



TO BE
YOUR
WIFE

rae kennedy

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CHAPTER 1

AT LEAST THE FOOD IS DELICIOUS, BECAUSE THIS GUY IS FUCKING AWFUL.

The first words out of his mouth were, “Whoa. You’re, like, really tall.”

No shit Sherlock.

I am tall. And I’m wearing heels, which make me taller. I won’t apologize or stop wearing them.

The evening has spiraled gracefully to shit since that moment.

“So, Chip, do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask.

“One brother.”

Okay... I sit for a moment, smiling, hoping maybe he’ll ask me a question in return. *Why, yes, I have four siblings, Chip. Three older brothers and one younger sister.* But no. He does not ask me anything.

Our server comes to refill my water.

“Thank you, Henry,” I say with my sweetest smile. He has literally been the best part of my evening thus far. He’s been my hero, keeping those bread baskets coming during that awkward

time after ordering. When there were no menus to pretend to read, just the two of us, sitting across from each other—staring—he brought me carbs and butter and I will be forever grateful.

“You’re welcome. Can I get you anything else?” Henry asks.

“No, thank you.”

He walks off and I have an urge to call him back and order myself a drink. A strong one.

I look back at Chip in his polo shirt and tousled blond hair that many girls might find attractive. You know what I find attractive? A guy who can hold a conversation.

“You’re a communications major, right?”

“Yeah.”

That’s it. That’s all he says. Ironic, actually. I’d laugh if I weren’t so bored. Luckily I couldn’t give two shits about this blind date. I’d agreed to go because I’m always up for meeting new people but I’m not actually interested in making a love match right now. I’m too busy with my last year of school for anything serious and after graduation, I’m moving back home where I already have a job lined up.

Without a word, Chip gets up and heads toward the bathroom. I can’t. I need to get out. I text Haley to call me in five.

Shortly after he sits back down, my phone rings.

“Oh, my gosh! I can’t believe I forgot to silence my phone, I’m so sorry!”

He shrugs and takes a bite of his now cold spaghetti.

Why am I even bothering? *Because you’re nice, dammit.* I answer the phone. “Hello?”

“How’s the date going?” Haley’s voice is friendly with almost a chuckle in it. There is laughter and noise in the background and I immediately want to be wherever she is—having fun and maybe getting an effing drink. Yes.

“Oh my god! That’s terrible!” I feign my best shocked and concerned reaction. Chip isn’t paying any attention.

“That good, huh?”

“Where are you?” I really want to know.

“We’re at Flanagan’s downtown.”

Fuck. Yes.

“I’ll be right there!” I hang up the phone and give Chip an apologetic look. I start to explain there’s an emergency, but I give up. “I’ve got to go.” I get up and lay forty dollars on the table. That should cover my meal and most of his, but I feel bad making him pay when I’m ditching.

* * *

I step out into the crisp November night and am invigorated. The breeze nips at my cheeks and when I take a deep breath, the fresh air fills me. It smells like fall. I wrap my chunky scarf around my neck, glad my long blonde hair is tied in a knot on top of my head. As I walk down the sidewalk toward Flanagan’s the street is alive with other people ambling to their destinations, laughing and slapping each other on the backs. Mostly other college students but some older folks too. Cars line the street and wait at intersections as the slow-moving pedestrians cross well past the “no walking” sign. The streetlights and headlights make a beautiful painting of light—red, yellow, and green, against the black sky.

Voices get louder and more jovial as I get closer to the bar. The air smells faintly of cigarettes and hotdog vendors set up for the late-night crowd.

I get to the front doors, manned by a large guy named Francis. Of course, most people don’t know his name—they might be less intimidated otherwise.

“Evening, Fran.”

He scowls at me. But I smile at him as I hand him my ID and he nods me in with a small smile creeping to the corner of his

mouth. Francis doesn't talk much while he's working. Mostly grunts. I've only got six more months in this college town, but I think I can still crack a full smile out of him one of these days.

The bar is much warmer than outside. It's almost humid in here, packed with bodies. Drunk and rowdy twenty-somethings playing pool and dancing and shooting darts and yelling so they can be heard over the loud Irish rock music. I spot Haley right away, sitting at a tall table near the back, a huge foamy beer overflowing before her.

I tend to hang out with a lot of boys, and I've only known Haley a couple of months, but I adore her. She is practically my opposite in every way—petite and curvy with wavy dark hair and dark eyes. I'm surprised she's out, even though it's a Saturday night. She generally requires dragging, begging, or bribery to get her to come party.

"Hey!" I squeal, running up to her and flinging my arms around her shoulders. "Thanks for saving me Hale."

Haley is not a hugger but she puts up with me.

"No problem." She looks way too sober for this late in the night at a place like this. As I take off my coat and nubby red scarf, revealing my short cream lace dress, I realize why. Across the table is a very drunk guy completely ogling my legs. Like, drool-out-of-the-mouth-and-not-even-ashamed-of-it drunk.

"Court, this is Cade." Haley directs me to the man to her right, not that he needs an introduction. Everyone in this town knows who Cade Renner is. Sex covered in tattoos. He shakes my hand across the table and I smile at him. I see what all the fuss is about. He is hot.

"Hi Cade, we've sort of met before."

"Uh yeah..." He nods at me. I can tell he is searching for a memory of me, probably in bed, but he won't find one. Cade gives women attention for a night, not long enough to remember

a face or a name. Being someone he hasn't slept with makes me completely off the radar.

"And this is my brother, Tuck." Haley gestures across the table to the drunk one, her cheeks brighten as she admits her relation.

He straightens up a bit and stretches his hand out to me. As I take it, he says, "Hey darlin'." Cheesy. But it makes my face open up and then he flashes me the most gorgeous smile ever, complete with deep dimples on each side. He has perfectly straight white teeth with a square chin and sharp jaw. His hair is dark, buzzed short and his ears stick out just a little too wide but as he takes my hand, our eyes lock.

His large hand envelopes mine and sends a wave of liquid warmth up my arm. His eyes are a beautiful mix of green and blue and gold. We have stopped shaking and are just now kind of holding hands. Entranced. His thumb barely brushes along my knuckles and I snap out of it, giggling.

"Nice to meet you, Tuck."

He looks a tad more devious as his grin widens, his left dimple getting deeper.

"You want to get out of here?" Haley calls to me, completely breaking the spell Tuck's eyes are casting on me and I turn to her as I let our hands fall.

"Are you kidding? I just got here. I'm ready to drink!"

"Oh, hell yes!" Tuck jumps up from his stool lightning-fast with a smack of his hand on the table. "What'll you have?" He looks at me with excitement. I'm excited too. I need to let out some steam before finals, and Chip certainly wasn't doing it for me.

"Anything with tequila."

Tuck looks as though he is about to faint as he crosses both hands over his chest. "I just fell in love." He actually does stumble

a bit but recovers nicely and reaches for my hand again. "Let's go do this, girl."

He takes my hand and we walk over toward the bar. We weave through the crowd—Tuck is taking care to block me from flying elbows and other people getting crazy. I am impressed at how steady he is walking and even more impressed with how much taller than me he is. He must be about 6'5" because I'm over six feet in these heels and he still has a few inches on me.

When we finally make it to the bar, there is no bartender. I step up on the foot rail and lean over the counter. As I do this, I realize with my short dress I very well may be giving Tuck a prime view of my ass, but that thought doesn't bother me enough to jump down. The bartender is at the far end and I wave to get his attention, which is futile. I turn around to face Tuck, who quickly tries to look like he wasn't just checking out my butt, failing.

"He's down at the other end." Even two inches away, I must raise my voice two octaves to be heard.

Tuck nods. "I'll try to get him. You stay here."

He melts into the crowd and I lean over the bar again. It is at times like these I wish I had any sort of cleavage to offer. But alas, this tall, thin frame only comes with boobs that can't even fill out an A cup on a good day. The bartender turns his head my way for a second and I manage to catch his eye.

"Joaquin!" I recognize him from our English class sophomore year. He smiles and heads my way.

"What'll it be, pretty girl?"

"Four tequila shots, top shelf."

He gives me a nod and starts grabbing glasses.

"Can I buy your drinks?" the smarmy guy next to me—where did he come from?—asks with a skinny smile.

“Oh, thank you so much for the offer, but I’ve got it.” I smile sweetly at him and then turn back to the bar. Hopefully he will get the message.

Nope. He moves a little closer to me. “You sure? Top shelf is pretty expensive.” He has an abnormally small nose.

A large hand wraps around my waist from the other side and a strong arm eases me gently against a solid torso. I turn a bit startled right into Tuck’s face. His bright green eyes just inches from mine. He’s giving me his dimpled smile. “Hey darlin’,” he says with a wink.

I crack up at this. Really? He bites his lip to keep from laughing too, our noses almost touch. He glances over my shoulder for a second, the twinkle in his eyes giving way to an intense glare. Whoa. That look could murder. The little man scuttles off.

Breaking away from Tuck’s powerful grip, I raise my eyebrow at him.

“I didn’t know if you wanted rescuing,” Tuck says with a shrug. “But I figured if you did, I’d help. And if you didn’t...well, that would have made me completely jealous.” He only slurs his words a tiny bit.

“I could have handled it, but that was easier.” I smile at him, giving him a playful punch in the arm.

Joaquin places the four shots down in front of us. He doesn’t spill a drop of the clear liquid as he fills them to the brims. He tells me the price and I dig out some cash from my pocket.

“Put it on my tab,” Tuck yells over, “and add four more.”

“Hey, I can buy us a round.”

Tuck looks at me with a goofy smile. “But darlin’, I’ve got you.” He hands me a shot and raises his to mine. With a clank and a couple drops spilled, we down them in a second. We take

the next ones then slam them down on the bar right as Joaquin sets down the next four. We carry those back to the table.

Haley and Cade are clearly disappointed we've returned and interrupted their alone time. She tells me he is different with her, but I need to keep my eye out for her, especially since Tuck doesn't know they've been seeing each other. Judging from the look in his eyes at that random guy who hit on me, a girl he just met, I think he might actually murder Cade if he knew about him and his sister hooking up behind his back. Especially since the guy is his best friend and roommate. But Tuck is blissfully oblivious.

"Shots!" Tuck slides the little glasses around the table.

"Naw man, you take mine. I'm driving." Cade passes his back.

"And tequila makes me vomit." Haley hands hers to me.

Tuck has his eyes on me. When he looks at me it's like I can feel his stare on my skin. "They've been like this all night. Thank God you showed up." He raises his glass. "To you." He sinks it back.

"How about we pace ourselves a little, okay drunk?" I pat his arm. Wow, that's a solid bicep.

He cocks his head, a sly grin showing his pearly whites. "Okay, I'll slow down. But I've been at it all night. What's your excuse?"

A lifetime in sports and I was never able to curb my competitive side.

"Touché." I touch the small glass to my lips and down the burning liquid in one smooth gulp, not letting its effect on me show. We are staring at each other as I reach for the next one and slide its contents down my throat as well. When I grab the shot sitting in front of him, his eyes widen in surprise. I sip that one down too, never breaking eye contact.

"Fuck. Me." He is impressed.

“Was that a proposition?”

He gets a little flushed up through his cheeks but then smiles, stunned. “Will you marry me?”

“Not a chance.”

“I’ll ask again when I’m sober. I’m much more charming.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You’ll definitely say yes the next time I ask.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“Yup.” He hiccups. “Wanna dance?” He holds his hand out to me.

“Sure.”

Tuck has surprisingly good rhythm for his level of inebriation. He wiggles his booty and shimmies his shoulders. At one point I think he throws in some jazz hands. He has that big, silly smile on the whole time. The one that’s completely carefree and fun. He can’t moonwalk or do the worm, but that doesn’t stop him from trying. The best part is he doesn’t care. We laugh at how horrible he is.

“Your turn, girl. Show me your badass moves.”

I pull out a couple classics—the sprinkler and the shopping cart. Tuck claps for me and joins in, laughing the whole time. His smile is so genuine and beautiful, it’s disarming. As we dance, my elbows and hips keep bumping into him. We seem to be drifting closer together.

The next time we make contact, the full length of my arm brushes against his side and neither of us is in a rush to pull away. He’s dancing even closer now. He smells like fresh laundry and a mix of beer and tequila. His eyes are laser focused on me while we dance and he is smiling the whole time.

He is watching me and I’m aware of how warm my entire body is and how fast my heart is beating. As the music picks up speed, he lightly touches my back, encouraging me to step closer. I do. Tuck’s hand slides slowly down to my hip.

My pulse quickens. *When's the last time a guy did that to me?*

With a little pressure on my hip I move with him and we sway to the music. Our bodies are almost touching and his body heat is overwhelming. He's still looking at me intently, his lips parted. He's leaning in toward me. *Am I holding my breath?*

But then the song ends.

"Whew, it's hot in here," I pant.

He chuckles, flashing his big smile and deep dimples as his hands leave my sides. "Yeah. Let's go."

Tuck wraps his solid arm around my shoulder as we walk back to our table. He leans down to me, his lips brushing at my earlobe. "Do you want another drink before I close my tab? I think I'm done celebrating for the night."

"No thanks. Maybe just a water?"

He smiles and gives my shoulder two quick squeezes, "Sure thing, darlin'."

It looks like Haley and Cade have left to the dance floor when I get to the table, their beers still mostly intact.

The crowd has started to thin a little and Tuck returns shortly with a glass of ice water for me. He sees the two mostly full beers and sighs.

"Guess it's all up to me." He slides one in front of him and takes a swig. His eyelids are getting heavy and his eyes are glazing over. I softly pat his knee and grab Haley's beer. Eff, this glass is big.

"I'll help."

He sleepily grins, his left dimple appearing as he lays his hand over mine, pressing it around his thigh, just above his knee. I didn't realize how intimately I was touching him and now I'm a little embarrassed. Let's change the subject.

"So, what are you celebrating?"

He looks at me dazedly. "You're gorgeous."

I roll my eyes but can't keep a serious face. "I asked you a question."

He shrugs. "Being single."

"Oh?"

He nods, his head steadily lowering toward the table. "My girlfriend. Ali." His cheek is now resting on the shiny surface. "Just dumped me."

Damn. "I'm so sorry, Tuck. That sucks."

His eyes are now closed, mouth open. "Broke my heart."

Well, shit.

CHAPTER 2

THIS NIGHT CAN SERIOUSLY SUCK MY DICK. THE FIRST GUY I MEET IS bland with no social skills and the next one, who I was kind of digging, is now passed the fuck out in the middle of the bar. Not to mention, freshly dumped and not taking it well. The fact he still referred to her as his girlfriend and not ex-girlfriend is a huge red flag. Nope. Not going there.

Cade and I help Tuck into the backseat of the car. I get in first and Tuck basically falls in on me, his head landing square in my lap. As we drive off, he nuzzles my thighs and starts to breathe softly, mouth open. He does look cute, a big guy all curled up in the tiny seat. I don't even realize I'm doing it at first, but I'm running my hand over his buzzed head, feeling the short stiff hairs rub across my skin. It's nice. Tuck sighs just audibly.

Nope. *Stop that, Court. You're being weird.*

Haley and Cade are in the front. Stealing glances at each other and small smiles. They're doing it, right in front of me. Falling in love.

I don't think I'll ever have that again—the butterflies of new love.

I'll have Wes. According to my family and friends back home, we have always been meant to be, and considering no guy I've met while at school has even come close to putting me in danger of losing my heart, I guess they're right. I already had my butterfly feelings with Wes at fifteen, so no more butterflies for me.

The car rolls to a stop in front of my building.

"Thank you so much for the ride, you guys."

Cade gives me a little nod in the rearview mirror.

Haley shrugs. "Sorry you had to deal with that one all night."

I look down at the sleeping head in my lap. His dark lashes fanned across his chiseled cheek bone. Those pouty lips barely parted. I wish Haley had warned me her brother was seriously attractive. And exactly my physical type. And funny. And sorry bud—I don't know if I'm thinking this to him or to me—but we are just going to be friends. I don't do rebounds.

"I had a great time actually." I look back up at Haley, who isn't looking at me at all, but at Cade. "Gah! Go get a room you two." I pop open the door and slide out as smoothly as I can, trying not to bounce Tuck's huge head against the black leather seat. "Call you later."

Haley gives me a little smile and a wave and they are off.

* * *

I'm not sure how long I've been staring at my ceiling, but when the buzzing starts, I know it is five o'clock. I find my phone from under my pillow and hit answer.

"Good morning, Sunshine!" The booming voice of my dad comes through. Just talking he sounds a bit out of breath, as if he's just been jogging or laughing for an hour.

"Morning, Daddy."

"How's life treatin' you, Baby Girl?"

“Oh, you know, fair to great. What are you doing today?”

“Feedin’ a bunch of cattle. Your ma’s making a mean lunch, then I might take a nap.”

“Exciting.”

“As always. Have a good day, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you to death.”

Dad’s never been the chatty type. I slide my feet out of the covers and to the floor. The air is chilly and it is still black outside. As I change in the dark, the apartment is silent. Not even a hint of a roommate. Outside is still. No cars or people or even wind. It’s my favorite time of day. I love the mornings. I always had to get up early to help on the ranch, and I guess it stuck.

I lace up my running shoes and tread quietly down the hall to the kitchen. I grab a banana from the counter and scroll through my phone, deciding on which playlist to listen to today. I swear, as if by extra-sensory perception, the second I open my mouth and place the banana inside, Nick pops in front of me. Out-of-fucking-nowhere.

“What I wouldn’t give to be that banana.” He does the creepy double eyebrow raise at me.

“Is your mind always in the gutter?”

“Yup.” He sits on the stool across the counter from me and places his chin on his clasped hands. “Don’t mind me. I’ll just watch.” And then he stares at me sweetly. I place the banana between my lips, going deeper than I might normally, giving Nick a little smile. Then I bite down hard and chew it extra aggressively.

“Damn, girl. I take it back. Definitely do not want to be that banana.”

“Nope, you don’t.”

Nick’s sandy brown hair is a mess and his normally bright eyes are looking a bit drowsy.

“What are you doing up so early?”

“I’m not.” He stands and yawns. He’s a few inches shorter than me. He claims he’s 5’9” but we all know he’s 5’7”. “I had to take a dump. Going back to bed.”

“Charming. And you wonder why I never did take you up on that offer to sleep with you.”

He smiles and shrugs. “Always on the table, babe.”

“The offer would be much more flattering if it weren’t also open to eighty percent of the student body.”

His mouth drops open in an exaggerated look of offense. “That is not true. Just because I don’t discriminate between girls and boys does not mean I’m not picky. That number has got to be closer to sixty percent.” With a wink, he pads down the hall to his room.

I put my earbuds in and go out into the black, cold morning. With a burst of energy, I take my first step and my morning begins. This is the only time I don’t want anyone else around. The only time just for me and I relish in being alone. Just my thoughts, the rhythm of my breaths, and the sound of my feet bouncing off the pavement.

* * *

The pages of my planner are covered with notes. Due dates are in red, work related to my thesis is in blue, everything else in black. Reminders are highlighted in yellow, study group times are highlighted in green, and sports events are all squished in between.

I normally love looking through my planner. Planning out my days and weeks is calming. I always know what to expect and everything is laid out in an orderly manner. My love of planning is a strength I’ll get to use often when I graduate and start

teaching. But right now, my planner looks anything but neat and orderly. It's a shitshow.

I've been sitting at my desk, staring at these pages for the last twenty minutes. So. Much. Schoolwork. I have one paper due next week, three quizzes, and one group project we need to finish before I leave for Thanksgiving break.

One more week. I can make it.

There has been a dull buzz forming above my right eyebrow that is now a drill boring into my skull and I'm squirmy all over, like millions of ants are wriggling under my skin. Looking at my planner is literally giving me a headache. I need to do something else right now. Anything. Maybe go for a run and burn off some energy.

Or maybe, something...else.

Me: *Hey you want to hang out tonight?*

James: *Sure. Your place in 30?*

Me: *Perfect.*

* * *

His knock is quiet but deliberate. A gust of wind comes in as I open the door to James's smiling face, his cheeks and nose rosy from the cold.

"Hey." His arm wraps around my neck as he steps in.

"How've you been?" I shut the door behind him as he shrugs off his coat.

"Pretty good. Just trying to keep up with school." He takes off his shoes. "And occasionally having to talk Rob back from the ledge."

"I don't know why you decided to room with him again. It seems like he takes a lot of your energy."

James is sitting on the arm of our old, navy couch, taking off his socks and smirking at me with his dark brown eyes. "I'm a

masochist, I guess.” He follows me down the hall to my room. “So, how’s your final year going?”

“I love it.” I shut the door behind us. “But it is kind of kicking my ass right now.” I remove my shirt, revealing my pink bra. “I have so much to do, I don’t even know where to start. I’m glad I got my student teaching hours done last semester.”

James pulls his shirt off over his dark curly hair. “Are you using me to procrastinate?” He starts to undo the top button of his jeans.

I shrug. “Maybe.” I slide down my yoga pants.

“Are we done talking now?” He closes the space between us quickly.

“Yeah.”

He scoops me up and lays me on my bed. His mouth is over mine instantly, his kisses are sweet but I turn my face after a few moments. He presses against me, his body is hot over mine. I wrap my legs around his hips, urging him closer.

There’s a hum in his chest and a smile at his cheeks as he kisses down my neck to the edge of my bra. A familiar warmth starts to pool in my stomach and a tug in my groin entices me to grind against the erection currently trying to escape James’s boxers.

“God, Court,” he says under his breath.

I pull him up and roll us over so I’m straddling him. His chest is heaving and eyes hooded as I retrieve the condom from my bedside table.

“Ready for me already?”

“Always.”

* * *

As we lay on top of my covers, sweat glistening on our skin, hearts still racing as our breathing begins to steady, I am finally relaxed. Nothing like a good orgasm to release some tension.

The sun is setting. It casts a pink glow across the ceiling.

James props himself up on his elbow. "I noticed your roommates aren't here. You ashamed of me?"

"Of course not, but they don't need to be all up in my business. Besides, you know how they get whenever I bring a guy over."

"Yeah, I don't think they even started to like me until we broke up." He sits up, looking around the room for where his clothes landed.

"True. But I don't know if you can call it a break-up if we were never officially dating in the first place."

"You're right." He stands and starts putting on his jeans. "Over before we had a chance to begin. How tragic."

"Oh stop." I throw him his shirt, which hits him square in the face. "We're so much better as friends."

"Whatever you say," he says, as he pulls the shirt down. "You and Caleb still in for the basketball tournament next semester?"

"Definitely. It's in February, right?"

"Yeah, I think sign-ups start in January though. I'll let you know."

"Great."

He leans over and kisses me on the cheek and turns to leave.

"Hey, let me walk you out." Where the eff did my panties go?

"Don't worry about it." He gives me a wink. "I'll be looking forward to your next call."

CHAPTER 3

“YOU GONNA TELL HIM OR WHAT?”

“That’s the plan.” Haley takes a small sip of the beer she’s been nursing all night, a small crease forming between her eyebrows. I open a couple more bottles and head back to the couch, handing one to Nick as I sit next to her.

“Oh, come on! What a lousy call!” Nick is on his feet, yelling at the television.

“Fuckin’ refs,” Caleb mumbles. Caleb is my other roommate and he is currently sitting in the corner by himself, sulking as his team incurs another turnover.

Nick is giggling next to me. Our team is up by twelve.

A couple of our other friends, Josh and Jake, are over to watch the college basketball game with us and with all the yelling at the TV screen, I’m surprised Haley and I can hold even the resemblance of a conversation.

“Tuck seems pretty nice. And he’s your brother. I’m sure he’ll understand.” I try to comfort her.

“Cade thinks he’s going to get murdered.”

I almost spit out my beer. I might like to see Tuck take Cade down a few pegs. He’s certainly got four or five inches and thirty

pounds on him. "Well, let me know how it goes or if I can help in any way."

"I'll text you tomorrow."

Josh turns the volume up on the television.

Caleb continues to sit in his dark and gloomy corner.

"Pizza's here!"

Josh runs to get the door.

Nick gets more beer.

Haley looks like a nervous wreck.

* * *

Haley hasn't texted yet. It's Saturday afternoon. Tuck got home this morning.

I'm not worried, per se—but it is unlike her not to follow through.

So, I text her. You know, just a *hey, how's it going?* But she doesn't reply.

"Court, we're leaving for the tailgate." Caleb's big head is sticking in my doorway. "You comin'?"

"Yeah! I'll be right out."

We get home late after the football game. When I go to bed, there is still no message from Haley.

* * *

Sunday morning after my run and shower, I shoot Haley another text.

Me: *How are you? Did you tell Tuck about Cade? Are you okay?*

Still nothing. I am not a worrier or a clingy friend, but I decide to call her after lunch. It goes straight to voicemail like it has been turned off.

* * *

Monday afternoon Haley is not in our sociology class. She is always in class. Like, always.

It's official. I'm freaking out over here.

As soon as we are dismissed, I hop in my jeep and race over to Haley's house.

I knock on the front door and anxiously bounce on the front porch until footsteps click on the other side.

The heavy wood door creaks open and there is Tuck, standing tall and handsome in a white dress shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his elbows, a loosened black tie, and black dress slacks. He gives me a small smile. I catch a glimpse of his left dimple and white teeth and I have a sudden rush of happiness at seeing him again.

I step right up to him and give him a big hug around the middle. "Hey darlin'," I say as I walk past him, poking fun at the silly nickname he kept using the other night. "I came to see Haley."

He looks at me a bit bewildered as he shuts the door. "Oh! You're one of Haley's friends? I'm her brother." He puts his hand out toward me. "I'm Tucker. People call me Tuck."

I stare at him blankly.

Just blinking.

At least I think I'm blinking.

There! I just blinked.

He looks at me encouragingly, still holding out his hand "And, you are?"

Oh. My. God.

I don't know if I should explain my over-familiar actions, which now seem a bit inappropriate, or if I should just go with it and not embarrass him by pointing out he was so drunk when

we met, he doesn't remember me. Or rubbing all over me on the dance floor. Or passing out in my lap.

I place my hand in his and shake. "I'm Courtney. People call me Court."

"Nice to meet you, Court."

Uh huh. "You too, Tuck." Now it is silent and a little awkward. "So...is Haley around?"

He looks down for a second, "Yeah, but...she's sleeping."

I eye him skeptically. "At four in the afternoon?"

He nods and then our eyes catch. His eyes are still stupid pretty and emerald green. "It's been a rough couple of days."

"Tuck, what's your middle name?"

I think he's so caught off guard by my weird question he answers it without hesitating. "Lee."

I cross my arms. "Tucker Lee Collison, what did you do?"

"What the—what?"

"You heard me. What did you do? When she told you about Cade."

"She didn't tell me anything. I walked in on them. In bed."

"Yikes."

"Right?"

"So...back to the original question. What did you do?"

He looks incredulously at me. "I did what any older brother would do! I freaked the fuck out. I made him leave and told him he was never to see or speak to my sister again."

"So, Cade left?"

Tuck nods.

"And Haley?"

"She's...not taking it well." He looks down at the floor again, hands in his pockets.

"I see."

He looks at me from behind his lashes, a pool of sadness in his eyes. I reach around him and slide my hand right into his back pocket. Wow, his ass is nice.

“Whoa!” He jumps back from me in shock but I manage to retrieve the phone from his pocket first. I add my name and number to his contacts.

“Call or text me when she is up and about again and ready for company—or, even if she’s not, just let me know how she’s doing, okay?”

I look up at him as I hand him back the phone. He still has a dumbstruck, almost mortified look on his face.

“What the hell was that?”

I roll my eyes as I walk to the door. “Jesus. I think I like you better when you’re drunk, which is too bad, because you promised me sober Tuck was much more charming.” That really makes his face contort in confusion. I just smile and close the door behind me as I leave.

I haven’t even made it to the car yet when my phone buzzes.

Tuck: *What do you mean you like me better drunk?*

Me: *Drunk Tuck wasn’t afraid of touching. Sober Tuck seems a little uptight.*

As I drive home, the phone buzzes again in my purse. I decide to let him sweat it out until I get home. It buzzes again as I pull onto my street. Walking up the stairs to my apartment, I finally pull it out.

Tuck: *What?! I am not uptight*

Tuck: *Now I know you like to reach into the pants of guys you just met, I can get on board.*

Me: *Technically, we didn’t just meet.*

Tuck: *I gathered. When did I drunkenly meet you?*

Me: *Last Saturday at Flanagan’s.*

Tuck: *Oh*

Then a few minutes later...

Tuck: *And I was touchy?*

He is too fun to mess with.

Me: *Your head did end up in my lap for a good fifteen minutes.*

Tuck: *And you liked it?*

This makes me laugh out loud.

Me: *Don't you wish you could remember?*

Tuck: *Drunk Tuck has all the fun. So you're telling me sober
Tuck is out of the running?*

Me: *Hmm...will sober Tuck remember me?*

Tuck: *Definitely*

Me: *I guess he's alright too, then*