was that extra alcoholic wine? My absurd laughing fit is quickly interrupted by the doorbell.

* * *

ADAM HELPS ME OUT OF HIS SPORTY RED COUPE WITH A WARM and gentle hand.

“You really do look magnificent tonight.”

“Thanks.” I look down as my cheeks grow warm. “Again.” Don’t get me wrong, I know I look fabulous. I spent half the afternoon making sure of it, but he’s the one who looks devastatingly handsome. He’s dressed in a soft charcoal gray sweater and dark jeans as he leads me to the restaurant. I laugh to myself when I look up and see where we are. *La Mer*.

He turns around when he hears me laugh and, God, is his face just perfect. Those deep brown eyes are lit up with his smile and I find myself staring at the little cleft in his chin.

“What?” he asks.

“Oh, nothing. I hear this is a good restaurant.”

“It’s pretty romantic.” His cheeks flush. I swoon at embarrassed Adam.

We enter the restaurant and he is right. Everything is beautiful, serene, and very romantic. The tables are intimate with white tablecloths and little flickering candles that cast a warm glow over the space. Actually, there doesn’t seem to be any lighting other than candlelight.

We are seated promptly for our 7:15 reservation and the server recites the evening’s specials. They all sound so fancy. I am a little overwhelmed. Adam smiles his boyish smile at me, putting his hand over mine across the table.

“I think we could use just a moment.” He is so freaking handsome, and he can’t take his eyes off of me, even if he is sweetly amused by my obvious French-restaurant virginity.

I order more wine right away.

Turns out I had no need for worry—everything set for us on the table is superb. By the time our dessert—a strawberry tartlet drizzled with decadent vanilla bean-infused crème fraiche—is set

down I am pleasantly buzzed on wine and laughing uncontrollably at Adam's stories about getting stranded on a city bus in Brazil. He had fallen asleep and failed to get off at the stop with the rest of the Habitat for Humanity volunteers over last year's Spring Break. He is charming and only reluctantly removes his hand from mine to eat. His gaze is altogether more heated as we take turns eating the sweet dessert from the same spoon.

After dinner, we walk out onto the sidewalk. It is dark and I can just make out the haze of the moon glowing behind the clouds. I should have brought a jacket but I'm not used to it getting cool this early in the year. I am heading toward Adam's car when he reaches for my hand. I slow and turn to look at him as he laces his large fingers through mine. Suddenly I feel quite warm. He leans down and brushes his nose against my cheek. His breath is hot against my skin and his scent makes me inhale deeply.

"You want to take a walk with me for a little while?"

Dear God, yes.

I can only nod in response. And so we walk. He asks me some more questions about my hometown and what I was like in high school. But mostly we just walk. And look up at the stars. Adam releases my hand and wraps his whole arm around my shoulders, my body fits snugly under his arm and I rest my head into his chest. One of the perks of being so short. I could sink into him right here—he is so warm and solid against me.

We stop at an intersection for the light to change. The air is breezy and I am more aware of my bare arms as we are motionless. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his head dip down as his hand sweeps over my arm. I turn my face up ever so slightly and it is all the cue he needs. He closes the space between us quickly and his lips are pressed against mine. Despite the chills, his kiss is heated and he begins to move his mouth tenderly, coaxing it open to allow our tongues to massage

one another. He tightens his arms around me, pulling me in against his body and I wrap my arms around his waist, running my hands up his back. We break the kiss but hold the embrace a few moments longer. Our noses and foreheads are together, lips just an inch apart.

“Ready to head back now?”

Not really.

“Sure.”

The ride home is much too brief. I don’t want to be anywhere else but here with him. His hand is resting lightly on my knee and he takes his eyes off the road to smile at me every few seconds. I am still blissfully drunk off our kiss—and let’s face it, the wine too.

I’ve got a tight grip on his hand as we navigate the cracked steps up to the porch. *Please don’t trip in front of Adam.* I probably shouldn’t have ordered that last glass of wine.

He gives my hand a squeeze before releasing it when we reach the door. I look up at his dark brown eyes and he closes the space between us. His warm hand is on my cheek, then in my hair, holding my face to his. His lips meet mine gently at first. The kiss becomes wetter, more eager as his tongue maps my mouth. His breathing becomes erratic. He pulls me to him as my fingers grip his sweater. He pulls away too soon.

“I should probably let you go now.”

What?

“Yeah.” I smile as sweetly as I can. I want the smile to say, “I’m a good girl. I like you, and that was nice,” instead of what I am actually thinking, which is, “I haven’t gotten laid in forever and I would like to attack you while ripping all your clothes off.”

“Bye, Haley.” He leans down and kisses my cheek. “I’ll call you later.” And with his stunning smile, he turns and leaves. The scent of his cologne lingers around me.

AS I BREEZE INSIDE, CADE IS JUST WALKING FROM THE KITCHEN into the living room. He's carrying a big bowl and shoving his mouth full of popcorn when he sees me and freezes, hand still in mid-shove.

"Wow." A piece of popcorn totally falls out of his mouth. "You look great." He looks me up and down incredulously, lingering a bit too long at my boobs.

"I clean up nice, I guess." Clearly, I hadn't impressed him lounging around the house in my sweats over the last few weeks. Well, that is for the best because I certainly don't need Cade looking at me like that. The way he is currently looking at me. He nods his approval.

"I was just about to start a movie. You want to watch it with me?"

I am still too awake from the incredible kissing to go to bed.

"Sure. Just...give me a minute." I am not sitting next to Cade all evening in this dress.

He shrugs and plops on the couch, still eating the popcorn by the fistfuls. Okay, maybe he isn't that distracted by the dress. I still go and change into a light T-shirt and my most comfortable gray sweats. In the bathroom, I scrub my face clean and put my hair up into a bouncy ponytail.

When I come back out, he looks dramatically disappointed.

"No dress?"

"Um. No."

He has that devious panty-dropping smile on his face again. He looks at me like I am naked.

"That's all right. You looked nice in the dress, but not nearly as much as you do in polka-dots."

Heat rises to my ears and I can't think of a good retort. He motions for me to sit next to him.

“Sorry. It’s just too easy to give you shit. I promise I’ll be nice. I’ll even share my popcorn.” He holds up the bowl as a peace offering and I can’t help but smile at the innocent look he so purposefully puts on his face.

I sit next to him and immediately swipe a handful of popcorn, giving him my best evil eye. Apparently, it is a pretty poor evil eye because it just makes his smile broaden.

The movie is a ridiculous comedy from a few years ago. The jokes are juvenile, but I secretly love it.

We spend the first half of the movie intently watching, laughing at every moronic joke and shtick while intermittently reaching for more popcorn. I try not to care when our hands brush against each other in the bowl, but it keeps happening and I swear he must think I am doing it on purpose.

More than once I realize my foot has wandered over to his side of the couch and is resting against his leg before I pull it away. He doesn’t acknowledge our multiple accidental touches, but he doesn’t move his leg either.

Near the bottom of the bowl of popcorn, I spot the perfect piece. It is huge and so unnaturally yellow I know it is going to be wonderfully buttery. Right as I reach for it, Cade snatches it. I reflexively smack his hand away. He drops the popcorn and looks at me, a little shocked. His astonishment quickly melts into his devious grin.

“What? You take up three-quarters of the couch and now you’re going to hog the popcorn?”

“I am not taking up three-quarters of the couch!” I am not.

“Hey, you’re the one who keeps touching me with your smelly feet.” He is smirking at me. The jackass.

“My feet are not smelly!”

“Really? Let’s see.” He grabs for my foot. I kick and try to twist away from him but he is too fast and has my bare foot in

his hand quickly. He pulls it up to his nose and scrunches up his face in an excessive display of distaste. “Whoa, super stinky.”

I can tell he is joking, and I know my feet do not stink—oh god! Do my feet stink? Now he is full on laughing at me.

“You’re an ass!” I grab for the popcorn and throw a few pieces right at his face. He is momentarily surprised then grabs a few pieces of his own and throws them at me, chuckling. He grabs my foot again and starts tickling the bottom of it. Seriously? Apparently, I am six years old and I am laughing too hard to form any coherent sentences. I can only gasp out, “Stop!” in between sobs of laughter. I can’t breathe. I am practically choking.

“Cade!” He’s incessant. “Please...stop.” I almost kick him trying to struggle away. That was the first time. The next time I actually do kick him in the face. A good hard heel right to the jaw. His teeth clank together when my heel connects.

“Ow! Fuck.”

“Oh shit! I’m sorry, Cade!” I sit up toward him. “Are you all right?”

He has his hand to his face, massaging his open jaw.

“I bit my tongue.” He looks at me and abruptly seems less pissed and more pleased. “I think you made me bleed.”

I can’t control the giant smile that takes over my face.

“You’re pretty happy with yourself, aren’t you?”

“Well, you kind of deserved it.”

Before he can retort—and I can tell it is going to be a good one—Tuck walks in the front door. I suddenly realize how close I am sitting to Cade. I scoot back to the other side of the couch. Cade straightens up a little too just as Tuck walks into the room.

He comes in, loosening his tie and collapses into the chair opposite the couch with a sigh.

“What are you guys watching? Oh, this movie sucks. Shit. You two have the same awful taste in movies. I’m going to bed.” He gets up and moves toward the hall when Cade stands.

“Yeah, me too.”

They both disappear into the hallway, two doors shutting behind them.

Really? Not even a “Goodnight, Haley.” It is barely after midnight and I swear I have never heard Cade go to bed before two.