

i don't want to be friends

(A NEW ADULT COLLEGE ROMANCE)

JUST FRIENDS

BOOK 3

CAMILLA ISLEY



One

David

She wasn't coming.

David cast another furtive look at his watch. At a quarter past eight, Haley was an hour and fifteen minutes late. No, not late, because she'd never meant to come. Earlier, the whole "meet me, I'll be there waiting for you regardless" bit had seemed a wonderful idea when he'd proposed it to her. Teasing. Romantic. At least, when he'd been so sure she'd show up. Now, he'd turned into a sorry dude: David—*Pathetic*—Williams, stood up by the girl of his dreams, drinking alone in a bar.

What a waste of a Saturday night.

David had come to The Plough and the Stars early. He'd ordered his first beer at six forty-five and drank it in small sips, pacing himself, not wanting to be tipsy when Haley arrived. His second beer had gone down a lot faster. By now, he'd lost count of the rounds.

"Can you close my tab?" he asked the bartender.

The bartender nodded efficiently. He walked to the cash register and came back with David's credit card and a bill to sign. David wrote his name on the receipt, his handwriting more flourished than when he was sober. Then he stumbled off his stool, drained the last two inches of lukewarm beer in his glass, and dropped it on the counter with more force than he'd intended.

"Sorry," David apologized.

The barman curled his upper lip and gave David an

unimpressed look as he swiped the glass off the counter without comment, probably accustomed to sloppy drunks.

Taken aback by the barman's evident contempt, David's hands curled into fists as icy rage flooded his system. He was itching for a fight, but the last lucid part of his brain nagged at him that causing a brawl in a bar near campus was not the smartest idea. And he wasn't really angry at the bartender, anyway. A pair of green eyes flashed in his mind. No, he was definitely mad at someone else.

Outside the pub, hot air dripping with humidity blew in David's face, doing nothing to help him sober up. Why did Boston have to turn into a swamp every August? With a disgusted wince, David stared up at the brick buildings of Cambridge, trying to orient himself. After taking a few tentative steps up Massachusetts Avenue, he realized he was heading the wrong way and turned around, dragging his feet all the way home.

David was no less drunk when he unlocked his apartment door twenty minutes later. He careened inside the house and realized at once that something was off. *Different*. David frowned, unable to identify what was wrong, but definitely sure something had changed since he'd left earlier that night. He scanned the living room and kitchen area for a clue, but everything seemed just as David had left it.

Then he saw it: Scott's door, an inch ajar. That door had remained firmly shut for the past two months. David narrowed his eyes and walked toward his brother's room. Pushing the door open, he saw a huge suitcase parked next to the bed. His worst fears confirmed: Scott was

home.

His brother was back in Cambridge from his summer internship in California a week early. Why? And where was he now, if not here?

David's body reacted to the answer an instant before his brain connected the dots. His heart contracted in a spasm, and he missed a breath. There was only one place Scott could have gone: to see his girlfriend. Haley.

"Ooooh, perfect." A bitter sneer spread on David's lips. "Welcome home, brother," he said to the empty room, and then punched the door with so much force that the skin on his knuckles split. His opponent—the *wooden door*—took the hit and bounced back with no lasting damage sustained. The same couldn't be said for David's fist.

With a throbbing hand, and a dark mood none improved after the punch, David stumbled over to the freezer. As he took out a bag of frozen peas and applied it to the back of his hand, his gaze landed on a bottle of vodka sitting at the bottom of the compartment.

Like most drunk people, the idea of getting even more trashed was incredibly appealing to David.

He dragged the bottle out, smiling. "Hello, baby," he told it. "Why don't we keep this party going?"

With the bag of peas precariously balanced on the back of his injured hand, David dropped the bottle of Vodka on the kitchen counter and went hunting in the cabinets for shot glasses. He found six and arranged them in an orderly row on the countertop.

One-handed, he opened the bottle and poured the first shot, saying, "For my brother." Then he poured another. "And his lovely girlfriend, Haley. I wish them a happy

life together.” Each statement was followed by a shot glass being filled. “To myself, for playing the part of the fool again. And to Brigitte, who tried to teach me a lesson many years ago I don’t seem to want to learn.”

David stared at the one remaining empty shot glass, trying to decide who he should dedicate it to. Unable to come up with another toast, he shrugged. “To me again, because I’m worth it.”

David filled the last glass and threw the empty vodka bottle into the sink, where it landed with a loud clunk. Unmoved by the noise, David lifted the first glass and toppled the contents into his mouth. One by one he brought the small glasses to his lips, banging them on the counter once he’d downed them. The vodka burned his throat as he swallowed, and it spread like acid when it reached his empty stomach. But David didn’t stop until all the glasses were dry, by which point he was irredeemably intoxicated.

Head spinning, he staggered to his room and, fully-clothed, fell face-down on his bed and passed out.

Madison

Madison woke with a groan, the morning light burning through her closed eyelids. Why could she never remember to close the blinds? Not that hard, right? All she had to do was turn the stick and the slim metal panes would seal themselves off, keeping the light out and allowing her to enjoy a Sunday morning lie-in. But, no, she always forgot, and those rotten, pupil-stabbing

sunrays woke her up at the crack of dawn, *pronto*.

Pity, she'd been having the best Scott dream ever. Right before she'd woken up, he'd walked into her bedroom, ripped off his shirt, and told her he wanted her.

"Ah, hell," she huffed, throwing off the sheets and getting up.

Now that she was half-awake, the building pressure in her bladder became too strong to ignore. Barefooted, garbed in only a matching pair of pale pink panties and a flimsy tank top, Madison dragged her feet off the bed and headed for the apartment's shared bathroom.

Madison was too busy rubbing the sleep out of her eyes to pay much attention to where she was going. So, she was utterly stunned when she almost crashed nose-first into someone walking out of the bathroom. Someone really tall, and really *naked*.

Madison's jaw dropped as she stared up into Scott's emerald green eyes. He was standing in front of her, bare-chested and wearing only a pair of unbuttoned jeans, with an apologetic smile stamped on his sexy lips. Exactly as he had in her dream.

She blinked.

Am I still dreaming? Isn't six in the morning a little too early to start hallucinating?

"Hi," the hallucination said, in a fantastic impersonation of Scott's low, masculine voice. "I thought no one would be up this early." Imaginary Scott proceeded to fasten the button on his jeans, visibly embarrassed.

The pull was inexorable, and Madison's gaze was drawn to the gesture. Her eyes traveled down his flat-muscled chest, skimmed over a sculpted, rock-hard six-

pack, and came to rest on the deliciously inviting V of muscles disappearing below the jeans waistband.

Mmm, Madison thought, chewing on her lower lip. *Well, if I really have to hallucinate something, high-five, imagination.*

“Madison?” the hallucination asked. “Are you all right?”

“Never been better,” Madison said, smiling like a fool.

“Oh, okay.” Imaginary Scott shifted on his feet.

Madison didn’t care if he seemed uncomfortable; this was her dream, so she might as well take the lead. She raised her hand and splayed it across Imaginary Scott’s chiseled chest. But when her fingertips came in contact with warm, living flesh, Madison gasped and retracted her hand as if burned. “You’re real!”

He chuckled. “Last time I checked.”

“But you’re in California,” Madison protested.

“I came home a week early to surprise Haley,” Scott—the real, not one-bit Imaginary Scott—said. “Sorry if I startled—”

“Oh, gosh,” she interrupted. “Oh... oh.” Shocked, Madison pressed one hand over her mouth while the other moved down to cover her panties. Oh dear goodness, she was standing in front of Scott wearing close to nothing and acting like a complete fool.

She flushed red head to toe, and, following her hand with his gaze—*his turn to gawk*—Scott’s cheeks pinked as well.

With another awkward smile, he repeated, “I thought nobody would be up this early... Sorry.”

Madison couldn’t take a second longer of this

exchange. She pushed past him, muttering a hurried, "Excuse me," and barged into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

Breathing heavily as if she'd just run ten miles, Madison rested her shoulder blades against the wooden door. *Crap. Crap. Crap.* She hit her head back against the wood in time with the imprecations. Then she realized Scott might be able to hear her and stopped before she made an even bigger fool of herself.

She took long, steady breaths, trying to slow her heart down. But the stubborn idiot seemed to be settled on run mode, making her gasp like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room. Embarrassment and shame burned a steady fire in her lower belly.

Madison collapsed down, her butt hitting the cold tiled floor, while a million thoughts crossed her mind.

Scott was back. He'd just seen her half-naked, hair disheveled, and probably sporting a horrible case of morning breath. Madison exhaled into her cupped hand and smelled it.

Shit.

What the hell was Scott doing in her bathroom at six in the morning?

He must've spent the night here, making love to Haley in the adjoining room while Madison had been sleeping next door, clueless. And they'd probably make love again soon.

Double shit.

This last image lit a different kind of fire in Madison's guts. Flames of anger and disappointment. Flames of envy flaring into hate. Hate for the best friend Madison couldn't legitimately hate, and hate for herself for all

these contrasting feelings that kept eating at her.

And now there really wasn't enough oxygen in the room, maybe not even in the entire apartment. Madison needed out. She used the toilet only because her body forced her to. Then she turned the lock and opened the bathroom door a crack, poking her head out to make sure the hall was clear. Scott was gone, so she sprinted back to her room, pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, grabbed her gym bag, and fled.

The campus gym ran various group classes, and Madison was hoping to burn off her bad mood with something up-tempo and high-intensity. But the only thing on this morning's schedule was Hatha Yoga. Madison scoffed; she wasn't in the mood for anything relaxing, calming, or even remotely of the feel-as-one-with-the-universe philosophy. She needed to drive her body to its limits, so she wouldn't have any energy left to think about what had happened—or to imagine what might be happening at this very moment in Haley's bedroom.

Head bent low so as not to make eye contact with anyone, Madison jammed in a pair of earbuds and stepped on the first available treadmill. She set the machine on the longest and hardest program and selected a random cardio workout playlist on Spotify. But even with her feet flying on the mill and music pounding in her ears, Madison's brain was still functioning at full capacity, damn it. And her heart, despite being busy pumping blood at 160 beats per minute, still had time to break over and over again like it had been doing for the past eight months. Eight long months since the day Haley had come home from Hawaii and announced she and

Scott were an item.

How much pain could a broken heart cause? There had to be a limit...

Because I can't take this anymore, Madison thought.

Scott's two-month internship in California had put a false sense of security in her. With him gone, away from Haley, it hadn't been so bad. There had been no sudden stabs in her chest when she ran into him on campus, or when she caught an intimate stare between him and Haley—or, worst of all, when she saw them kissing.

With Scott and Haley's relationship on hold, Madison had coddled herself in the false idea that she was getting over him. That these stupid feelings would go away. That she wouldn't feel so damn miserable all the time anymore.

Nope. Not for you, Madison. Not a chance in hell.

This morning's encounter with Scott had been the proverbial cold shower, her false sense of security promptly washed away. The illusion she wasn't in love with Scott gone.

So, what now?

Alice's words from their last "Scott" discussion echoed in her mind. "*Listen, Maddie,*" Alice had said. "*Who knows if Scott and Haley will stay together, or if you'll ever get to be with him, or even want him anymore? You could meet someone who'll sweep you off your feet tomorrow... And our lives are going to be so completely different in a year when we graduate, anyway. You just have to be strong and pull through.*"

Alice was right. All Madison had to do was to be strong and pull through. She'd already suffered eight months of this. She could survive twelve more.

I can do it!

I have to be strong and pull through, Madison repeated inside her head. Eyes focused forward with a newfound determination, Madison pumped up the speed of the treadmill and ran and ran and ran toward the new finish line she now saw standing before her. Graduation was only a year away. Her life would change. Everything would change. And she'd be finally free...

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