

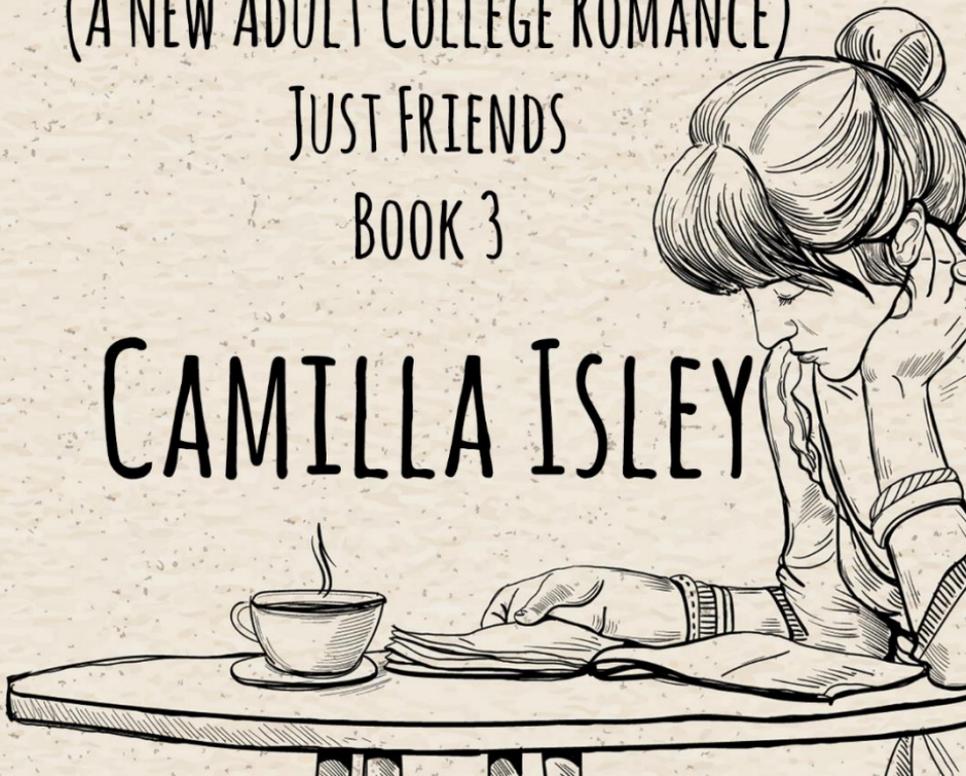
my best friend's boyfriend

(A NEW ADULT COLLEGE ROMANCE)

JUST FRIENDS

BOOK 3

CAMILLA ISLEY



One

Haley

Now

“I don’t have an umbrella,” Haley called, shouting to be heard over the rumbling summer storm. “Do you?”

“No,” David yelled back. “And I don’t care.”

He hurried past her out of the cover of the library porch and ran down the steps. When he reached the bottom, he tilted his face up and closed his eyes. In a matter of seconds, he was soaked.

“What are you doing?”

David looked at her from across the street, he was walking backward toward the center of Harvard Yard. “Come here. It’s only water.”

Haley didn’t know what possessed her, but she did as he asked. She ran off the porch and joined him in the middle of the park. The sensation of the rain on her skin was electrifying as she spun on her toes, arms opened wide. Haley looked upward and laughed and laughed, unable to stop—until she pirouetted right into David’s arms. The smile died on her lips as he caught her wrists and held her hands close to his chest, leaning his head down...

She tried to pull back, a ragged breath catching in her throat. “David, don’t.”

David’s lips brushed her forehead in a soft, wet kiss. “I wasn’t going to,” he whispered. “The next time we kiss, you’ll want to just as much as I do now...”

Two Madison

Two Months Ago

Madison fled the room and closed the door behind her, pausing a moment in the hall to catch her breath. Her hand was still wrapped around the doorknob, and her rib cage bobbed up and down in panicked gasps. Tears blurred her vision, and her temples were exploding with a mix of fear, shame, and the first signs of a killer hangover. Now that she was alone, the enormity of what she'd almost done hit her in the chest, guilt stabbing at her heart. *No*, she didn't have a second to spare thinking about the betrayal. Her number one priority was to get the hell out of her grandparents' house.

The Smithson country mansion was a two-story building with ten plus bedrooms and a three-acre garden with a pool. Even if the property belonged to her grandparents, Madison and her cousins had basically grown up here. But now the familiar walls of the upper-floor hall seemed to be pressing in on Madison, ready to crush her in their wake.

No one was up here, save for the people in the room she'd just left. Madison let go of the handle as if burnt by an electric shock and stumbled down the hall. She hopped down the stairs, careful not to trip on the hem of her bridesmaid dress, and paused on the last step to check the ground floor. The gardens were swarming with wedding guests, but the house itself was empty except for a few servers scurrying in and out

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of the kitchen.

All clear.

Running as fast as her high heels would allow, Madison covered the distance from the bottom of the stairs to the main door in a blur of lavender silk. Then she was out. No one had seen her, no one had called after her.

Good.

She could have handled a random relative or a guest, but if she'd run into Alice, or worse, her mom, they would have seen right through her. And what if she'd run into Georgiana?

The thought made her shiver, making her walk across the front-yard-turned-parking-lot all the more difficult. Her spiky heels kept sinking into the fine white gravel, causing her to stumble with every step as she traipsed toward her car. Madison considered taking off her shoes, but she doubted walking barefoot on pebbles would prove any more comfortable.

A few more wobbly steps got her to her SUV. With trembling hands, she fished her car keys out of her clutch to unlock it, then collapsed into the driver's seat. Only after hauling the door shut and putting a darkened window between her and the house did Madison finally feel safe.

She rested her head back against the seat, closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths. When she'd calmed down enough to drive, she kicked off her shoes, threw them onto the passenger seat, and put the car into drive. But the row of cars parked in front was too close for her to get out. She maneuvered the car back and forward a few times, trying to steer it at an angle that would allow her to exit, but the SUV was too big.

Losing any composure she'd just tried to recover, Madison started screaming and crying, hitting the wheel in violent

blows of desperation. Why did nothing in her life ever go according to plan?

“Why? WHY?” She kept shouting it over and over again. “WHY?”

When her throat began to hurt from the screaming, and her hands started to go numb from slamming her palms against leather-covered plastic, Madison instead gripped the wheel and desperately turned her head left and right in search of a solution. But she was one hundred percent trapped. What now? She couldn’t go back to the reception and seek out the cars’ owners. No, there were too many people on her “avoid-at-all-cost list” she didn’t want to risk bumping into: Ethan, Vicky, Rose, Alice, Tyler, Georgiana...

With a sinking heart, Madison realized she’d never be able to show her face at another family gathering ever again. Later; she’d think about all that *later*. Now she had more pressing issues to solve. On a whim, Madison glanced at the rearview mirror—behind the SUV was nothing but spotless green grass and an intricate flower bed.

Well, sorry, Grandma, Madison thought as she switched the gear to reverse.

She hit the accelerator with enough force to jump up the curb separating the lawn from the gravel and reversed into the flower bed. Pushing the gear back to drive, she pressed her foot all the way down and the car screeched forward, leaving deep tire marks in its wake. Her grandparents’ otherwise pristine front garden, ruined. She’d never hear the end of it if they found out it had been her, but at the moment she was too frenzied to care. Half of the family already hated her, so why not start working on pushing away the half that still cared about her?

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The drive home seemed to take forever. When Madison finally pulled up in front of her building, she was still feeling nauseous. The pounding at her temples had not stopped, and the stomach-churning anxiety gnawing at her guts had not passed. She parked the car in her reserved spot, killed the engine, grabbed her shoes and clutch, and got out of the SUV barefooted holding up the hem of her dress—without heels, the skirt was too long.

Halfway to her building, Madison stopped dead in her tracks. Jack Sullivan was sitting on the front steps with a forlorn expression—the look of someone who'd been waiting for a long time.

Perfect. Just freaking perfect!

If there was one person missing from Madison's "avoid list" at the wedding, it seemed the dude had decided to show up at her place instead. Oh, he wasn't here to see her—she knew that. Jack was here for Alice, her roommate. But the last thing Madison needed right now was to be reminded of another guy who'd used her for easy sex and then forgotten all about her. Of another time she'd been too quick to jump in bed with a dude she'd just met. Of another betrayal that had almost cost Madison one of her best friends.

Jack didn't look like he was about to go away anytime soon, and Madison was too exhausted to wait for him to leave. She needed a shower, her bed, and a Xanax. Keys clutched tightly in her hands, she marched forward.

"Madison, hey," Jack said, jumping up. "I was—"

"Leave me alone," she replied. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Oh, okay." He backed off a step. "Do you know when Alice will be home?"

"I said leave me alone!" Madison yelled, brushing past him

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and shoving her key into the lock. She let herself in, then slammed the door in Jack's shocked face.

To hell with him, too.

In her room, she wrestled with the zipper to get out of the gown, threw the shoes in a corner, and headed to the bathroom for a hot shower. Thankfully, the apartment was empty. No one around to ask her what had happened or to demand an explanation for her shitty behavior, which she still didn't begin to understand herself.

Yes, her life was a mess. Guys hated her, or used her and then threw her in the garbage once they'd had their fun. And her cousin Georgiana was the queen bee of bitches. *But nothing can justify the fact that I almost slept with Georgiana's husband on their wedding day.*

Was it because she'd wanted revenge? Or was she just so pathetic that even the most insignificant flattery from a handsome man made her lose control of herself?

"What's wrong with me?" Madison asked the empty bathroom.

She tried to wash away the shame and humiliation with the scorching water, rubbing her skin raw until it was all blotched and red. But no amount of scrubbing could cleanse the emotional stains off Madison's conscience.

Wrapped in a towel, wet hair loose on her shoulders, Madison collapsed on the bed ready to forget she existed. Unfortunately, the world wasn't as ready to forget her. Just as she was starting to doze off—thanks only to anti-anxiety drops—her phone rang. The muffled ringtone came from inside the clutch she'd dropped on the desk, only a few feet away from the bed but out of reach. Madison glared at the small bag, resentful someone had woken her when all she wanted was to be unconscious. She was pondering what would

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bother her more—to keep listening to the ringtone, or to get up and silence it—when the sound died on its own. *Finally, something goes right for once.*

But Madison had only just started getting cozy again on the pillows when the ringtone filled the room once more. This time, she dragged herself out of bed to find out who was calling.

Vicky.

Despite the way her cousin had reacted back at their grandparents' house—preferring comprehension over judgment after walking in on her sister's husband kissing a bridesmaid—Madison groaned. She stared at the phone still ringing in her hands, but couldn't bring herself to answer. The shame was too much. No matter if Vicky was the most understanding person in the world, Madison wasn't ready to talk to her. Filled with guilt, she let the call go unanswered, hoping her cousin would give up.

It didn't happen. Nothing ever happened the way Madison wished it to. When Vicky called again, Madison let that call, too, go unanswered. Then she turned off her phone and sank back on the bed, finally sure nothing would distract her from the void of her existence.

At some point she dozed off, and she must have slept for a few hours, because when she woke up the sun was starting to set. Madison straightened up against the headboard, her neck sore from falling asleep on wet hair. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. A shiver ran through her entire body; the air conditioning in the apartment was set on a low temperature, and the towel she'd been wearing had almost entirely slipped off.

Madison rubbed her arms with her hands, then climbed out of bed and went to fetch a pair of clean PJs. She was just

pulling on the bottom half when the buzzer rang. Had that been what had woken her up?

Gingerly, she shuffled through the living room to the entrance hall. Their building had video intercoms, and their camera showed a distressed Vicky fidgeting with the button. She was still wearing her bridesmaid dress—an exact replica of the lavender gown now adorning the floor of Madison’s room.

What now?

Madison didn’t want to talk to her, but Vicky must’ve been worried sick to rush all the way here as soon as the wedding had ended. I should have texted her to say I’d gotten home fine, but didn’t feel like talking, not left her hanging. Can I do anything right?

Well, there was no escape now. Vicky was here, probably wondering if Madison had died in a horrible car crash. Madison picked up the receiver just as the buzzer rang again.

“That’s my buzzer you’re abusing,” Haley’s voice drifted out of the intercom. “Can I help you?”

Madison’s eyes snapped to the small screen on the wall. Haley—her other roommate—had just walked into the frame, and was now talking to Vicky. The girls seemed unaware Madison could overhear them.

“Yeah, sorry,” Vicky said. “Hi. I’m Victoria Smithson, Madison’s cousin. I was looking for her.”

Haley gave Victoria a once-over. “Didn’t you see her at the wedding?”

“Yeah. But I wanted to make sure she got home okay.”

“Couldn’t you call?”

“Her phone is off,” Vicky said, looking annoyed. “Is there something wrong with me wanting to see my cousin?”

“No, of course not. It’s just that in the two years we’ve

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lived together, this is the first house visit any of her relatives have paid her. Odd, right? Especially since you've spent the entire day together." Haley's cold logic wasn't missing a beat. "Did something happen?"

"No!" Vicky was too quick to say, and Madison could pick up Haley's skeptical expression even on the tiny black-and-white screen. "I only wanted to check if she got home safe."

"Well, her car is in our reserved spot." Haley pointed to the side and then crossed her arms. "Doesn't seem damaged in any way, so we can assume everything's fine."

"I'm sorry, but do you have something against me?" Vicky snapped. "Why can't you just let me in?"

"It's nothing personal, but don't you think that if Madison wanted to talk to you she'd have her phone on? Or she would've let you in herself." Haley turned toward the camera with a pointed look.

Instinctively, Madison took a step back. It was as if Haley was staring right at her through the screen.

"Listen, something did happen," Vicky said. "It's a family matter, and I can't discuss it with you, but Madison and I need to talk."

"Yeah, the problem is I can't shake the feeling Madison is doing her best to avoid you. If something is bothering her, she can talk to me."

"No!" Vicky yelled, frustrated. "She can't talk about what happened with you."

"Uh-oh, why not? Is she forbidden? She's not a kid you can boss around, you know."

Vicky stuttered something intelligible, her embarrassment bound to confirm Haley's theory.

Madison's roommate instantly went on the aggressive.

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“Aren’t you supposed to be the good cousin?”

“I *am* the good cousin...”

Madison couldn’t watch any longer. “It’s okay, Haley,” she said into the speaker. Both heads snapped toward the intercom. “Vicky is only trying to help.”

“Oh, Madison.” Vicky stepped so close to the camera that her face took over the entire screen. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry I didn’t pick up the phone, I was too...” She couldn’t say, “*Ashamed.*” “Well, you know, I didn’t feel like talking.”

“Madison, you need to talk to someone,” Vicky insisted.

“Does it have to be you?”

Vicky turned sideways and looked at Haley. “You really stuck your neck out for my cousin.”

“She’s my best friend,” Haley said simply.

“Please take care of her tonight, and whatever she tells you, please keep it to yourself.”

“You can trust Haley,” Madison jumped in. “She won’t say anything.”

“Seems I’ve been outvoted,” Vicky sighed. “I’m going home, Madison. When you’re ready to talk, please call me, okay?”

“I promise. And, Vicky... thank you.”

Madison watched her cousin wave toward the camera as if to say she had nothing to be thanked for, and then Vicky turned on her heel and disappeared off the edge of the screen.

Haley frowned at the camera in an “explanation time” way, and said, “Since you’re there, why don’t you buzz me in?”

Madison took a deep breath, then pushed the button. This was not a conversation she was looking forward to.

Three

Madison

Madison positioned herself on a stool at the kitchen bar with a direct view of the entrance to wait for her roommate's arrival. The few minutes Haley took to ride up in the elevator and reach the apartment seemed to last forever. When she finally got in, Madison's heart was in her throat. Talking about the wedding fiasco would force her to admit what had happened, even to herself.

"So," Haley said instead of "*Hello.*" "Who do I have to beat?"

"Me, unfortunately," Madison replied, getting up from the stool. "I'm the villain in this one."

"You?" Haley hung her jacket on the rack behind the door and dropped her backpack on the carpet. "What did you do?"

Before confessing, Madison sought the comfort of a hug, clinging to Haley and collapsing on her shoulder in a fit of sobs. Haley caressed her hair and murmured soft, soothing words.

After Madison had calmed down enough, Haley said, "Get in bed, I'm making tea."

Madison followed the order and waited under the covers for Haley. She came in a few minutes later with two steaming mugs and settled next to her, sipping the tea and waiting for when Madison would be ready to talk.

Between muffled sobs, Madison managed to spill out everything. "At the wedding, I kissed the groom," she confessed. "Georgiana's husband. Ethan and Rose walked in

on us making out in one of the guest rooms. Ethan and Tyler began to fight and Rose was trying to stop Ethan from smashing Tyler's face when Vicky came into the room and took charge of everything. She gave Tyler a pep talk and tried to calm Ethan down, then she sent me home," Madison concluded, keeping her sad tale as short as she could. At the end, she turned toward Haley, prepared to find judgment and disappointment written all over her best friend's face and finding neither.

"Okay," Haley said. "Now I can see why Vicky was so worried about someone outside the family knowing."

"Because I'm a horrible person, the worst."

"You only made a mistake. Okay, a big one, but that doesn't make you a horrible person for life. What I don't understand is..." Haley frowned. "Were you aware the dude was the groom? I mean, were you out-of-your-mind-drunk or something?"

Madison wished she had at least plausible deniability. Wouldn't it be great to be able to say she was so drunk she hadn't realized who Tyler was? But she couldn't. "I knew," she confessed. "And I was tipsy, but definitely not drunk."

"So what made you do it? I know your other cousin is a total bitch, but you're not mean or vindictive. Did Georgiana do something bad today? Was kissing the groom a crazy revenge play?"

"Yes and no." Madison covered her face with her hands and shook her head. "Georgiana was her usual nasty self, but nothing out of the ordinary. She didn't say or do anything I haven't heard before... It's just that lately, with everything that's been going on, I haven't been myself."

"Why? What's been going on? What are you talking

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about?"

"The fight with Alice about Jack... Haley, she says she's forgiven me for sleeping with Jack, but she hasn't, not completely, at least, and I miss our friendship so much..."

"Alice!" Haley seemed to have just remembered they had another roommate. "Where is she?"

"Still at the wedding, or getting here. Ethan is giving her a ride; his girlfriend lives near campus."

Haley low-whistled. "Awkward."

"Another thing she can hate me for."

"Come on, Maddie, Alice doesn't hate you."

"I'll agree with you if she doesn't come home tonight." Madison mustered a small smile. "Jack was waiting for her downstairs when I got here, seemed like he'd been there all day..."

"Ah, I didn't see him, think he got her?"

"One can hope."

"Anyway, about today... I know you, Maddie. The fight with Alice wasn't enough to drive you to a make out session with your cousin's groom on their wedding day."

Madison looked away, blushing. "No, but it got me to mull over that period of my life... Freshman year?"

"What about it?"

"Nothing special. I just met a lot of assholes that year who weren't exactly nice to me, and neither was Jack." Madison threw her mug-free hand up before Haley could say anything. "I'm sure he's going to make Alice happy, it's clear he's in love with her, but back then..."

"No prince charming, I get it."

Madison scoffed. "Nowhere near."

"Maddie, you're circling around what's really upset you."

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“I’m only saying I was already in a fragile state of mind when David rocked the boat for good.”

Madison felt Haley stiffen at the mention of David—her boyfriend Scott’s brother.

“How?”

“Our breakup wasn’t pretty.”

Haley sighed. “Tell me everything.”

Madison stared at the wall, gaze unfocused, as a memory of that day danced before her eyes.

“I’ve told you a thousand times I don’t want to meet here,” David said as he opened his apartment door to find Madison standing on the other side. “Hello” and “come in” apparently forgotten.

“Yeah, but Scott is at my place with Haley, so I thought it’d be okay to hang here for a change,” Madison said. “Plus, I didn’t want to be there right now.”

David finally moved aside to let her in. “Why not?”

“Alice and I had this huge fight. It’s all solved in theory, but I’d still rather not be at home.”

“You and Alice? Not Haley?”

“No, why would I fight with Haley?”

“No reason, apparently.” David sounded annoyed—no, more like disappointed. Madison came closer to hug him, but he shuffled away. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Why? School’s over. You only have to wait for Commencement Day. Are you nervous?”

“No.”

Madison fished in her bag for a gift-wrapped book. “This is for you: my graduation present.”

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David arched an eyebrow as he took the gift. "What is it?"

"A collection of my favorite poems."

David chuckled at first. "Priceless, that's priceless." Then he laughed bitterly. "Can you really be that stupid?"

Madison flushed in mortification. "You don't have to read it if you don't want to."

David threw the book across the room, the wrapping paper tearing as it hit the wall. "I'm not my brother!" he shouted. "I don't care about the words of other tormented souls who've been dead for centuries."

"It's only a present, no need to be such a dick about it."

David pinched his nose. "This isn't working out."

"What isn't?"

"You, us, this."

Tears Madison had fought hard not to shed started to roll down her cheeks. "Why?"

"I can't stand you. All you do is talk, talk, talk"—David mimicked the action with his hand—"all the time. I can stand you only when you're asleep."

"What are you talking about? We've been dating for two months and you never said a thing."

"A mistake, clearly."

"If you hate me so much, why go out with me at all?"

"You had your purpose. Seems it's run out."

"What purpose?"

"Madison, I need you to leave." David pushed past her and reopened the door.

"But—"

"GET OUT!"

CAMILLA ISLEY

“I had no idea what to say, Haley, I basically fled the place... It was so humiliating,” Madison said, concluding her tale. “It made me feel... I don’t know, worthless.”

“You’re not worthless,” Haley hissed, pulling her into a tighter hug.

There was a fury in her friend’s words that made Madison lift her head to look Haley in the eye. “What’s up with you? You seem angrier than I am.”

“It’s David. I *hate* him.”

“Yeah, well... You tried to warn me about him. My bad I didn’t listen.”

“No, you did nothing wrong. He’s a jerk.”

“Yeah, but I’m not such an angel, remember? Anyway, between him, the Alice/Jack drama, and my family... I lost it today.”

“Tell me how it started, precisely.”

“With a ketchup spill.” Madison chuckled bitterly. “So ridiculous! During the buffet, I had ketchup on my fingers after eating a slider burger... I was looking for a napkin when I almost bumped into the bride. Georgiana was a mean bitch as always. She said something about me being a pig and how I was fatter than her even if she was three months pregnant.” Madison closed her eyes. “At that moment I hated her, Haley. I’d never felt a loathing so strong. She made me sick. I wanted to grab her by the hair and smash her face into the mayonnaise dip.”

Haley scoffed. “She sounds precious enough.”

“But of course I didn’t do anything; I just stood there and let her walk all over me. I smiled, cleaned my hands on a napkin, and got back to my table, which, being a bridesmaid, was the same as the bride and groom. For the entire lunch, I

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had to stomach Georgiana ranting on about how perfect her life was... Tyler was seated right in front of me and seemed equally rattled by Georgiana's ramblings. I caught him looking at me more than once and I was happy about it. It was like my little secret revenge against Georgiana. I was thinking, 'You might've forced him to marry you by getting pregnant accidentally-on-purpose, but he doesn't love you.'

"So you *wanted* to sleep with the groom?"

"Not really, I was happy with him eye-flirting with me, but then things got out of control. By the end of the meal I just needed to get out. I couldn't stand Georgiana a second longer, so I walked away to get some air. I was hiding in the garden behind a hedge when Tyler found me. He was being all nice and cute and charming, and I thought, 'Screw Georgiana.' I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to hurt myself and all my family... It's hard to explain. I knew I was doing something wrong and self-destructive, but I wanted to do it anyway."

"And all of this because of David?"

"David, Georgiana, Alice, Jack, my life in general..." *The fact that I'm in love with your boyfriend*, Madison added inside her head. "Your pick."

"But in the end, nothing unreparable happened," Haley said. "I mean, it could've been horrible, but it wasn't. Vicky seemed more worried than mad."

"You didn't see the glare in Ethan's eyes. He's never talking to me again."

"I'm sure that's not true. He'll come around if you leave him time to process." Haley squeezed her hand supportively. "He probably has no idea what a bitch his sister can be. Vicky will give him a reality check."

"Mmm, I wouldn't be so sure. Ethan has such a blind spot

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when it comes to Georgiana.”

“But not Vicky?”

“No, she loves her sister, but can still see Georgiana’s many flaws. Vicky is the only person in my family I feel close to.”

Haley grimaced. “I’m sorry I gave her such a hard time.”

“Thanks for being my champion, by the way.” Madison smiled at her friend. “I’m sure your protective attitude let Vicky know her nut-job of a cousin was in good hands.”

“You’re not a nut job.”

“Wish I could believe you.”

“But you had a hell of a day. Why don’t you try to sleep it off?”

“Will you stay with me?”

“Sure, let me just get changed.”

Haley went to her room and came back wearing a pastel rainbow unicorn onesie covered in little multicolor stars. She snuggled under the covers next to Madison and comforted her until she fell into a dreamless sleep.

Four

Alice

Alice woke up smiling. Even if her brain was still half-unconscious, the joy was too strong not to seep through all the layers of her mind. She was so used to waking up being the hard part, the moment when she'd have to remember it had all been a dream. That she wasn't Jack's girlfriend, that they hadn't made love all night, and that he'd never see her that way.

Not today.

Today reality surpassed all fantasies. Her toes curled under the sheets as memories of how they'd spent the night IRL flashed before her eyes. *Yeah, definitely better than every dream could ever hope to be.* For a brief moment she doubted herself; could that really all have happened? Slowly, Alice lifted her lids, eyes focusing at once on the very naked proof that, yes, it had been real.

Jack was lying on the bed next to her. Head tilted to the side on the pillow, dark hair ruffled in all directions, and not a sock on his body. She ran her fingertips down the length of his collarbone and arm, all the way to his wrist and back up. She needed to touch as well as see before she could let herself believe Jack was in love with her after they'd been just friends for three years.

A pang of fear made her chest contract. How would their relationship change now? How would they transition into being boyfriend and girlfriend? Would everything be different? Better? Worse? Would sex ruin everything?

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Her mental rant was interrupted when Jack opened one eyelid to peek at her sideways. “Ice, I can hear you thinking too much.”

“I’m not.”

Jack turned sideways to stare at her properly, elbow bent on the pillow, head propped on his hand. “So you weren’t getting all inside your head worrying about how our friendship is ruined forever, and how we’re doomed, and wondering how long before we break up?”

“No?”

“Good.” He pushed a lock of hair away from her face. “Because we’re never breaking up.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I love you.”

Alice’s insides melted. It wasn’t the first time he’d told her, but the words were still so new on his lips. She reached up to touch his face, again wanting to make sure he was real and not just a dream. “I love you, too,” she whispered back.

Jack pulled her into his arms. “Now that you’re mine, I’m never letting you go, Ice. Deal?”

“Deal.” Alice giggled. “But at some point, you’ll have to let me go home.”

“Why?”

Alice pointed to the floor, where her cocktail dress from the wedding lay in a pool of blush chiffon. “As lovely as that dress is, I can’t go around all day wearing it.”

Jack’s mouth curled at the corners. “Fine by me. I prefer you naked anyway.”

“You have a roommate,” Alice chided. “And I need to check on Blue. Remember the little guy who introduced us?”

“Remind me to buy him some expensive bunny treats.”

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Jack smiled. "Can you have breakfast in a cocktail dress?"

Alice's stomach grumbled in reply. "Starbucks' patrons don't judge, and I'm starving."

She'd eaten plenty at the wedding, but they'd skipped dinner altogether last night. They'd been too busy doing... what Jack was starting to do now...

Alice's body tingled under his touch, and with a playful smile, she said, "Now, now. Just because you got lucky once..."

"Oh, yeah?"

Alice squirmed under his gaze.

Jack's grin was wicked. "So it was just a one-off?"

Whatever sassy reply Alice was trying to come up with was silenced by Jack's lips. Oh, gosh, he was *so* going to get lucky any time he wanted.

Alice was fighting hard not to sing her joy to the world as she unlocked the door of her apartment. With a full belly, the phantom of Jack's lips all over her body, the more visible trail of beard burns all over her face and neck, and the echo of those simple, life-changing words—*I love you*—ringing in her ears, Alice was walking on a cloud and sporting a smile so wide her cheeks ached.

The smile, however, was short-lived. It died on her lips as she spotted Haley's anxious expression. Her roommate was standing in the living room holding her chin with one hand in a pensive pose. When she heard Alice come in, instead of saying "*Hello*" Haley pressed a finger to her lips and pointed at Madison's door with her other hand.

"What's going on?" Alice whispered. Haley closed the

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distance between them and made to push her back out the door, but Alice resisted. “Wait, I have to get changed and take a shower.”

“The shower can wait,” Haley whispered back. “We need to talk. Put something on and meet me on the roof. Please be quiet, I don’t want Madison to wake up.”

Begrudgingly, Alice shuffled into her room and changed into a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. She checked Blue’s cage. It had already been cleaned and the bunny fed. Well, even if they didn’t let her shower, at least her roommates were good for something.

That’s when Alice remembered Madison had come home from the wedding in tears yesterday and she’d left Haley to deal with the mess, not sparing the matter a second thought until now. She hadn’t even texted Madison to ask her how she was. And from Haley’s urgency, the issue was far from solved.

I’m a horrible friend.

Now filled with worry, Alice hurried to the rooftop.

“What’s going on?” she asked as soon as she set foot outside.

Haley turned to face her, eyes positively murderous. “I’m going to kill David Williams. I hate him, Alice, I hate him so much.”

“Why? What happened? What did he do?”

Haley sighed. “I’ve been authorized to tell you everything, since Madison wants you to know, but she’s not in the right state of mind to repeat the whole story...”

The more Haley talked, the more Alice started to connect all the dots from the previous day and weeks. The blue shadows under Madison’s eyes. Her pale face, newly cynical view on weddings, and general subdued attitude. Madison pretending the breakup with David had been unimportant, and

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her refusal to discuss it. Alice had blamed Madison's sudden reticence on their argument over Jack, but deep down she'd known something else had to have happened. It seemed David Williams had happened! And one of her best friends—*yours truly*—abandoning Madison at a time of need had happened. Even after she'd learned about their breakup, Alice hadn't asked, because her pride and heart were still sore after discovering Jack and Madison had had a one-night stand in freshman year. And Haley had probably been too clueless as usual to notice—they usually had to spell things out for her where people's feelings were concerned. Haley could talk to robots, but she found people much harder to read.

As Haley wrapped up the full story, more pieces fell into place. Madison's sudden disappearance from the wedding the day before. Ethan, Vicky, and Rose confabulating in a close circle. Ethan's homicidal expression when he looked at Tyler. And the groom's pale and frazzled appearance.

What. A. Mess. No wonder Ethan was giving me attitude yesterday, *Alice thought. At least now it made sense.*

"...And then there's Scott," Haley concluded. "Madison likes him more than she's letting on, doesn't she?"

Well, ding-dong, Haley. That took you long enough to grasp.

"Mmm," was all Alice mumbled, not wanting to confirm Haley's fears, regardless of how well-founded they might be.

"Mmm?" Haley turned toward her, crossing her arms over her chest. "Is that all you have to say?"

No, *Alice thought.* I want to tell you how happy I am. How crazily, stupidly in love I feel. I want to savor the joy at least for twenty-four hours without being pulled into more drama.

Alice chided her inner self for being so selfish. One of her

friends was in pain and all messed up. No matter what Madison had failed to confess, she'd always been there to support Alice through every Jack crisis. They had spent endless movie nights in whenever Jack had a new date and Alice was too depressed to go out. And Madison hated watching TV, she only loved books.

"We have to do something," Haley insisted.

"Yeah, but..." Alice pulled her hair up into a ponytail. "What *can* we do? I mean, other than being around and being supportive?"

"I don't know, Alice. I feel so guilty. She's in love with Scott, isn't she?"

"I can't honestly say," Alice said vaguely.

Haley threw her a no-bullshit look.

"Okay," Alice conceded. "I suspect she's more into Scott than she's letting on."

"Wonderful!" Haley pressed her hands to her temples.

"Hey, it's not your fault. You don't have to feel guilty about dating him."

"But how could I not? I'm his girlfriend. Remember how much you used to hate Jack's girlfriends? How can Madison stand to live with me?"

"First, those are a lot of questions, and second, I'm sure Madison doesn't hate you."

"Would you not hate me? Just a few weeks ago you wanted to claw her eyes out for sleeping with Jack, *once*, three years ago. And I've been with Scott for the past six months, right in her face! And I'm not even considering giving him up because I'm just so in love with him... but then, it's impossible not to feel guilty about how happy I am."

Alice nudged Haley shoulder-to-shoulder. "So is Scott *the*

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one?”

Her friend smiled. “I suspect he might be. I’ve never felt this way for anyone.”

“Not even for the infamous masked dude from last summer?”

“Please don’t remind me about that.” Haley hid her face behind her hands. “I dance with a masked stranger at a party, kiss him, never learn his name, and spend the next six months obsessing over him. How lame is that?”

“Sounded pretty romantic when you were telling us the story.” Alice started talking using what she called a “movie trailer” voice. “A lonely dame at a ball rescued by a mysterious masked gentleman who sweeps her off her feet, leading her in a passionate dance—”

“He was a horrible dancer.”

“It’s the thought that counts.” Alice continued talking in her movie voice. “A romantic stroll in the gardens under a thousand fairy lights, and then, at the stroke of midnight, an epic kiss...”

Haley laughed at her theatrics, but said, “It wasn’t midnight, I’m no Cinderella, and it’s the dude who fled the ball without telling me his name. Sometimes I even wonder if that night was real. You know when something seems so ‘too good to be true’ that you ask yourself if it wasn’t all a dream?”

Haley had just described how Alice had woken up that morning, and she couldn’t suppress the little smirk that escaped her lips. “I know.”

Haley caught the smile and flashed a grin back. “Tell me, Miss Brown, are those beard burns all over your face?”

Alice couldn’t keep it inside any longer, she told Haley everything. How Jack had waited for her in front of their

building, how he'd told her he was in love with her, and how they'd spent the night and the best part of the morning.

"Great!" Haley scoffed sarcastically. "So we're both the happiest we've ever been and our best friend is at an all-time low. Alice, I love Scott so much... and he loves me back... a-and I don't know how to shield Madison from all that."

"For one, we don't rub our happiness in her face."

"And for two?"

"We have to avoid becoming two of those cheesy couples that do things only in pairs. We have to keep going out with a wider group of people—singles and couples—and include Madison as much as possible. And when she has a low day and needs a girls' night in, we tell the beloved boyfriends to beat it."

"And you think that will be enough?"

Alice shrugged. "It's the best we can do; we can't fix her love life for her. When Madison's ready, she'll find the right guy. In the meantime, our job is to be around as much as possible and to force Madison to be social."

"She likes parties more than I do."

"True, but what guys do you usually pick up at parties?"

"The wrong kind. Gotcha."

"Anyway, there won't be many parties, at least for a while." Alice sighed. "Not with almost everyone gone for the summer."

"Right. Only the best are left." Haley smiled, staring at the Boston skyline in the distance. "I could never spend a whole summer home."

"Me neither, I'd be bored out of my mind."

"And also lovesick over Jack."

"Especially lovesick over Jack." Alice flashed her friend a

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megawatt smile. "So how's your schedule for summer break? Are you going to be super busy?"

"Nah." Haley toyed with a lock of hair, curling it around her fingers. "I'm taking three summer courses, but I should be able to stick around a lot. You?"

"Same for me. I'm doing an internship at a pharmaceutical company downtown, but it's mornings only." Alice grinned. "Jack applied for the same program without telling me, you know, when we weren't speaking..."

"I like his style."

"Yeah, me too. You know what Madison is doing?"

"A literary research project for her department."

"And Scott?"

"He applied for a few internships, something to do with pre-med school. But no answers so far, I think. We haven't really discussed it yet."

"Okay, so everyone will be here for the summer," Alice said. "Now that we have a plan, can I go shower?"

"Yeah, thanks for the pep talk." Haley pulled her into a hug and added jokingly, "Now you can go wash Jack off."

They both laughed and stumbled toward the elevator, still hugging each other. They were a team; they could solve any problem if they stuck together.

Five

Haley

Haley spent Sunday at home with her roommates. They baked cookies together, and Haley and Alice made an effort to avoid any boy talk. The strain was clear on Alice's part; she was bursting with happiness and it was obvious she had to check herself not to smile and hum love tunes under her breath 24/7. For her part, Madison put on a brave face and let them organize the day for her.

But being a good friend had meant ditching her boyfriend for most of the weekend. So as she knocked on Scott's door early on Monday afternoon, Haley was super eager to jump into his arms.

When he came to open the door, Haley's breath caught in her chest.

That face. Those eyes. That mouth.

Despite the fact that they'd been dating for six months, he still had that effect on her. Today he was wearing a bright blue tank top that made his muscled arms stand out, a pair of white basketball shorts, and his feet were bare on the wooden floor. His dirty blonde hair was already streaked golden from the first real sun of summer, and he'd never looked better.

Scott smiled. "Hey."

The smile brightened his entire face, from his sexy lips to his emerald green eyes.

"Hey, you," Haley breathed when Scott hugged her.

He smelled like he always did: soapy, manly, delicious. But when Haley pressed her face into Scott's chest, guilt

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suddenly flared through her. Haley was here in his arms, and Madison was at home, *alone*. They were in love with the same guy, and that was a problem without a solution. One of them would always end up being hurt. Unless, of course, one of them stopped loving him.

But how could you not love Scott? It was inconceivable. He was gorgeous, smart, kind, and sexy as hell. He was also a bookworm like Madison. They'd been sharing the same Lit classes for years. Haley could just picture her best friend adoring Scott from a distance, too shy to talk to him. She was equally glad and sad Madison had never mustered the courage to speak to Scott. If she had, Scott could've been Madison's boyfriend now; they had so much in common. They both were words people, whereas Haley preferred numbers.

But, hey, opposites attract.

And as guilty as Haley felt, there was no way she would ever give up Scott.

He pulled her into the apartment and shut the door, his lips slowly making their way from her neck to her mouth.

"It's only been a day, but I've missed you," Scott whispered in her ear.

Haley mumbled something back, too distracted by the cute, tiny freckles scattered all over his shoulders. All she wanted to do now was take off his top and feel that hard chest pressed against hers as she dug her nails into his muscled back. She started kissing the freckles, one by one. And Scott must've been a mind reader, because in a swift move he took off the tank top, draping it over his other shoulder.

"Easy, tiger," Haley joked, pushing him toward his room all the same.

He flashed her a grin. "From the way you're looking at me, I thought you were the tiger."

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Yeah, that was exactly how she felt. Like a hungry cat ready to pounce.

Haley kicked the door shut and pushed Scott onto the bed. Then she almost jumped into his arms, losing herself in the kisses of the boy she loved so much. And at that moment there wasn't space for anyone else in her mind. There were only Scott and his kisses.

The guilt waited until a couple of hours later to sneak back into Haley's mind and start whispering in her ear about how selfish she was for being so utterly happy.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Scott asked.

They were cozied up on his bed. Haley had stolen his tank top—she loved wearing his clothes—which reached almost to her knees.

Basketball players are tall. Haley winked to herself for dating one who, at present, was left shirtless next to her.

Haley shuffled across the bed and dropped her head onto that beautiful, smooth-skinned chest. "Yes, sorry." She kissed one of his flat-muscled pectorals. "I'm just a little distracted."

A little distracted. That's one way of putting it.

Haley was positively torn between two loyalties. On one side stood Scott. She wanted to tell him everything, not to keep secrets from him. But then there was Madison. Haley couldn't expose her friend's feelings to him. If the roles were reversed, Haley would be humiliated by his knowledge. Neither could she discuss how disgusting his brother's behavior toward Madison had been when David had dumped her. She had to put Madison's need for privacy before anything else; her best friend was fragile and needed to be protected. But it still

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sucked not being able to tell her boyfriend why she was in such a bad mood.

The front door slammed shut and Haley jolted in Scott's arms.

"Sounds like my charming roommate is home," Scott said.

The risk of bumping into David had been a calculated one when Haley had asked Scott to meet at his place. Better than Madison running into Scott at their apartment. Plus, Haley couldn't make love to Scott with Madison in the adjoining room. It would break whatever was left of her friend's heart.

"When is he moving out?" Haley asked. "I mean, isn't school over? Shouldn't he get on with his life, get a job somewhere, or something?"

Scott sighed. "I'm afraid that's not David's plan."

"What do you mean?"

"He's doing a summer internship at an investment bank in downtown Boston, and he's starting his MBA at Harvard Business School in the fall."

"So he'll be here for another two years."

"Yep."

"And he's not moving out..."

"Nope. But at least he won't be on the basketball team any longer. I'll see him less than ever and so will you especially..."

It'd better be that way.

Haley wasn't sure she could control her rage around David. There was something in him that made her go to extremes. She'd never thought she'd be able to loathe someone, *really hate*, but David had proved her wrong.

"...Would you want to go?"

Where?

Scott had kept on talking and was now looking at her

expectantly. He wore a little frown, but was trying hard to smile as if he wanted to be casual about what he was asking, when in fact it was something he cared deeply about. But *what* was he asking?

“Go where? I’m sorry, I got lost in thought again.” Haley forced herself to stop twirling her hair and pay attention. “Where are you going?”

“Damn, you really are distracted.” Scott’s face fell with disappointment. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell me what it’s about?”

“I’m sure,” Haley said, and made a move-on-with-what-you-were-saying gesture while squeezing his hand to show him her worries did not concern their relationship.

Scott rolled his eyes, but he let it go. “I said that you’ll have to see even less of my brother if you come to California with me this summer.”

Haley’s chest contracted with sudden fear. “Since when are you spending the summer in California?” Haley disentangled herself from Scott’s arms to stare at him.

“I wasn’t until this morning.”

“What happened this morning?”

“I got this.” Scott handed her his phone, an email opened on the screen.

Haley quickly skimmed the text. It was an official acceptance notice for Scott to shadow a certain Dr. Kendrick Allen, a neurological surgeon.

“I know it’s last minute,” Scott said as Haley kept reading the details of the email. The internship started on June 20—*only two weeks from today*—and ended on August 26, the week before the fall term started. *Two months without Scott.* “But I never expected Dr. Allen to accept my application. This

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guy is like the best in his field, he's leading this revolutionary research program on neuro—”

“I can't come,” Haley interrupted him. “You know I'm taking summer courses.”

“I thought you were just considering it. You never told me you actually enrolled.” Scott's eyes widened. “Summer School, huh?”

Haley stared at the bedspread, her finger picking at a loose thread. She knew Summer School sounded uncool. “I like the different crowd.” She shrugged. “And there's always interesting people from all over the world with all these unique backgrounds and coding experience.”

Oh, hell. Did that come out as lame and geeky as it sounded in my head?

Scott lifted her chin with a finger. “Well, that settles it, then. I'm not going.”

“But it's an incredible opportunity.”

“I have a backup internship in Boston. I never thought Dr. Allen would pick me.”

“Because he's the best.”

“He is, but the doctor here in Boston is amazing too.”

“But not *as* great.” Haley sighed. She didn't want Scott to go. But for him to lose such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because of her... “Two months isn't a long time,” she lied.

Two months without him would stretch on for an eternity.

“Haley Thomas, I'm not going anywhere without you,” Scott declared. “I love you, and I don't want to spend a single day apart. End of story.”

A warm fuzz threatened to turn Haley's inside to jelly. Scott's gaze was so intense, and he sounded so sure. She stared at the phone still clutched in her hand. Scott had until Friday to accept—or refuse. The offer would stand for four more

days.

“Don’t reply today,” she said. He was about to protest, but she stopped him. “Please, take all the time you have to think about it. I want you to be sure. An opportunity like this is too important for you, for your future career. Take at least a couple of days to think it over.”

“I will, but I’m not moving to California without you.”

Dating varsity basketball players had its cons. Haley would’ve loved to spend the entire evening with Scott, but tonight he had to go meet a few of his teammates for an outdoor basketball game. Last winter, basketball had been the silent third wheel in their relationship and even now that the official Harvard Crimson team training had stopped for summer break, the game was still a huge part of Scott’s life. He spent almost as much time training now as during the regular season, and never missed an opportunity to play.

So, after spending every last possible second with Scott, Haley was running late. She’d just left his apartment and was hurrying home, wondering why phones had the special ability to lose themselves inside a woman’s bag.

Haley rummaged again in her maxi bag, but her hands kept coming in contact with all sorts of different things; everything but a phone. And she needed to call her mom ASAP. She could picture her mother already staring at her smartphone, fretting as she waited for Haley’s call.

Miranda Thomas was the techiest of her parents and the one who could always be relied upon to pick up whenever Haley called. She would then put the call on speaker for Haley’s dad to take part. Weekly calls were Haley’s special

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ritual with her mom and dad. She rang them every Monday and Friday night—and tried to never miss an appointment.

Haley rattled her bag and attempted another blind search, but with all the stuff cluttered inside, she couldn't find the phone. Especially not while she was speed-walking across campus.

Frustrated, she stopped near a bench and, with a sigh, knelt next to it and up-ended the overfilled bag onto the seat. When something disappeared into the folds of her maxi bag, there was no other way of luring it out. But even after a forensic examination of all the objects scattered on the bench seat, her phone was still MIA.

A flashback of taking the phone out of her bag to check her texts and dropping it on Scott's nightstand shot through Haley's head. Unfortunately, there was no follow-up memory of taking the phone from the night table and putting it back into the bag.

Haley groaned, swatting the bench.

The phone was at Scott's apartment, and Scott was at a game that would last at least two hours, maybe more. But Haley had to call her mom—she checked her watch—*right now*.

This left only one solution. After all, the other Williams brother *was* at home. Haley groaned again. She really didn't want to confront David. Not today. Not ever. But what other choice did she have? She could hurry home and Skype her parents instead, but the thought of her phone being alone in the same house as David Williams gave her the creeps. And since her mom would probably call her way before she could get home and in front of a computer, David would know the phone was there because he'd hear it ringing.

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Shoving everything back into her bag with a sweep of her arm, Haley got up and hurried back toward Scott's house.

Six

Haley

“I forgot my phone,” Haley said, skipping the pleasantries and barging into the apartment past David.

“Hello, Sunshine,” he said, using his usual mocking tone. “Would you like to come in?”

“I’m just picking up my phone and then I’m gone.”

“You mean this?”

Haley stopped halfway toward Scott’s room and turned around. David stood there looking at her with an arrogant, self-satisfied face that demanded to be slapped. An infuriating lopsided grin was stamped on his cruel lips. He must’ve picked up her phone from somewhere because he was wiggling it tantalizingly between his thumb and index finger.

She marched back to where he was standing. “Give it back.” Haley made to grab the phone, but he raised his arms over his head, way out of her reach.

Damn basketball players and their being super tall—*or ex-basketball players, in this case.*

“Say please,” David taunted.

Haley gave up the fight to reach the phone and stared him down. “David, stop it. I need to call my mom; I don’t want her to worry.”

“Miranda? Looovely lady.”

“How do you know my mother’s name?”

“Before you got here, she’d already called three times and, as you said, we wouldn’t want the lovely Miranda to get worried, so I picked up and acted voicemail. You’re

welcome.”

“You looked into my phone?”

David scoffed. “Don’t worry; your lovey-dovey, emoji-filled texts with my brother would be too boring for me to spy on.”

“I want my phone back.”

He took a step forward so that now he was towering over her, crowding her space, his gaze intense. “Say. Please.”

A familiar scent Haley couldn’t quite place—one associated with a positive memory—filled her nostrils. Confused, Haley backed away instinctively. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” David asked, acting all innocent.

“The flirty eyes thing, and the charming act... I want nothing to do with you.”

His eyes flared bluer, if that was even possible. “Now,” he said, tossing her the phone. Haley caught it and quickly texted her mom to say she’d call her later. All the while David kept talking. “There’s really no need to be rude. If you’re mad you can’t withstand my charms, that’s your problem, darling.”

“Your charms?” Haley hissed, pressing Send and fixing her narrowed gaze on him. “What charms? Yeah, you’ve pretty eyes and a pretty face, but that’s it. You’re mean and cruel for no reason. The way you hurt Madison makes me sick, you—”

“Your friend is just another stupid girl in love with my sappy brother. Madison didn’t care about me enough for me to really hurt her. She used me as a rebound, same as I did her. But speaking of hurting Blondie...” David snapped his fingers, then pointed one at her. “I bet your relationship with dear old Scotty is doing more damage to her right now than I ever could.”

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A blow too close to home. Haley was at a loss for words.

“Ooh.” David smiled, satisfied. “Seems I’ve touched a sore point. I apologize, Sunshine.”

Rage flared in Haley’s chest. “You don’t even try to deny you used her. How can you be so arrogant after everything you’ve done? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“You confuse me for someone who cares about your opinion, little miss ‘I like to judge.’” His next words came out in a low hiss. “None of this matters to me. None of it.”

“Then why do you even bother to tease me all the time?”

“Oh, that?” David asked, his voice mocking again. “That’s just for fun. I enjoy watching how hard you try to deny the obvious chemistry between us.”

“There’s no chemistry between us,” Haley spat. “I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole if you were the last guy on earth.”

“Might be too late for that, my dear.”

“What do you mean?”

David started walking toward her, slowly, deliberately. Haley backed away until her shoulders came in contact with the living room wall. David stopped a few steps short of where she was standing and covered the top half of his face with his hands. He lifted the index finger of each hand to show only his eyes through the narrow gap, giving the impression he was looking at her through a mask.

And then he bowed.

“Would you do me the honor of this dance?”

The guy bowing in front of Haley was staring up at her through an elaborate black mask. His eyes were a dazzling

electric blue and the corner of his mouth was turned up in a lopsided grin that promised danger.

“But of course.” Haley did a coy little curtsy and took the stranger’s hand. “Mister...?”

“Giving you my name would defy the purpose of us wearing masks,” the man said, taking her hand and straightening his back. He was remarkably tall, a good full head taller than Haley.

“My gentle sir, you find me at a disadvantage,” she said, keeping up the pretense of speaking like gents and dames while he led her toward the dance floor. “How is it fair when my face is practically bare and yours almost entirely covered?”

Haley’s mask for the Venetian Masquerade Ball consisted of a few strategically placed stick-on Swarovski crystals scattered around her eyes. But the stranger’s mask covered the majority of his face, leaving only his lips visible. And those sparkly blue eyes.

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “Then I’m all the luckier for it.”

If the costume party had been dull up until the mysterious man’s appearance—and definitely not worth the investment in her rented princess gown or the ticket’s cost—it seemed the night could still turn around.

Keeping at the edges of the dancing crowd, they started swirling in time with the music. Neither of them had a clear idea of what they were doing, but Haley hoped her long skirt made enough of a show to cover for their poor dancing skills. Not that she cared much, anyway; she was too entranced by the blue eyes of the man leading her so inexpertly in what had officially become the most romantic dance of her life.

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Not being able to see the guy's face was both enticing and infuriating. He could be anyone and no one. And the only detail the mask didn't leave to the imagination—his full lips—didn't help steady Haley's breath. A hot flush warmed her skin; she had become too sensitive to the touch of one of his hands on the small of her back. And to his other hand holding hers, to the way sharp electric tingles shot down her arm from where their skin touched.

"I've never seen eyes as green as yours," he said.

Haley wanted to reply that the blue of his was no joke either, but it seemed corny to repeat the same compliment he'd just paid her. "You have pretty eyes, too," she said, almost out of breath.

His gaze was so intense it was squeezing the air out of Haley's lungs. They didn't say much afterward; in fact, they didn't speak at all. Haley and her masked stranger stared wordlessly into each other's eyes, green into blue, while they kept doing a poor impression of a waltz.

Haley wasn't able to explain the force of the insta-connection, the way it made her pulse race and her breath short. The music, the costumes, the elegant hall; it all seemed to disappear, reducing Haley's world to those blue eyes and full lips and the thousand faces that could be hiding under the black mask.

Maybe love at first sight was a thing. Even if it turned out she had no idea who this man was, she still felt an ease, a sense of belonging, that she'd hardly ever experienced with any of her exes.

Distracted by her own thoughts, Haley stepped on the stranger's toes.

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He winced under the mask and said, "What do you say we take a stroll outside? It's getting scorching hot in here." He rolled a finger on the inside of his shirt's collar. "And we've demonstrated our awful dancing skills enough for one night."

Haley swatted him playfully. "Who are you calling an awful dancer?"

He smiled wickedly and offered her his elbow. Haley linked their arms together and followed him outside, where the temperature was a bit cooler thanks to a crisp evening breeze abating the late summer heat.

The villa where the party was being hosted resembled more a European palace out of a fairy tale than a countryside mansion in Massachusetts. With its imposing size, light brick architecture, turrets, and large windows, it was more castle than house. And its gardens were just as stylish, a mix of flower beds and shrubs organized in symmetric geometrical patterns and lit with a thousand fairy lights.

There was a small gazebo in the center of the garden, a wrought iron structure covered in white roses silhouetted against the dark night sky. Without speaking, they both headed toward the flowery cage. It seemed like a good place to talk—or not talk.

When they stopped underneath the arch, the tension in Haley's body spiked. She felt edgier than the first time she'd kissed someone.

"You make me nervous," she told the stranger.

He held both her hands close to his chest as he faced her. "Good nervous or bad nervous?"

"Good, I think."

He tilted his head at her questioningly, and Haley started to over-talk. "I don't know your name or what your face looks

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like, but I feel like I've known you forever. Can you at least tell me if you're from around here? Will I see you again after tonight?"

"I go to school in Cambridge. I'm about to start senior year."

"Me too. You go to Harvard? What's your major?"

"Shh..." He pressed a finger to her lips. "So many questions..."

Haley kissed the finger in what she hoped was a sensual gesture, then guided his hand down to rest on her waist. "So little answers..."

The charming stranger joined both his hands behind her back and pulled her against his body. Less than an inch separated their faces now. For the first time, Haley's nostrils filled with his scent—a mix of sun-kissed skin and a citrus aroma, bergamot or orange. A fragrance that was woody, citrusy, and salty at the same time. It made her think of a sunny day on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean. It's what Haley imagined all those male models from D&G perfume commercials must smell like.

The mysterious man spared her the time to take another ragged breath before he closed the distance between them. Their lips finally connected, and despite them not dancing anymore, the world still seemed to spin around them. She clung to him—to his chest, to his shoulders, to his neck—the only firm point in a dizzy, swaying universe. The kiss didn't start softly or tentatively; like everything else between them so far, it was forceful right from the beginning. Not just intense, but deep, powerful, passionate... and somewhat more meaningful than every kiss Haley had ever given or received.

CAMILLA ISLEY

In the arms of this mysterious man, Haley felt helpless and secure at the same time.

When he let go of her mouth, he left a trail of gentle kisses down her neck, then brushed a thumb down her cheek and over her lower lip. Haley wasn't sure she was made of flesh and bones any longer; she was worried her body might melt under the stranger's touch.

She was about to pull his face down to hers once more when angry shouts and a crashing sound reached them from inside the house. Haley turned to check what the commotion was and caught sight of several security guards running after another impressively tall guy. The "fugitive" was heading in their direction.

"Oh-ho," the masked stranger said, "looks like we've been found out."

"Why? You know that guy?"

"Yep, we came together."

"What did you do?"

"We aren't exactly invited guests to this party."

"How did you even get in??" Haley asked.

"Climbed over the fence. And now I have to go."

"But—" Haley began. Her mystery man cut her off by pulling her into a passionate but hurried kiss. She was still collecting herself when he winked, stepped away, and walked backward toward the gate.

The runaway friend had now almost reached them; as he raced toward the gazebo, he yelled, "We gotta beat it, my man!"

The masked stranger bowed one more time to Haley, wearing that impossibly sexy, wicked grin, and then he was running away.

MY BEST FRIEND'S BOYFRIEND

“Wait!” she shouted as she watched him go. “You haven’t even told me your name...”

Still running, the unknown man who had stolen Haley’s heart turned his head and smiled again, his lips forming an answer, the sound of which got lost among the shouts of the security guards chasing after him...

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my best friend's boyfriend

Camilla is an engineer turned writer after she quit her job to follow her husband on an adventure abroad.

She's a cat lover, coffee addict, and shoe hoarder. Besides writing, she loves reading—duh!—cooking, watching bad TV, and going to the movies—popcorn, please. She's a bit of a foodie, nothing too serious. A keen traveler, Camilla knows mosquitoes play a role in the ecosystem, and she doesn't want to starve all those frog princes out there, but she could really live without them.

You can find out more about her here: www.camillaisley.com and by following her on Twitter.

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