

Destined

Author not credited

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

Contents

Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	20
Chapter 4	29
Chapter 5	34
Chapter 6	40
Chapter 7	45
Chapter 8	51
Chapter 9	57
Chapter 10	64
Chapter 11	70
Chapter 12	78
Chapter 13	84
Chapter 14	89
Chapter 15	97
Chapter 16	102
Chapter 17	106
Chapter 18	110
Chapter 19	116
Chapter 20	122
Chapter 21	127

Chapter 22	131
Chapter 23	136
Chapter 24	141
Chapter 25	146
Chapter 26	150
Chapter 27	156
Chapter 28	161
Chapter 29	166
Chapter 30	171
Chapter 31	175
Chapter 32	180
Chapter 33	190
Epilogue	196

About this edition

This StoryPDF reading edition contains the complete English text, with its original paragraph and section order preserved.

Newly typeset with selectable text, a linked contents section and chapter bookmarks. Copyright rules can differ by country. Corrections and rights enquiries: liuxinglianxue@gmail.com.

Read online: [StoryPDF](#) / [Destined](#).

Reading edition: 2026-10-28. Typography: Crimson Text (SIL Open Font License).

Chapter 1

I didn't want to be here.

School that is.

Usually, I didn't have a hard time paying attention in class. Especially not in English, which happened to be my favorite subject. But I couldn't help but stare at the empty desk a few rows in front of me.

School had only just started a few weeks prior and the boy who was supposed to occupy that seat, had been there maybe twice. How does someone get away with not coming to class so often?

"Hello? Earth to Maddie!"

I rolled my eyes at the theatrics Kimmy Ford tried to throw at me to get my attention. She was waving her hand in front of my face until I finally glanced over at her. "What do you want? I'm trying to learn."

"Doesn't quite look like you're paying attention at all. Besides, it's not like you need anymore information in there," she leaned over and tapped my head. "Your brain must be so full of useless junk. It could explode at any minute."

"Your point?" I deadpanned.

She sighed and whispered, "can you believe he's actually here today? He's never here."

"Who are you talking about Kims?"

She narrowed her eyes at me and then looked pointedly to the front of the room. There, Ace Craige was standing, about to walk over to his usually empty desk. "Ace, Maddie, I'm talking about Ace."

Ace Craige was a bad kid, from what I had learned since Kindergarten. He and his friends were notorious for getting into a few fights, flirting and a one night stand at most girls in our school.

There was Raze Park; who played football up until last year after a bad knee injury. But somehow still kept the status of the best wide receiver around here. His dark blonde hair and blue eyes were a selling point to the girls here, making them all swoon with one look.

Then, there was Loki Thompson . He was the scariest out of the three of them. His dark brown hair and dark brown eyes seemed to judge every passing body that went near him. And I had even heard he had been arrested once.

But then there was Ace Craige. Everyone knew he was a narcissistic douche canoe who literally and figuratively screwed anything and everything with a pulse and a vagina.

But I will admit, Ace was hot; steaming cocoa on a winter night hot. His dark caramel colored hair and dark green eyes was enough for any girl to faint over. Plus, he had to be at least 6'1, that in itself was swoon worthy.

But it's not like I noticed or anything.

I had been very good at avoiding those boys my entire life. If one was in my class, I sat in the back. If they got into a fight, I walked in the other direction. It was easy, avoiding them.

But seeing Ace now sitting in his neglected seat made it hard to ignore him. "Kimmy, he's always here. He just ditched this class."

She shrugged. "I wonder why he's here today."

I wondered too. It was probably because his grades were already lacking from not attending his English class for three weeks.

After class, Kimmy and I quietly made our way out of the classroom. But stupidly, I made the mistake of looking behind me, and into the mostly abandoned classroom. Ace was getting up out of his seat and heading over to our teacher's desk.

How did someone look so hot just standing from their chair? Not that I noticed. But then, he turned and found my gaze on him and winked, actually winked at me. And for the first time in my life, that action caused a rift in my unpopularity.

Thanks to Ace Craige and his damn good looks, my shoulder knocked into someone walking by. But of course, it's not just anyone, no, that'd be too easy. I bumped into Farah Del Valle. Farah Del Valle was most definitely the most popular girl in our senior class.

Farah was the kind of girl all boys fell for. She was born with blonde curling hair, dark brown eyes and long tanned legs. Lucky her. She was the complete opposite of me. I had a dull shade of brown for my hair. My eyes were light blue and I was short. My legs were probably twice the size of hers.

Before now, Farah Del Valle had never even batted an eyelash at me. Now, her fake but very expensive eyelash extensions fluttered at me angrily. Her phone had fallen to the ground and it now faced with its screen to the floor. I held in a gasp, in hopes it didn't break. God knows what'd she do to me if her phone cracked because of me.

She sighed in relief after picking up her phone and I almost fainted with joy.

"I am so sorry. I didn't even see you. I wasn't watching where I was going," I start to fluster over her.

"Whatever, it's normal for Freshman to not know where they're going," she sighed, not even sparing me a glance.

I started to tell her that I wasn't a Freshman, that I had been in the same school, same grade since we were five but she flipped her long locks and walked away.

"Holy cow Maddie, you are so lucky she didn't end your life right there," Kimmy's voice was breathless.

I nodded and we started walking. "I know, that was a close one."

"What had you so distracted?"

I hit my lip, thinking about how Ace had looked at me, for the first time in my life.

Not that I cared or anything

"Madison Grey? Anyone there?" Kimmy brought me back to reality once more.

"I can't even remember," I lied. But I since I had never lied to Kimmy before, she believed it.

At lunch, Kimmy and I sat together in our normal spot, in the back of the cafeteria. "Oh gosh!" Kimmy's eyes widened at me. "Sorry, I just remembered I have to grab a book from the library for the history homework."

"Oh, okay. Just leave me here, alone. I get it," Kimmy whined dramatically.

I chuckled, "whatever. I'll see you in a little bit, okay?"

She nodded me on. "Uh huh. Get lost."

I kept my head down as I walked through the halls. It wasn't to avoid anyone, it was just a habit to keep my nose and eyes out of things that weren't my business. I nearly bumped into another body but I stepped around them quickly when I saw their feet come into view. I muttered an apology and kept walking.

"Wait!" I heard from the voice now behind me.

They weren't talking to me. No one ever was.

"Hey, you! Girl in the maroon shirt and black jeans!"

Oh. That was me. I slowly turned around to face whoever was trying to talk to me. When I saw it was Ace, my eyes bugged and I almost turned back around to keep walking.

He walked over to me with a swagger only he held and stopped in front of me. I had to look up to see him properly. "Madison Grey, right?"

Uh. I merely nodded in confusion.

"Saw you checking me out earlier in Clark's class," he smirked.

Hold up, what? I snorted, something I only do in front of Kimmy. "Like I'd ever check you out," I stated. And holy cow, where did that sass come from?

He chuckled but the smirk remained, "then why did you walk right into Farah?"

"I just wasn't watching where I was going," I must have sounded like a brat.

The smirk grew, "simple explanation, you weren't watching where you were going because you were busy watching me."

He had a point there. But was I going to tell him that? No. "Has anyone ever told you your ego is bigger than Mount Everest?"

The smirk became mischievous. Oh no. "No, but I have heard something else is bigger-"

I plugged my ears to save my innocence from such assault. Ace laughed, I think. Seeing that he was done with his innuendo, I unplugged my ears and felt a blush rise to my cheeks. "Are you always this gross?"

"Gross?" He choked out, trying not laugh. I simply nodded and started to walk away. "Wait, wait, that's not why I wanted to talk to you."

Why did he want to talk to me? "I need a favor," Ace's voice lowered Oh and I cleared my throat, "you know, not every girl wants to-"

"No, no no no, not that," he interrupted me before I said something to embarrass myself. "I need you to pretend to be my girlfriend."

I laughed in his face. "Why do you need someone to pretend to do that? There are plenty of nice girls at this school."

Okay, not necessarily true.

"Just, trust me when I tell you none of the girls here are girlfriend material," his eyes narrowed on mine.

"And I am? Girlfriend material?" I was so confused.

Ace nodded, "yeah, you know. You're smart, shy and hot."

If I had had a drink, I would have done a spit-take. Ace Craige thought I was hot?

Not that I'm interested!

I didn't know what to say but apparently my mind did. "Well that isn't going to happen buddy, sorry." And then I tapped his chest twice. Twice! And started to walk away toward the library like I had first planned.

But just then, the door to the cafeteria opened again and out came Farah Del Valle. She saw Ace and me talking and the look in her eyes was devilish. "Well, what do we have here? Is this freshman bothering you Acey?"

First of all, Acey? What kind of nickname was that? Ace seemed to think the same because his eyebrows scrunched up at the name. And second of all, I was not a freshman.

"Freshman? Where?" Ace laughed. Farah nodded toward me and he laughed even harder. "Far, she's been at the same school as us since kindergarten, in the same grade."

Far? Again with the stupid nicknames.

She aimed her gaze at me, "if you aren't a freshman, why did you knock into me today in the halls? Are you just stupid or blind?"

Before I could retort something i'd regret, Ace stepped in. "She was busy checking me out."

"Was not!" I responded immediately.

Sophie snorted, "so she speaks." She was clearly amused. "Why are you talking to this loser anyway Ace?"

Ace's face hardened, "that 'loser' happens to be my girlfriend Farah so if I were you, I'd back off."

I couldn't believe Ace freaking Craige had stood up for me, to Farah Del Valle. And wait, did he just call me his girlfriend? Didn't I just tell him no? "I am not-" Ace grabbed my upper arm and led me away from Farah into a classroom across the hall.

"Don't ruin this for me Mad, i'm serious," his voice was low and intimidating.

I yanked my arm away from his grip as he closed the door behind us. "First of all, my name isn't Mad, I go by Maddie. Second of all, I told you I didn't want to be your stupid fake girlfriend. Didn't your mother teach you when a girl says no, it means no?"

As I went off on a rampage, Ace stood there, hands in his pockets, leaning against a wall. He looked hot as hell with the small, amused smirk that refused to fade.

"What?!" I exclaimed at him when he said nothing.

He shrugged. "Nothing, you just look hot as hell when you're mad," he said, repeating what my mind had just thought.

I definitely felt a blush rise up my neck and into my cheeks. Within the past 5 minutes, Ace Craige, notorious bad boy, had called me hot twice. This day just kept getting weirder and weirder. "I'm not mad, I'm just confused. Why do you need a fake girlfriend in the first place?" I asked him, still trying to figure him out.

He started to look uncomfortable. "My family is coming into town."

"And?" I asked him.

He looked around the empty classroom awkwardly. "I told them I had a girlfriend."

"Can we get to the point Why you decided I was the chosen one?"

His gaze returned to me. "The chosen one? Who are you, Harry Potter?"

"You know, for someone who's trying to convince me to do them a favor, you aren't being very pleasant about it," I reminded him.

He rolled his eyes. "Alright. It's because my parents have seen most of the girls that I bring home, awkward, I know. They would know right away that we weren't actually dating. You are a respectable girl and I decided to ask you because you obviously have an interest in me."

"Interest?" I sputtered. "In you?"

The smirk returned. "You checked me out today."

I shook my head. "How would this even work? How long would this be for? Like one dinner?"

"You wish, sweetheart. My cousin goes here, she'd know it was all fake and she'd just looove to rat me out."

"So I'm stuck pretending to date you at school and your home until they leave? When would that be?" I asked him, sighing. I hadn't agreed to anything j ust yet, but I was curious.

His body tipped off the wall he was leaning against and he walked toward me until he was right in front of me. My breathing speed increased and I cleared my throat. "They get here next week and leave two weeks after that. So, you get three whole weeks with the pleasure of being my girl. And when I say pleasure, I mean it." I almost choked on my own saliva. What the hell? I must have been staring with wide eyes because he chuckled. "Don't worry Mad, your virtue is safe for the next three weeks."

I couldn't hold myself back anymore, "my virtue?"

"Uh huh. Your Virginity, babe. You're safe with me kid," he smiled proudly.

I almost choked again. But I was so not getting into a conversation about my virginity with Ace Craige. I turned around without another word and walked to the door.

"See you tomorrow, Mad!" He yelled with amusement clouding his voice. I didn't even have enough energy to correct my name again.

Chapter 2

The rest of the day went without any issues, beside the lingering feeling of confusion caused by a certain green-eyed bad boy.

Once I got home, I began the obvious, homework. About halfway through starting an English paper, I heard the front door close. I powered off my laptop and carefully crept down the hallway.

There he was, my father. He was making a bunch of noise in the kitchen. I looked at the clock, 5:43 pm. He hadn't been home since 3:15 the day before. I tried to turn back around to walk back to my room but he knew I was there.

"Maddie, I didn't think you'd be home," the man who held the title as my father slurred.

I sighed and walked back into the kitchen. "Harry. It's been awhile. How was work?" I knew he hadn't been at his real job but still asked.

He just chuckled, "work was great."

By the way he was talking, the bar was most likely where he had been. That wasn't the issue. The issue was, Where had he been for the rest of the 24 hours that had passed. If I had to guess, he had been staying over at his girlfriend of the month, Nicole's house.

"How is Nicole anyway?" I asked, not at all curious.

He had the decency to look ashamed. "That's none of your business little lady," he growled and I backed off.

"You know, nothing seems like my business anymore Harry," I told him solemnly and then went back to my room to finish my essay.

The next day, my alarm never went off so I woke up 20 minutes later than usual. I was eating oatmeal while putting on my socks. I put on the pair of jeans I wore at least 3 times a week, a plain black shirt and tried to make my outfit less horrible by wearing a pair of black wedges. My makeup was half assed, only going for concealer, mascara and blush which made me sad. It was the best I could do.

I ran down to my car and went 5 over the speed limit, praying I wouldn't get pulled over. I didn't need to make my day even worse than it already was. I made it to first period just as the final bell rang and I sighed, sitting next to Kimmy. What I didn't notice was the boy in front of me until he turned around to give me a confused look.

"You're never late. Were you dolling yourself up for me sweetheart? You know I wouldn't care if you wore a paper bag right?" Ace was trying to keep himself from laughing.

I frowned, "my alarm didn't go off idiot. And I'll have you know, I doll myself up for me."

I could tell Kimmy's eyes were about to burst out of their sockets so I started to say something about (MAYBE) being Ace's fake girlfriend for a few weeks but he cleared his throat. I looked over at him confused. But he looked at Kimmy.

"Nice to finally meet you Kimmy, I'm Ace Craige. Mad here tells me a lot about you," Ace introduced himself with a smile and his hand shot out.

Kimmy reaches out to shake his hand. "I'm very confused," is all she said.

Ace's eyebrows corkscrewed in a mask of confusion. "Sweetheart, you said you were going to tell her." He really should be an actor.

"I never agreed to anything Ace," I grit my teeth, implying I had never even said I'd be his fake girlfriend.

He smiled, "you didn't need to babe, I could tell what you were thinking."

Kimmy whipped her head back and forth, "why does he keep calling you by coupley names?"

"We're.... dating," it hurt to say but I somehow managed. The smile that lit up on Ace's face was slightly disturbing, knowing he was getting exactly what he wanted.

Kimmy blinked very slowly before cocking her head to one side. "Since when?"

"Officially since yesterday," Ace interrupted. "I've been pestering her for a week to go out with me and I've finally gotten her to agree."

Kimmy looked hurt, "why didn't you tell me Maddie? I thought I was your best friend." And then she turned in her seat and ignored me for the rest of the period. I sighed and looked over at Ace who had already turned around.

After class, I cornered outside our classroom and started walking with him to what I assumed was his next class. "Why didn't you let me tell Kimmy we aren't actually dating?"

"Not so loud Mad," he told me softly. "Listen, if i'm not going to tell my friends, why would you be able to tell yours? It makes it all the more believable if we are the only people the know the truth."

I sighed, it was becoming my norm. "I wish that didn't make any sense but you're right i guess. Okay I won't tell her."

He nodded, pleased with my answer. "Where are you going? Don't you have math right now?"

"I'm not even going to ask how you know my schedule because i'm sure I don't want to know. I was walking with you to class so I could talk to you but now that that's over-" I started to turn around to walk to my class but Ace stopped me with a hand on my wrist.

"Do you want to meet up after school?" he asked me, shocking me.

I blinked, "why? Isn't this just an in school and at your house thing?"

He chuckled again, like he always does when I talk. "We need to make up something. How we met, how I asked you out, Why you like me..." He trailed off with a raise of his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes and looked down at the hand still holding my wrist. He let go of it, somehow knowing I didn't like it. "I really don't want to be seen in public with you unless we have to so we can go to my house or... to yours?"

He started playing with a piece of of my hair and I stumbled on my words. "Definitely your place sweetheart. Unless your parents are there. Yeah on second thought, maybe we shouldn't."

"Harry won't be home. He never is," I told him bitterly.

He didn't look at me with pity like Kimmy did when I talked about my dad. I hated when people pitied me so I was thankful for his reaction. He shrugged and kept walking to class, dropping my hair. "Perfect. Text me the address."

"I don't have your number," I realized.

"See you at lunch sweetheart," he yelled, causing everyone in the hallway to look at me. They all immediately turned to their groups and whispered.

By lunch, Kimmy was still ignoring me so I had no idea where to sit during lunch. Ace said he'd see me at lunch but that couldn't mean he'd sit with me, right? But I was wrong. As soon as the 6'0 boy stood from his usual table and started walking toward me, all eyes were turned.

He stopped in front of me and smirked. "You just gonna stand there sweetheart?"

"I don't know where Kimmy is and I doubt she wants me to sit with her anyway. Thanks for that by the way," I told him, my arms crossed over my chest.

His smirk became lazy and I noticed a dimple that hadn't been there before. "We can sit wherever you want to Mad," he emphasized on the word we. I had decided I'd let him call me Mad if he wanted to. It had a certain ring to it. At least it wasn't Grey.

I once again rolled my eyes. What can I say? He brings it out in me. "Seriously Craige, you don't have to sit with me," I made my voice monotone.

"What kind of boyfriend would I be if I let you sit alone at lunch Grey?" It wasn't that I didn't want him to sit with me. It was more of the fact that I was super uncomfortable with the amount of people that would stare at us if he did.

"The kind that you are, the fake one," I joked but it was awkward considering it was true.

I was holding the sandwich I had bought in my hand, it was still covered in saran wrap. I started to unwrap it to take a bite but Ace took it from my hand and bit it himself.

"Hey! That's not your sandwich," my arguing was fruitless.

He finished chewing and swallowing before answering, "sharing is caring Mad."

"I don't care enough to share, asshole." Okay, maybe that was a little harsh but I was mad. The guy had just stolen my lunch and I get mad when I'm hungry.

With one eyebrow raised, he handed me back my sandwich. "You feeling caring enough to share your number with me sweetheart? Or am I going to have to find it out myself? I have my ways."

I took his phone from his hand when he held it out and typed in my number. He did the same.

"Anyway, I have a test to remake so," I lied just to get away from his overwhelming presence.

He tilted his head to the side, adorably. "Since when do you get less than a B+ on a test?"

"Why do you know my grades?" I shot back.

What I did expect was a smirk to form on his face and to make a stupid innuendo. What I didn't expect was the two red spots that formed on his cheeks. "You just look like a nerd," he tried to amend.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to tease him for his blush but at the same time, I did. "Well, I'm going to the library." I turned around and started to walk away but I turned back. "By the way, you look adorable when you blush," I joked and then bolted out of the room.

I got home that day, totally forgetting Ace was planning on coming over. I was surprised when I got a text from the guy at 4:15 saying, planning on giving me ur address anytime soon or?

I yelped and looked around my messy as hell room, sent him my address and started throwing everything into my closet.

I'll be there in 10.

I cleaned faster. There was no way I was going to let Ace Carter see me at my worse, which was in my pig style of a bedroom. Only seven minutes later, the doorbell rang. I ran down the hallway, practically as if there was fire on my backside. I swung open the door to reveal Ace.

His smile was deadly as he leaned against the doorframe. He looked me up and down twice before settling on my face. "Cute pajamas."

SHIT. I looked down and looked at my fluffy heart pj pants and flowery tee shirt. Figures, I'd cleaned my room but had forgotten about my horrid taste in bedclothes. I settled for an embarrassed, "thanks," and let him in.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you forgot about our little date Mad," his voice was amused but there was a hint of something else I couldn't identify.

"This isn't a date and stop calling me Mad," okay maybe I had lied about letting the nickname go.

Ace ignored me and looked around my apartment. Harry and I had been living here since my freshman year of high school, only 2 months after Samantha left. I hadn't gotten the chance to clean anywhere except my bedroom so there were beer cans sitting beside the couch and the tv had still been on when I had gotten home.

"You drink?" Ace asked, seemingly trying to lighten the mood. I shook my head, ignoring his humor.

"Harry," is all I said and he shut up. I walked down the short hallway to my room before turning around. "Sorry, did you want anything to drink? We have beer and water." I was only half kidding.

He chuckled, "I think i'm okay." And then he gestured for me to open the door. So I did.

My room was plain and scarcely decorated. The walls were white, my furniture was light brown, my queen comforter was blue with little flowers all over it. I had a desk and a dresser and a bed, not much of anything else. "I know it's nothing to what your house must look like but-" I hinted at Ace being rich, just like the rumors.

His eyes narrowed, "what makes you say that?" I shrugged and he moved on. "I like it. It's nice and simple. And it isn't pink," he added with a smirk.

"Hey! I like pink. It was Samantha who didn't like pink," I confessed without realizing it.

His smile sobered a bit. "Who's Samantha?"

"Sorry, I meant my mom. My mother doesn't like pink," I tried to amend.

Ace did what he did best and moved on. "So, how did we meet miss Grey?" He sat on my bed, making it look much smaller than a queen size.

I tried to think how I wanted to weave our story. Did I want to go for realistic and make his family 100% believe in us, or did I want something so outrageous, it would be hard to believe. I figured Ace would appreciate if they believed us.

"Just say we met in class or something. Like, we were placed next to each other and we just started talking," I threw the simple idea out there.

He leaned back on his hands. "And sparks just flew?" There was laughter in his voice. It bothered me.

"This was your idea Ace, not mine. You need to take it seriously," I crossed my arms.

He fell back against the bed and groaned. "Okay, okay. You're right. Alright, in class, started talking..." He trailed off.

"Okay, how did you ask me out? Where was our first date?" I tried to push him to think. I was not going to be the only person involved in our "relationship."

He was still laying on his back. I could have sworn he closed his eyes as if he was making himself at home. "Well, since we talked in class, I just asked you on a date. I took you on a picnic. It was night time so the stars were out. And since you're a smartie pants, you pointed out all the little constellations." He paused as if thinking over what he had said. "Girls love that kind of crap right?" Ace sat up.

I tried to say something, anything but I couldn't find the words. That was... romantic. I had no idea a guy like Ace Carter could think of something so out of box for a date. I mean, he was a boy. Boys weren't supposed to be good at that type of thing right?

"So they don't like that stuff?" Ace asked me, trying to snap me out of my thoughts.

I finally snapped out of it, realizing I probably looked stupid, standing there with my jaw on the floor. "I mean, I guess."

It probably wasn't the answer he was looking for because he just scratched the back of his neck and looked down at the floor. "Anyway, what time does your dad get home from work?"

"If he went to work, he would have been off at 3 but since he isn't here, i'm guessing he spent his day at the bar." I didn't mean to say it sounding so bitter but it sure came out that way.

"Mom?" Ace asked, uncomfortable.

I sucked in a breath and glanced over at my desk to a picture of her and me when I was a baby.

"Samantha left when I was 14."

"What happened?" Ace sounded curious.

I shook my head, "Long story."

"I have time."

I clenched my jaw. "I really don't want to talk about it," my voice went up a few notches.

For once, Ace Carter looked taken aback. "That isn't my business. Sorry."

I moved on again, "the date idea is good but we need more. They're gonna expect more about our relationship than the first time we went out." And so we spent the next few hours planning out our story.

Kimmy finally stopped ignoring me when I got to first period the next day. She hadn't forgiven me yet but at least she exchanged a few words with me. I'll take what I can get. Ace strolled into class, fifteen minutes late and made some kid I'd spoken to a few times in my entire life, move seats. He plopped down in front of me and turned around.

"Good morning babe," his lips spread into a smirk.

I forced a smile while simultaneously clenching my jaw in an effort not to throw up at his pet name. I decided that if he wanted to call me "cute nicknames" I'd ham it up for him. You know, make the relationship very believable.

I leaned forward and pinched his left cheek, "good morning boobear. I missed you!" Ace's eyes widened as I continued to theatricalize my love. "How did you sleep last night cuddle bear? I had a great time on our date last night! Didn't you?"

I could tell he was holding back laughter as he leaned closer to me. "You're overdoing it a bit sweetheart, but please, continue."

"Overdoing What?" Kimmy piped in. Well shoot.

"How much fun she had on our date. It really was nothing," Ace told her. I don't know how he did it but his face filled with a rosy blush, really playing my best friend. He had a serious talent.

The teacher quieted the classroom down after that, ending our conversation.

Throughout class, I watched Ace stare at some girl across the room for a good 10 minutes before I leaned over and smacked his arm. He ignored me but I saw him start to smirk.

After class, Ace didn't even wait for me to gather my things before leaving. I had to jog to catch up with him. When I did, I smacked his arm again. "You know, you're really bad at this whole boyfriend thing."

He looked at me blankly. "How so?"

I rolled my eyes, "boyfriends aren't supposed stare at other girls all throughout class." He chuckled. "Or leave them hanging when they're packing up their backpack."

"Here, I'll make it up to you," he reached his arms out and took my backpack from my hand since I hadn't gotten the chance to put it on properly yet.

I sighed, "there's literally no point to you taking my bag considering we're heading in the direction of your class, not mine." He stopped, spun us around and started walking in the opposite direction. "Where are we going?"

He shrugged, "making an excuse to hold your bag by walking to your class."

Hm, I could get used to him holding my things. "Thank you," I told him. He smiled.

We walked in silence and I realized what a horrible friend I was now that I had a "boyfriend." Just like Ace had left me in the classroom, I had left Kimmy. I resolved to hang out with her at lunch and buy her a cookie to make it up to her. By the time I had sorted out my issue, we were at my class.

"So, they get here on Saturday in the afternoon. Can you do dinner maybe Sunday night?" Ace asked me in a rush.

I had almost forgotten what he was talking about. "Oh yeah, of course. Sooner we get this over with, the better."

He laughed, "just the start of the next two weeks."

While I resisted the innate urge to break out into "Start of Something New," I nodded and took my backpack from Ace's grip. "Okay. See you tomorrow I guess."

"What about lunch?" He asked me, checking his phone, for texts most likely.

I scrunched my eyebrows together, "what about lunch?"

"I won't see you at lunch?"

I shook my head, "I'm gonna hang out with Kimmy. Try to stop her from being mad at me anymore." He nodded and the bell rang. He started walking away. "Where are you going?" I asked when I noticed the way he was going, toward the doors.

"I find that I don't really want to be here right now. School is boring. See ya tomorrow Madison Grey."

I walked into class. "See ya Ace Craige," I whispered to myself.

Chapter 3

The next day was boring and excruciatingly slow. I kept falling asleep in first, second and third period. Ace kept nudging me every five seconds to keep me alive basically during history.

There was a football game on Friday and Kimmy was dragging me to it. She told me I was "free to bring my boy toy" whatever the hell that meant. But therefore, it meant I had to invite Ace otherwise Kimmy would think something was up.

So there I was, twirling a strand of hair around my fingers, thinking of a way to ask Ace if he would go with me to the game. For once, he was actually concentrated on his work and not staring at some girl.

"So your friend Raze plays football right?" I whispered to him, leaning my body slightly toward him.

He finished What he was writing and looked up. "Yeah, why?"

"There's a game tonight." He smirked. "I'm aware."

"Kimmy is making me go."

He leaned back in his seat and folded his hands together. "And?" I shrugged and turned back to the whiteboard. But Ace didn't move. He kept his eyes right on me. For a straight minute.

"She wants me to bring you," I whispered, exasperated.

The smirk turned even more mischievous and I almost wanted to groan in annoyance. "You sure it was Kimmy that's making you bring me?" His eyebrows wiggled in a way that I found oddly, hot?

"Fine, then find yourself another fake girlfriend by Sunday," I crossed my arms across my chest and settled into my chair.

Ace sighed, very loudly, and told me, "yeah I'll go to the stupid game with you. I was already planning on being there. Do you need me to pick you up?"

I thought about it for a second. "No, it's okay. Kimmu is driving me there and back home." He nodded and we got on With our day.

After school, Kimmy came over to my apartment to help me get ready. She searched through my closet. "Do you own anything With our school's name on it?"

"Just the PE clothes from freshman year. " I hated our school so why would I give them my money?

She groaned and kept looking. Eventually pulling out a pair of ripped blue jeans and a green oversized sweater. I opted into wearing my white converse and leaving my hair down, letting the brown waves lay on my shoulders.

Kimmy, with her black hair straightened and bronzed skin from recent tanning, wore a black mini skirt, yes a mini skirt to a football game. She also wore a white crop sweater, putting on a green cardigan over it, to show her spirit for the school. We left without a word to my father; who sat on the couch, passed out and with a beer in his hand.

The car ride was uneventful with Kimmy and I singing at the top of our lungs to the music. We arrived 10 minutes later and pulled into the very full parking lot. We headed to the stands and I got up to get something to snack on.

Walking back to where we were sitting with a bag of skittles in hand, I spotted a certain green eyes boy walking toward me. I nodded at him in acknowledgement and he smirked. "You didn't get anything for me?" He asked me with fake puppy dog eyes.

I laughed and kept walking. "Why would I?"

"Because I am your favorite boyfriend," he told me triumphantly and smiling.

I rolled my eyes, "if I had an ex I'd disagree with you but since I don't, I guess you win by default?" It came out more as a question than a statement.

"I can't even believe that you've never had a boyfriend. Guys are stupid," he huffed.

We were almost to the bleachers. "You are a guy Ace."

"I am? Thanks for noticing."

I ignored him. Thankfully I saw Kimmy and I saw her eyes light up in recognition. I looked over to the boy on my left and saw him still smirking. As soon as I turned my head back toward Kimmy, I felt my hand being overtaken. Ace scooped up my small hand in his and swung it between us. Weirdly, it didn't feel odd. It felt kind of, natural. I knew he was doing it for Kimmy's benefit but nevertheless, my heart still fluttered erratically in my chest. But this time when I turned to look at him, his smile was genuine.

We won the game, obviously. We weren't the greatest team in the state but we held our own against the rival schools in the area. Raze, I learned, was a star player. The QB of the team and already being scouted for colleges. Ace had sat next to me, squishing me between him and Kimmy.

After the game, Ace had somehow convinced Kimmy to drive me home. I didn't argue, seeing as he was supposed to do things like this, being my boyfriend and all. When we got to his car, he opened the door for me and spouted, "milady," making me smile.

He hopped in and started up the car. It was one of those cars where you press a button to turn on the ignition. I stared at it in wonder, wanting one for myself. He let me mess with the radio until I finally decided to hear what CD had been put in. It was The Maine and I let it play.

Ace's mouth twitched up at the side when I started to sway and sing along to 'Am I Pretty?'

Am I pretty? Do people like me yet?

We drove passed the exit that would take us to my apartment.

Is there a party? Am I invited yet?

I looked at him in confusion but his expression told me to just wait and go with it.

It's such a pity. No one adores me yet.

Ace's hand began tapping against the middle console and he sang along, too quietly for me to hear.

Make me up in the shade that fits me, tell me love oh am I pretty?

"So where are we going? And if you say the long route I'm going to roll my eyes," I told him.

He chuckled, still tapping along to the song. "You'd do that anyway." I crossed my arms and faces the front again.

But when I felt his eyes still on me, I turned back, "why are you staring at me?"

He smiled again and shook his head, "nothing." His eyes on me made me feel uncomfortable. He was too gorgeous and he was looking at me. I knew I wasn't ugly but he was so far out of my league, it was crazy.

Eventually, we pulled up outside of Ida's Ice Cream Shop and he powered off the car. I got out of the car, very confused. But Ace just started walking into the shop so I followed, obviously.

The door made a jingling sound when it opened and I looked at him. "You took me to get ice cream?"

But before he could answer, Ida herself waved us in, "just get in from the football game kids?"

Ace nodded at her, "yes ma'am, we won 20-7. Thought I'd bring my girl in to celebrate."

I managed to keep myself from rolling my eyes. But it was more because he was telling people we were together. Not even people that necessarily needed to know. It made me feel warm inside. Oh god. What am I saying?

It's not that I liked Ace exactly. But he was a very, very attractive guy and a girl can't help but appreciate his curling hair and beautiful green eyes.

While my brain was working overtime, Ace and Ida had been having an entire conversation. I finally snapped to attention when she asked me What kind of ice cream I wanted. "Cotton Candy," is what I'd said.

Ace got rainbow sherbert, a very un-Ace like flavor. We sat down and I started going at my ice cream like I hadn't eaten in 20 years and Ace laughed when I got a slight brain freeze. "I swear, you are the only person who could get a brain freeze within two bites of ice cream," he stated, eating some of his own sherbert.

"So, what's the game plan for Sunday?" I asked him. "Who am I meeting?"

He finished off his bite and looked up. "My mom and step-dad, my brother and two sets of aunts and uncles. And then all the cousins. Honestly I don't know how many there are." He stopped to chuckle a little but continued. "I'll come pick you up probably around 4 and we'll head over there. Dinner will start around 5:30 and we'll get through that and then I'll take you back home. Questions?"

I shook my head, "seems easy enough." Ace smirked. "You haven't met them yet Mad."

We sat in silence while we finished our ice cream and surprisingly, it was a comfortable silence.

"I should probably get you home before your dad kills me, huh?" He joked.

I smiled sadly, "no, I'm fine. I won't get in trouble."

Ace looked confused. "When is your curfew?"

"I don't have one," I hesitated to say. He nodded, "lucky."

My smile got sadder. I wish that I had a curfew because it meant that you had parents who cared. I sure as hell didn't.

"You okay?" Ace asked me.

I nodded, "I'm fine." And then I got up and threw both of our trash away before going out to Ace's car.

He followed me out. "Well, if you don't have a curfew, you wanna go somewhere else?"

I looked up at the sky. "It looks like it's about to rain." I was making excuses.

"We could go somewhere inside," he tried.

I shook my head, "I really should go home."

Ace looked like an idea had come to him. "I know, I'll just come with you to your house."

Was he serious? "Why do you want to hang out with me?"

"The guys are most likely at some party."

I still didn't get it. "So go to that party!"

"I want to spend time with you. Is that so hard to comprehend? You're a good friend Mad," Ace admitted, leaving me shocked.

I got into the car and he did the same. "Well, let's hope Harry isn't home."

"Really?" Ace asked me. I nodded and he started the car. We drove the short distance to my house, The Maine still playing in the background.

We pulled up to the parking lot of my apartment and got out of the car. I checked my phone. Still no text from Kimmy. Ace walked in front of me until we got to the front door, which I unlocked. I told him to stay outside until I could conclude whether or not Harry was there.

I looked in the living room and his room and he wasn't so I went back to the front door. "Coast is clear," I told Ace and let him in. He went straight to my room where clothes had been thrown about, Kimmy's fault.

"So what do you wanna do?" I asked him once he settled, oh so comfortably, onto my bed.

He thought about it. "What movies do you have?"

I shrugged and went into the living room where we kept all our movies. We didn't own much. Any movie that I wanted, I had to buy myself. But there were Disney movies from when I was a kid.

I felt Ace's presence behind me so I grabbed some random movie and turned around, holding it up.

"The Little Mermaid?" He asked incredulously. I almost doubled over with laughter at his unamused expression.

"I love this movie," I told him. It was true. I could sing all the songs and I knew at least half the lines.

He smirked and plopped onto the small couch. "Then The Little Mermaid it is."

"Seriously? You're gonna let me put on a Disney princess movie? Who are you and what have you done with the Ace Craige I know?" I joked, putting it into the DVD player.

He patted the spot next to him. "There are many sides to this bad boy Mad. You'll just have to wait to meet them all.

"Whatever," I told him, turning on the power and starting up the movie. I sat on the far end of the couch, away from Ace. But he scooted closer to me. "You really are taking this fake girlfriend thing to an unnecessary level you know."

He laughed, "nah, I'm like this with all my friends." I really doubted that. Most likely, Ace just wanted to get into my pants like he had with so many other girls. But I wasn't going to fall for it. The movie started and I couldn't help but sing along to all my favorite songs and maybe say a few lines here and there. Ace laughed at me when I voiced Sebastian's accent, doing a terrible job.

Halfway through the movie, it started to rain heavily. I'm talking some hardcore hail. The roof was taking a major beating and I had to turn up the volume on the tv multiple times.

The movie finally ended which had me clapping, literally. I always forgot how good that movie is. Ace wouldn't stop laughing at my lameness which resulted in me slapping his arm on many different occasions.

Ace and I were standing in the kitchen, looking through the fridge. It was currently very empty and in need of a good grocery shop. I made a mental note to go tomorrow. And then we both heard the front door crack open.

I looked at Ace with my eyes wide and whispered, "go to my room." He didn't question it, he just quietly made his way down the hall.

I heard my father stumble his way into the living room but what I didn't expect, was to hear a giggle. A womanly giggle. I peaked out of the kitchen and saw Harry and a woman Who I assumed was his girlfriend.

She was pretty. She was blonde and had golden, sun kissed skin. But she also looked young. Way too young to be dating my 45 year old father but I wasn't an ageist so I didn't judge too hard. I decided I wanted to meet her.

I stepped out into the living room where they were still giggling like a pair of 12 year olds. "Hi, I'm Madison. You must be Nicole. It's nice to meet you," I told her, holding out my hand.

She glared at me and looked at my father. "Who is this Harry? And who's Nicole?"

Yikes.

"Okay well, I'll be in my room," I told them both and slowly started to back up.

Harry held up one finger. "Madison, you stay right there." He said this as the woman stood from his lap and made her way to the door. I had a feeling she wasn't staying very long.

I switched my feet uncomfortably. This was not going to turn out well. She left with a huff and I cringed when the door slammed. My father turned to me.

"How dare you Madison Grey. You did that on purpose didn't you?" I just stood there, glued to the carpet. "You little brat," he whispered before jumping from the couch and heading into the kitchen.

This was my chance, go to the bedroom. But I stayed.

He came back with a beer in hand and then set it on the coffee table. He came closer, stopping directly in front of me. He lit a cigarette right next to my face and took a drag. He blew it out, making me cough. But I didn't dare move.

I had learned to let him blow off steam and not stoke the fire by talking. "Giving me the silent treatment are you Mad? I see how it is. You're just like her, you know. Just like your whore mother."

If I knew one thing, it was that Samantha was not a whore. And then I did something stupid, I told him just that.

"My mom is not a whore."

Harry laughed and laughed and almost choked on his cigarette. His laughter turned into hacks of coughs. I took this chance to turn around to go to my room. But Harry had other plans. He grabbed a thick section of my hair and pulled. It surprised me more than it scared me but I still yelped. I landed on the floor, on my ass. Harry bent down toward me. "Don't talk back to me Madison Grey. One more time, I swear to God."

And then he leaned back, away from me. He went to the couch and opened his beer. He sat down and it was like he was excusing me. But I still sat there, confused out of my mind.

I was scared. Harry had scared me. I had never in my life been terrified of my father. But here I was, sitting on my ass in front of the tV while my father drank a beer and I was scared. I didn't even remember getting up and walking to my door. But somehow, I was in my room. I closed the door and sagged against it, sliding to the floor.

Okay

My eyes were closed because if I opened them, the faucet would let loose.

When I felt a hand on my cheek, I almost flipped my shit. But then I remembered I had told Ace to go to my room. Great, the last thing I needed right now was for Ace to see me cry. But when I opened my eyes, there wasn't pity on my face, only confusion and something else I'd never seen directed at me.

An unwanted tear slipped down my cheek and Ace pulled me into his chest, on the floor. He cradled me in between his legs and I cried. I wasn't sobbing but there were silent tears flowing

down my face. They were unstoppable and Ace didn't care. He didn't care if I ruined his tee shirt. He didn't care that a teenage girl was crying relentlessly into his chest.

Boys didn't know how to deal with crying girls, right? But Ace more than dealt with me and my tears. He did something that I didn't realize I needed. Which was for someone to just hold me. He didn't tell me everything would be okay. He didn't plant hope into my mind because he couldn't promise it.

After a while, I leaned on his shoulder. My tears had stopped but I was exhausted. His arms loosened around my waist and he pulled back a little. "Are you okay?"

I managed a nod and wipe at my wet cheeks. "Thank you," I told him, looking into his concerned green eyes. "I'm sorry for crying on you."

His frown didn't change as I stood from his grasp and walked over to my bed. "You don't need to be sorry sweetheart." I sat down, and looked at the floor. I didn't want him to think Harry was always like this.

"You know, Harry doesn't usually yell at me like that. That was a first." I could tell my justification did nothing to ease his anger.

"I don't want to leave you here alone Mad," he paused. "Mad, that's why you don't like when I call you Mad?" I nodded sheepishly. Harry had called me Mad my entire life. "I'll stop," he told me immediately. But I didn't want him to.

"It's okay, it's growing on me. And it's different when you say it." I was spewing out words before thinking. I didn't want to know what was going through Ace's head. I didn't know why I had just said that.

He ignored my last statement. "I'm serious about not feeling comfortable about leaving you."

I nodded, "stay."

"Turn around," I told Ace. I needed to change into a tee shirt but didn't want to venture into the hallway to find the bathroom with Harry still out there. He smirked but did as I said. I carefully watched his back as I changed, making sure he didn't sneak a peek. "Okay."

He turned back around and glanced at my shirt which had polka dots all over it. "Cute." I blushed as he went over to my bed and pulled back the covers for me. I climbed in.

"Are you going to get in trouble for staying?" I asked him.

He shook his head, "I was suppose to stay with Raze tonight anyway."

"Sorry I took you away from spending time with you friends," I told him, my voice solemn.

Ace got under the covers and smiled, "I think I'd rather be here anyway." And then he turned off the bedside lamp on my side. Meaning, he leaned over my entire body to do so. I think stopped breathing for a second. There had never been a boy in my bed before.

I felt heat climb up my neck as he settled under my covers, not touching me. Not unless I let him. And just for tonight, I wanted to forget he was Ace Craige. The boy who used girls when he was bored. The Ace that was my fake boyfriend.

So I scooted closer to him and loosely threw an arm over his torso. He was stiff to the touch at first but once my face was snuggled on top of his chest, he relaxed. One hand went to my hair and ran through the strands. The other played with my fingers that rested on his ribs. It was easy after that to fall asleep.

Chapter 4

The only eventful thing about Saturday was when Ace shook me awake and told me my father had already left for the day. I wasn't sure how he knew that but I didn't question it. He left quickly after that, claiming he needed to go home and help his mom clean up the house before his family arrived.

I went grocery shopping with the little money I had and told myself to make sure Harry paid me back. Beside that, nothing else happened. I did my homework, which was little to none. I talked to Kimmy for a few hours about college. Neither of us were sure about what we wanted to do or where we wanted to go. I was seriously considering a gap year.

I fell asleep somewhere around 11 pm and woke up way too early for a Sunday morning. I cleaned up around the house while Harry slept half the day away in his room. We still hadn't exchanged any words since Friday night but that was normal of us. I didn't want to talk to him anyway.

It was finally time for me to get ready so I hopped into the shower. Once I was out, I blow dried my hair and left it in its natural, slightly wavy state. I looked in the mirror and contemplated wearing makeup. Deciding to impress the family rather than scarring them, I lightly covered my face in foundation. Livened my face with some bronzer and blush and applied some mascara.

My outfit consisted of a light yellow sundress that ended mid thigh. The dress was an off the shoulder type. It was adorable. I slipped on a pair of black flats and a short gold necklace Samantha had gotten me for my 16th birthday.

The doorbell rang and I checked my phone for the time. It was definitely time for Ace to pick me up. He had already texted me to tell me he was here, 5 minutes ago. Shoot.

I grabbed my things and rushed out into the hallway. I heard gruff voices and I cringed. Harry had gotten there first. I could see Ace was holding back his anger while introducing himself to my father.

"Nice to meet you sir, I'm Ace. I'm here to pick up Madison," he spouted to my father.

Harry looked confused and slightly angry. He turned around and saw me. "Mad, why didn't you tell me you had a boyfriend?"

I couldn't help myself. "Well Harry, you never told me you had multiple girlfriends now did you?" I pushed past him and grabbed Ace's wrist.

I started to pull him away but my father spoke again. "Have her home by midnight."

"I'm not a child-" I started.

Ace interrupted. "Don't worry sir, I will." I stared at him like he was crazy but he gave me a look that told me to shut my trap.

I could tell he knew I was angry because when we got to the car, he was silent. It wasn't his place to tell my father that I would respect his curfew. Especially not when he knew how Harry is to me.

"He wouldn't have let you go Mad. Not if I was disrespectful," Ace glances over at me halfway through the trip. I just kept my arms crossed and pouted like a baby although I knew he was right.

The anger started to wear off when he turned on the radio and an old One Direction song came on. Ace immediately went to change in but I smacked his hand away and started singing.

Waking up, beside you I 'm a loaded gun, I can't contain this anymore. I 'm all yours, I 've got no control, no control. Powerless, and I don't care it's obvious, I just can't get enough of you, the pedal's down, my eyes are closed, no control.

I could see Ace staring at me inbetween looking at the road ahead. The smirk I was used to was in full force. "Look at the road doofus!" I laughed, causing his lips to stretch further.

Ace's house was only a five minute drive away from my apartment. He parked in front of a nice looking, but not over the top house. It wasn't a mansion like the rumors had me expecting. The house was light blue with a white fence. It was a "typical" family home. It was weird to picture Ace living here.

I don't know what possessed me to do so, but i told him just that. "I can't picture you living here."

"Why's that?" He asked me, pulling the keys out of the ignition.

I shrugged. "It's just so-" I looked around the outside at the small garden next to the front door, the green grass lawn.

"Ordinary?" Ace provided.

I nodded, "yeah, and you are anything but ordinary Ace Craige." I said it as a joke, to make him laugh but the look on his face made me turn away and open my door.

I stepped out of the car and straightened my dress and cleared my throat. Ace was beside me a second after that, his face masterfully blank.

"You look pretty by the way," he whispered into my ear. I almost shivered at his close proximity.

I couldn't even manage a thank you as he took my hand. "Let's get this show on the road," he told me with a smile on his face. You would've thought he was almost enjoying this little act. He opened the front door, taking a deep breath and led me in first.

There was a lot of people here. Kids were running through the area around the staircase that was visible as soon as you stepped into the house. The walls were painted a light yellow color and the floors were a brown hardwood.

Ace led me into the kitchen where I saw a group of women huddled around the white island counter. Ace cleared his throat and the women stopped their whispering. I wondered what they were talking about. "Mom."

A petite woman with dark blonde hair stepped toward us with a grin on her face. Up close I could see that this was where Ace got his green eyes. They were so eerily similar, I wanted to take a step back. But considering that would have been embarrassing, I managed not to.

She glanced down at Ace and my intertwined hands and her smile softened. Her eyes flicked over to mine.

"Ace you were right, she's beautiful."

Oh God. Of all the things she could have said. A blush covered my skin and I refused to look at the boy next to me but I felt his grip tighten slightly.

"Mad, this is my mom Anna Ross. Mom this is Madison Grey," he introduced us casually.

I didn't know why I let him introduce me as Mad just as I didn't know why I let him call me it. It sounded nice coming from his lips. Not terrible and scary like it did on Harry's. It was as comforting as when my mother used to call me her little melon.

"Nice to meet you Mrs. Ross. I really like your house. Or what i've seen of it so far. I've always wanted to live in a house like this." After I said it, I realized how sad it sounded. But if she noticed, she didn't say anything. She just pulled me into a sweet hug, pulling my hand away from her son's.

"It's good to meet you Madison. I'm glad my son is with a girl a sweet as you," she told me as she hugged me close.

Too bad it's all a lie, I thought to myself but kept a smile on my face. Pretending I was someone else was sort of fun. For the next few minutes Ace introduced me to his family as his girlfriend. I was playing a part. Did that mean I could pretend that I wasn't Mad? Because within the past few days, it seemed Mad and Madison were two very different people.

I met Ace's aunts and uncles along with his many cousins.

Ace's little brother, Noah, was eight and liked to hang around him whenever he was near. He looked like a little Ace with his green eyes but he was slightly more light haired. The kid was super energetic when he was playing with his cousins, running around the house with toy airplanes and such.

I learned that Anna was married to Austin Ross and he was Ace's stepfather. Ace and him seemed to really get along. It was nice to see him smiling around his family. Was this what he had meant when he said there was many sides to him?

I met the cousin who supposedly went to our school. She was a freshman and did, in fact, go to Edgewood. Her name was Katie. She looked like most of the women in the family, blonde hair, green eyes and small figure. She wore the cutest little glasses and had on a peach colored dress and white flats. She was nice, way nicer than her cousin.

I weirdly really liked his entire family, even the ones that made Ace roll his eyes in annoyance; maybe that's why I liked them. The backyard in Ace's home was beautiful. I could tell Anna spent a lot of time decorating. There was a giant pergola with little lights strung from it with white curtains hanging around them. There was white patio furniture surrounding a little fire pit that had been lit a few minutes before.

Most of the kids were already roasting marshmallows by the fire and the adults lounged on the chairs and various couches. Ace had taken my hand again and he led me to a couch that hadn't been occupied yet. The conversation was nice and I found myself laughing a lot. And surprisingly, I couldn't stop looking over at Ace to see his smile.

At some point, Austin came over to Ace and whispered into his ear. I was curled up on the couch with my knees under my chin. Ace shook his head, clearly embarrassed but then he looked over at me and something in his eyes changed. He smirked and got up. I almost fell over since I had been leaning most of my weight onto him.

He came back a few minutes later with a guitar in hand. He took his place next to me once again and set it on his lap. "What, you play guitar now?" I asked him with my eyebrows raised.

"I've been playing guitar since I was eight actually, just recreationally," he answered sincerely.

I leaned back against the cushions. "Well, then play something."

"I need someone to sing for me," he was still looking at me.

I snorted, aware that his family were watching us. "Well don't look at me you doof."

The smirk he wore grew. "Come on Mad, you can choose the song," he told me, his voice going lower.

"I don't sing Ace."

His eyes filled with confusion, "I've heard you sing Mad. And that's a flat out lie sweetheart."

"I don't sing in front of people," I corrected.

The smirk dropped and a small smile replaced it. "You sang in front of me. Are youu saying I'm not a person?"

"I just don't know. I'm not that good," I kept trying to convince him but it wasn't working. I didn't want to admit that I hadn't even realized I let my guard down enough to sing with him next to me, multiple times.

Anna came up to me and laid a hand on my shoulder, "Ace isn't going to force you to do anything you don't want to do honey. Right Ace?"

But all he did was give me puppy dog eyes. Drat him and his adorable face. I looked up at his mother. "It's okay Mrs. Ross, I'll sing." She smiled knowingly and Ace did a funny little dance in his seat and sent me an air kiss which I smacked away. "It's not for you idiot," I made to sure to tell him.

"I didn't say anything sweetheart," he looked away.

And of course, the kid didn't even ask what song, he just started strumming. So much for me choosing. I recognized the song immediately, thank god. It was Let Her Go by Passenger. But I was nervous and when it came time for me to start singing, so I didn't. Instead, Ace strummed the chords again and began singing himself.

Well you only need the light when it's burning low, only miss the sun when it starts to snow, only know you love her when you let her go.

He nodded at me and I started singing the next verse.

Only know you've been high when you're feeling low, only hate the road when you're missing home, only know you love her when you let her go. And you let her go.

We kept switching parts like that for the rest of the song and everytime Ace opened his mouth to sing, I was awed. I was surprised with the confidence in his voice. He was a really good singer but I never would have guessed it. When we got to the end, his family clapped and I blushed. Ace held up his hand and I high lived it like a six year old, feeling embarrassed.

But I couldn't lie, it was fun and exhilarating to sing with Ace. It felt like I could finally let go and be me. And it was hard to just be me sometimes. I didn't realize Ace could be the person to bring that out in me. I had only known two other people who could and that was my mother, before she left, and Kimmy.

Chapter 5

On the way home, we were silent. The only noise was the radio playing softly on an old rock station. I wouldn't say it was awkward silence, even though we were acting very awkward. Ace had surprised me tonight; seeing him with his family was new and a nice change. It made me feel weird. But I wasn't sure why he was acting odd.

He pulled into a parking spot in the apartment complex and turned off the ignition. He sat back with a sigh and turned toward me. "Thank you for tonight Mad," Ace told me, his eyes glancing over me.

"A favor is a favor Ace Craige. Do you think they believed that I was your girlfriend?" I wasn't sure why I had asked him that. They had obviously believed us. And I felt kind of bad that we had tricked them. No, Ace had tricked them. I was just here doing him a favor. A favor I still wasn't sure why I had agreed to.

He nodded and cleared his throat, "yeah, I think they did."

"I didn't know you could sing like that," my voice was soft and sounded kind of breathless. It was embarrassing.

The air in the car shifted from awkward to comfortable. "Sing like what?"

I shrugged, "good."

Ace started to chuckle which made me smile for some reason. A weird feeling formed in my stomach and my heart wanted to jump out of my body when he smiled like that; like he didn't give a damn about anything else that was happening.

"I would say the same to you except, I already knew you could sing well," Ace was still chuckling slightly and it made me want to jump out of his car and sprint up the stairs to my apartment.

I cleared my throat. "Right. Okay, thank you for bringing me home. I should probably get upstairs and let Harry know that i'm home before I turn back into a pumpkin."

"What?" Ace looked very confused.

I stared at him, "he wanted me home by midnight. Midnight was when Cinderella's carriage turned back into a pumpkin."

"Are you saying tonight was so magical you felt like a princess?" Ace's smile turned devious.

I shook my head and put my hand on the door handle. "I would never imply such a thing. Especially since I was with you."

"Well maybe I should have implied that I was the princess, not you."

What? Oh god, we were flirting again. I really needed to stop doing that.

"You're so weird," I ended up telling him with a laugh.

"And you're beautiful."

My laughter trailed away immediately and I felt a blush creep up my neck. There were a lot of things I could handle. Ace Craige telling me I was beautiful was not one of them. "Okay, goodnight," I told him and opened the door.

Ace got out of the car with me and followed me as I made my way up the stairs. "What are you doing?" I asked him without stopping.

"Walking you to your door? It's the gentlemanly thing to do," his voice sounded rushed and panicked.

I clenched my jaw. Couldn't he let me freak out in peace? "You really don't have to do that Ace. And since when are you a gentleman?" I didn't mean it to sound rude but it came out harsh.

I felt his hand wrap loosely around my wrist and it made me stop. I turned around and waited for a comeback. But Ace didn't say anything until, "why are you being weird?"

"That's not how you woo a girl Ace," my voice sounded bored.

He rolled his eyes at me. There was the Ace Craige I knew and... certainly not loved. "I'm not trying to woo you Mad. I don't need to," he added.

Cue eye roll from Madison Grey.

"You're the one that's acting weird Ace. There's no one here. You don't have to act like my boyfriend right now." Ace Craige wasn't my boyfriend, that much was obvious. And I didn't want him to be. So I wanted him to stop acting like it when he didn't have to.

I kept walking up the stairs. "I'm not acting like your boyfriend Madison. This is just how I act when I'm around you. Sorry if that bothers you," he called after me as he tried to keep up.

Ugh. Why didn't I like it when he actually called me by my name? "Sorry if it bothers you that I'm not falling for your charm."

We had made it to my front door and I had never been more happy to be home. "What are you talking about?" Ace whisper-yelled. I faced him.

"That's what this whole thing is about isn't it? This whole, fake date me, thing. It's just a big act to get some loser to fall for you?" I was being obnoxious and loud and I didn't care. I just didn't want to get hurt. But I wasn't sure when I had come to this conclusion.

Ace started to say something, probably defend himself and make an excuse but the door behind me opened. "Inside Mad, now," Harry ordered.

I turned away from Ace and shoved past Harry who huffed, saying something to the green eyed boy outside the door. I kept walking until my feet hit the soft carpet of my bedroom. I took off my shoes and climbed into bed, not even bothering to remove my makeup or tie up my hair.

Shit. I forgot to set my alarm, I thought to myself. I maniacally threw off the covers and went into my bathroom to wash my face. I was out the door ten minutes later with my hair in a ponytail, no makeup and leggings and a tee on. I had missed first and second period and was currently late to third.

I checked my phone when I got to the school and saw I had a missed call from Ace and three from Kimmy. Kimmy had sent me multiple texts about how, "missing school because of a fight with your boyfriend is not a valid reason" and how she would "Give me hell later for this." Ugh. Stupid Ace probably told her we were fighting and now she thought I was heartbroken over a dumb squabble.

I walked into my class with a pinched look on my face as I tried not to be seen. But instead, I got called out by my teacher and was given a warning about disrupting the class. Oh come on. It wasn't my fault, entirely.

When it was time for lunch, I called Kimmy trying to find her before having to go into the cafeteria. Just as she was telling me she had to make up her science test, a hand tug on my elbow, spinning me around. I told her I'd call her later and we hung up. Ace still had his hand on my arm but was now pulling me through the hallway.

We stopped in a small alcove nobody ever occupied except to make out in. If he tried anything like that on me, I'd stomp on his toes and knee him where the sun don't shine. I looked up at him to see his arms crossed over his chest. He looked angry.

"Where were you this morning?" He demanded but his voice was still quiet.

I gave him a funny look, "calm down dad I overslept, didn't set my alarm last night."

He sighed and rolled his eyes in exasperation, "are you still mad at me?"

"I wasn't mad at you in the first place," but I kind of was, wasn't I? That's why I had yelled at him?

His arms unlatched from his chest and rested at his side. "Okay because yelling at me and accusing me of using you means you're happy?"

He had a point. I shrugged, "I don't know Ace. You kind of are using me." Now I covered my own chest with my crossed arms and glared at him.

"You didn't have to agree Madison," he told me and started to walk away, to the lunch room I presumed.

Okay, he was mad at me. Ace had never called me Madison before. I didn't like it.

I also didn't like when he called me Grey. I wanted him to smirk and call me Mad until I rolled my eyes.

"Ace," I called to him but he didn't turn around. "Ace James Craigel!" I called a little louder, making him stop. His mother had called him by his full name the night before when he had said something rude.

He turned around and waited for what I had to say. I couldn't tell what he was feeling considering his face was blank and void of emotion. "Why do you care if I'm mad or not?" It was the only thing I cared about knowing at this point.

"You're smart Grey. You figure it out."

The end of the day rounded shortly and I was very happy I finally got to go home. I had homework to do and then I would be able to lounge in my pj's all night. But when I heard shouting across the hallway, I tensed up, knowing something was wrong. I cautiously made my way to the noise and saw a crowd of people surrounding a tight.

Jesus. It was Ace and some kid I'd barely seen before. He was a part of a bad crowd that I tried not to associate with. He was also a junior, a year younger than us. Ace was definitely kicking his ass. He was on top and was punching him in the face over and over. The kid was smirking and letting him do it.

I didn't like watching Ace practically kill another kid. His face was cold and his expression, harsh. His eyes were different when he fought. They didn't hold the same warmth they did when he talked to me. It was kind of scary seeing the look of pure malice on his face and the way his muscles pulled and tensed with every hit.

I looked over to his friends who were standing there with a sour look on their faces. Raze was curling his hands into fists at his side as if he wanted to reach out and stop the fight but he didn't. Loki was smirking but he didn't look like he meant it. It looked fake and practiced as if his bad boy

act was just that, an act. It was the same with how I felt with Ace. He was nothing like the bad boy reputation he had built up.

I walked over to them and hit Loki in the arm. He looked over at me surprised and then scowled.

"What do you want?" He asked me, getting the attention of Ryder.

"What the hell is he doing?" I asked both of them, pointing to Ace who had now been flipped over. I watched as the Junior landed a punch to his cheek and I cringed.

"What does it look like Princess? He's fighting," Loki told me, his voice laced with boredom.

I clenched my jaw and hit him again. My punch did nothing to hurt him but he still looked mad. "I can see that asshole. Why aren't you stopping him? He's getting hurt."

"It's what he wanted Madison," Raze added in. "Something got him pissed off today and he wasn't taking any crap from this kid. He was annoying the crap out of us."

"So he decided to kill him?" The question made me question who Ace really was.

Raze rolled his eyes, "he'll be fine. Ace knows his limits and he'll stop before he goes too far."

"Great," I told them sarcastically.

Raze face started to droop as Ace kept getting hit and or he hit the kid. I saw him whisper over to Loki. "Maybe we should stop him."

Loki just looked slightly sick to his stomach. I groaned as Ace got some leverage on the kid and punched him again. The crowd roared with excitement. It was disgusting. How could you cheer something like this on?

I decided enough was enough. "Where are you going princess?" Loki asked me as I started to walk toward the fight.

"To stop this nonsense."

Raze was about to reach out to stop me but Loki held him back. "Let her do it. If she wants her boyfriend to kill her, let her." Jesus he was evil.

I kept walking until I was in the circle of the fight "Ace stop," I yelled. But he didn't stop or acknowledge I was even there.

I said his name a few more times before I turned an idea over in my mind. It was likely to not Work but I decided it was the only other thing I could think of. "Ace please," I cried out, letting my eyes fill with tears. And I thought Ace was good at acting.

He looked up at my tears and tore away from the kid who looked half dead. There was something wrong with him because he looked as if he enjoyed getting his ass handed to him. I took a look down at Ace's bloodied knuckles and it didn't take long for the fake tears to become real.

It reminded me of my father from when I was little. We had been at a restaurant. Harry, Samantha and I. It was my mother's birthday and the waiter brought her a little cake with some candles stuck in it. But he had looked at her the wrong way. Or at least that's what Harry's thought.

So Harry stood up and punched the waiter in the face and then toppled over him to keep at it. I was only seven or so at the time so I didn't know what was going on. Samantha was screaming at him to stop, more scared for the waiter than Harry. When he finally did stop, it was because people had pulled him off of the poor guy and escorted him out of the fancy restaurant. Samantha sat there in her chair, shaking and crying. And I just sat there and thought of the way his hands had bled, if it was even his own blood.

Chapter 6

I was still standing there, in the hallway of Edgewood High, in front of Ace Craige who had just beat a kid to a pulp. Somewhere inside of me, I felt a fear that I had felt many times before but it had been so long, I didn't know what to do with it.

I moved my eyes from Ace's hands up to his bruised and bloodied face. He had a split lip in three different places. There was a welting bruise on his right cheekbone and a cut near his eyebrow. There was still malice in his eyes and that scared me most of all. That he could look at me with such anger.

I took a few steps back from him, the tears spilling over onto my cheeks.

By this point, most of the students had scurried out of the way, scared of getting into trouble. My tears did something to Ace's features. They softened greatly and the anger ceased from his eyes. But I was still scared.

I held my arms across my body protectively and my nails dug into my skin. It hurt but not as bad as when I thought of Ace hurting somebody else.

He started toward me and I flinched and tears welled up again. He saw the fear in my eyes and he looked destroyed. I didn't even notice the principal as he stalked his way over and yelled at Ace to go to the office.

I wasn't even aware of Raze pulling me away from Ace until we were outside of the school in front of the parking lot. I didn't know where Loki had gone to but Raze was in front of me, talking. I let his voice soothe me. He was telling me Ace would be okay, the other kid would be okay. I would be okay. I didn't know Raze was a nice guy. But what if he was pretending too?

The words still soothed me as he walked me to my car and I got in. He told me I shouldn't drive when I was like this but I managed a small smile and told him I was okay, just shocked.

He let me go, apprehensively and I climbed into my car and started it up. I so wasn't okay. I knew that but I wanted to get home and forget about today.

It was hours later when I finally heard my phone go off. I was just finishing my math homework when the ringing filled my ears. The only people who ever called me were Kimmy and Ace. I didn't want to talk to either. But alas, I looked at the caller ID and saw it was exactly who I expected.

I declined Ace's call and went back to working. He called again. I declined. It was ten minutes before my phone went off again. So I turned off my phone completely and finished my homework without anymore interruptions.

I looked over at the clock. It was nearly seven when I heard knocking on the door. I knew it had to be Ace. If I wasn't answering my phone, he'd come over here. I should have known. The doorbell rang three times before I got up out of bed and dragged myself to the front door.

I looked out of the peephole and sure enough, Ace Craige was there, bruised cheek and all. He looked Different and couldn't stop shifting his feet. He knocked again and I jumped away from the peephole and tried to calm my breathing. I did not want to see him right now.

"Mad, your car is in the lot. I know that you're here. Please talk to me." Ace Craige didn't say please but the Ace I thought I knew, didn't scare me. This Ace did. He knocked for another ten minutes while I sat against the door, zoning out. Finally I heard him sigh and I got up to look out into the hallway. He was gone.

The next morning, I got up on time and made it to class before half the class. I sat in my seat and looked down at my notebook. Hopefully Ace had enough sense to move somewhere else but I really doubted it. Kimmy walked in a few minutes later with a sad look on her face. I had called her last night and she came over.

And then, I told her about Ace, about everything. She knew about the fake relationship and Harry. She knew how bad I felt about everything right now. I was surprised when she wasn't angry with me for lying. She was just sad at how it had ended. She was a good friend and I was committed to being a good one back.

She sat down and changed her frown into a smile, trying to cheer me up a little. "So there's one thing I'm still confused about."

"And what's that?" I asked her, my voice quiet.

She held her hands together. "I know you said the whole relationship between you and Ace was fake but do you at least like him a little?"

I scoffed, "I already told you I didn't Kim's." I sounded incredulous.

"You wouldn't have reacted the way you did if you didn't feel something for him. That's all I'm gonna say Maddie. It's okay to like him, you know. From what you told me, he was sweet on you," she told me, her voice getting a little lower than before.

I looked to the front of the classroom, waiting for the bell to ring. Ace was sweet to me. That's what scared me the most. "He reminded me of my dad yesterday. I can't look at him the same anymore knowing he could explode like he did at any second."

Not even a minute later, Ace came walking through the door with a frown on his face. He walked to his seat in front of me just like I thought and sat down. He hadn't looked at me yet which was a promising sign. Maybe he'd just ignore me and forget I existed again.

Kimmy kept talking to me as if everything was normal but all I gave her were one word answers in exchange. I knew Ace was listening to every word she said because his head was tilted, his ear angled toward her. I kept my eyes trained on the back of his head. I stared at the curling caramel strands and I thought about how soft his hair looked.

Okay creep, I thought to myself as I stopped my mind from thinking of Ace. At one point in class the teacher told us to get into groups of 4 to work on an assignment due at the end of class. Ace immediately turned to me and Kimmy and I saw his smirk. He asked if he could be in our group. Kimmy said yes and I said nothing. The girl who sat in front of Kimmy also joined us.

I couldn't concentrate on what we were supposed to be doing when Ace was staring at me so intensely the whole time. I wasn't blushing but to be fair, I wasn't feeling much of anything in that moment. I didn't know what to think every time I looked at him. He was so gorgeous but at the same time it hurt to see the softness in his eyes when I had seen such hardness in them just the day before.

Kimmy and the other girl, Karlie, were engrossed in a conversation that had nothing to do with our assignment so Ace took it as a chance to talk to me.

"Hey, can we talk?"

"You can talk. I can't promise I'll listen," I looked away from him and tried to complete the assignment.

I saw him scratch his head from the corner of my eye. "Okay, can we meet up after school or at lunch?"

"I was thinking you could talk right now actually," I really didn't want to be with him any longer than I had to.

He sighed and cracked his knuckles. The knuckles where his skin was broken and has bled only a day before. "That wasn't what I was going for Mad. I don't care if you don't want to talk to me but I need you to hear me."

"Hearing you scares the hell out of me Ace. I don't think you get that," I still looked down at the paper, filling in another answer.

"Please Mad," he whined, getting the attention of my best friend and Karlie. "Give me today to change your mind about yesterday."

I doubted he would be able to and I wasn't sure I wanted him to. But something in me wanted to trust him still, so I agreed.

At lunch, Kimmy and I sat finally sat together in the cafeteria. We sat in the way back, away from Ace's table with his friends. I hadn't spotted any of the boys yet, which didn't surprise me. If anything, they had probably ditched school.

I looked down at my pasta, poking at it with a fork. I leaned my head on my right hand while Kimmy excitedly talked about the boy she'd been crushing on this month. "Okay, seriously, Maddie, this moping has got to stop."

I looked up, my expression blank and then looked back down. "I don't want to talk about it Kim."

"I don't care if you don't want to. You need to. I can tell this is bothering you. I haven't seen you act like this since you got a D on a math test last year," she told me, sounding a bit irritated.

I scoffed, "I'm fine Kimmy. I just don't like Ace and I want this stupid thing over with."

"What stupid thing? Talking to him? If I remember your agreement right, you still have another two weeks of being his girlfriend. Don't you at least owe him that?"

I shook my head, "I ended that on Sunday Kim. Or at least, I think I did. He must've gotten the point right?"

Her mouth curled up into a smirk, the action very Ace-like. "It doesn't look like he got the point."

"What are you talking about?" I asked her, looking back down at my food. She smacked my arm and nodded her head behind me. I turned around and saw Ace walking toward our table. But it wasn't just Ace. Raze trailed behind him and Loki walking slower behind them.

He stopped at our table and Raze and Loki sat down across from me, next to Kimmy. She looked shocked as hell. She eyed both the boys, as if she couldn't tell which one was cuter. I really hoped she thought it was Raze. Loki was still an asshole. Ace hadn't sat down yet; he stood next to me as if he were waiting for my permission.

I sighed, realizing he wasn't going to back down. I had known Ace for over a week and I already knew him well enough not to test him. I gestured for him to sit, so he did. Once he had pressed himself as close to me as he could, he pulled out a salad out of his backpack.

I couldn't stop my laugh if I had tried. The bad boy was eating a freaking salad and it was hilarious. He looked at me funny. "What are you laughing about?"

I shook my head, "did your mom pack your lunch for you?"

"Yes, she did actually," he told me proudly making me laugh harder. "I'll have you know, I love salads okay? Looks better than your spaghetti anyway."

I gasped, "did you just insult my penne?"

"What are you gonna do about it?" He asked me, leaning closer.

It was easy to forget when I was around Ace. He made me laugh, which was hard to do when I was angry or upset, especially when he was the person who I was angry with. I looked away and kept eating my pasta. "If you make fun of my lunch one more time, you'll wish you'd never sat down."

His laugh was easy going and boisterous. "Same goes to you sweetheart."

"Ugh, whatever. Just, don't insult my penne," I told him, unable to keep the grin off my face. And okay, maybe

I did want him to fix whatever had happened between us.

Chapter 7

Meet me by your locker. 3 pm

I stared at the note that had somehow been placed in the front of my binder. The boy was smart, I'd give him that. I had no fathomable idea on how he had pulled this off but, it was Ace. He could probably do anything and get away with it.

Like after his fight. Kimmy informed me he had gotten a stern talking to and a warning. He beat a kid up and didn't even get in trouble. There had to be something wrong with this school.

The entire span of my next two classes were me, full of anxiety. I had given Ace today to make me forgive him. And I had a feeling he had something good planned.

When the bell rang at 2:55, I hopped a mop out of my seat and tried not to walk too fast to my locker across campus. I made it there at 3:01 and saw students around but no Ace.

I walked over to the locker and looked around but nothing. I sighed and opened it up to put away my books. Another scrap of paper was sitting atop of all my other things. Once again, I wasn't sure how he had accomplished this. I opened it up and saw another note.

Meet me where you get your favorite food.

Ps. Ice Cream is your favorite.

I scrunched my eyebrows close together in confusion. But then, I got it. Ace had taken me to get ice cream last Friday. So that's how I found myself jumping into my car as fast as I could and driving over to Ida's.

I parked in the almost empty lot and opened the door, the little bell ringing. I imagined that Ace would be sitting in the spot we had before, waiting for me. But he wasn't. I looked over at Ida and she smiled, beckoning me over.

"Pick a flavor honey. It's already been paid for," Ida told me.

What was Ace up to? I ordered mint chocolate chip and she handed it over along with a piece of paper. Another piece of paper. I laughed and sat down, already eating my ice cream.

The next place is somewhere we haven't been before. But I promise, you'll like it. 314 Pomeroy Rd.

I typed the address into my GPS and saw that it was a flower shop I had never visited before. I mean, it wasn't like I strolled through when I was bored. I smiled and drove my way there.

The shop was cute. It was small and painted blue. I went in, unsure of what to say or do. I had a feeling Ace wasn't here either.

"Looking for something miss?" The voice was small and sweet. I turned around and saw a little old lady and I smiled at her.

Did I tell her I was looking for Ace? I wasn't sure. "Um, was there a guy here earlier? Tall, brown hair, green eyes?"

"Madison I take it?"

I barely had time to nod before she was off behind the counter. She pulled out a small bouquet of roses and handed them to me. Just as I expected, there was a note attached.

A bouquet of roses for the most special Mad I know. I don't know about you, but I am famished. Meet me at Roller Diner?

He really was going to such far lengths to get my forgiveness. I thanked the lady and made my way out to my car, the roses in my arms. They were beautiful red roses and even though they were cliché, they were my favorite kind of flower.

The diner was only a five minute drive from the flower shop and I made it there by the time it was 3:45. The little bell jingled here too. It was my favorite diner to eat at with my parents when I was younger. My mom had worked there when she was in high school.

This time, Ace was here. He sat in a small booth in the back. I nodded to one of the waitresses and she smiled and gestures for me to go on in. He wasn't looking at me but I could tell he knew I was here.

He was stirring a straw in his water with a sort of half smile on his lips. I sat down and he looked up.

"If I didn't know any better, this whole day feels like you trying to woo me Ace Craige," my tone was flirty and it freaked me out.

He continued to stir his straw but was looking right at me now. "I am trying to win back my fake girlfriend, you know?"

The waitress walked up to the table and asked us if we were ready. I quickly glanced at the menu but already knew what they served so I ordered chicken strips and fries and a root beer. Ace gave me a weird look but ordered a burger and fries.

"What?" I asked him when he didn't look away.

He laughed, "chicken strips? Are you 12?"

"They're good! There is nothing wrong with ordering chicken strips," I tried to convince him, knowing he was just teasing me.

"Not when you're 17," he told me, his voice monotone and sarcastic.

I jokingly frowned and gave him sad eyes. He quickly smiled charmingly and patted my head. I smacked his arm away but he was already laughing and I couldn't help but laugh along.

"Okay back to what we're here for," Ace's voice became serious. I waited and he continued. "Mad, talk to me."

I sighed and stared at his hands and then back to mine. "It was weird to see you like that yesterday, angry and mean."

I could see he nodded out of the corner of my eye. "I was mad and I took it out on that kid. I would say he didn't deserve it but he did. He was saying some pretty messed up stuff about some girl to us."

"But why did you nearly kill him? It was completely unnecessary Ace."

I looked up and saw him looking down now. "I kept thinking, what if that girl he was talking so disgustingly about was you? And then I got it in my head that if this girl was anything like you, she deserved more than that kid talking about her like that."

My breath caught in my throat. "You were thinking about me?" After I said it, I flushed. Wow, way to embarrass yourself in front of a very attractive guy rose.

But he just smiled, "You're my friend Mad. At least, I hope you will be after this." Friend. I skimmed over the word quickly.

"You scared me Ace. That's why I didn't talk to you. It-" I stopped, trying to find the right words. He looked at me confused. "Harry."

It was all I had to say because Ace's face fell and the look he gave me was so sad my chest literally ached. "Mad-"

"Harry used to lose his temper on people. Random people, my mom, and on me. The way you looked at me yesterday Ace, I've seen it before. I used to see it all the time because Harry wore it all the time."

Ace didn't speak; he let me talk. I told him the stories of when Harry had lost his cool and had scared me and my mom. And when I was done, he sat there in silence.

The waitress came back over and set down our food. I immediately found myself digging into my meal, wanting to end the awkwardness. But Ace barely picked up a fry.

"Are you gonna say anything or are you planning on sitting there with your mouth hanging open all day?" I asked him, trying to keep my voice light.

He shook his head. "I just, don't know what to say. I knew you were upset with me but I didn't think it was really about the light. I thought I had done something wrong, which I did, but I thought it was because I had gone too far at my family's get together."

"What are you talking about? I had a great time with your family on Sunday," I was still chomping on my chicken strips.

He dipped a fry into the ketchup off my plate and I resisted slapping the fry out of his hand. "You got all weird afterwards. I thought I had pissed you off for making you sing in front of everyone."

I blushed, remembering the reason I had acted that way. It was because I had realized there was more Ace and me than a fake relationship. "It was fun. That's not why I got mad."

"Then why did you yell at me that night?" He asked me but I wasn't quite ready to spill that.

I changed the subject, "it doesn't matter now. I'm not angry anymore over that night."

He nodded. "Okay, so what can I do to make you feel better about me lashing out on some Junior?"

"I just, I don't know. It freaked me out that you even had that kind of anger inside of you. It made me realize you could snap like that anytime, just like Harry," my voice went from upbeat to sad.

He looked at my face. His eyes trailed over every feature and I heated up a little when they went to my mouth. "I don't know what I can tell you Mad, except for you to trust me. I would never, ever hurt you or anyone that I care about."

"But how can you prove that?" I asked him, trying to focus on my food.

He shook his head, "I can't. I'm sorry that I can't do that. It sucks because all I want to do is be able to tell you that I will never act like that again. But I can't promise you that. I can't lie to you."

And man did that hurt. But I understood him, I did. I wanted to think the best of Ace because that's what he had showed me today. And I wanted to be Ace's friend, didn't I?

I nodded, "I trust you Ace. I literally met you like a week ago but I trust you."

I paused and spoke to myself. "Man, that's really insane."

I looked up at him and saw the small smile that lit his face. "What are you saying Mad?"

I stuck out my hand, "friends?"

His lips parted into a beautiful smile with his teeth showing. "Friends," And then he shook my hand and it reminded me of when he had held my hand at the football game on Friday."

I went home that night with a lighter step and a slight smile on my face. But it disappeared the moment I walked in the door. Harry was sitting there on the couch, beer in his hand like always. The tv was on but nothing was playing, just static.

What the hell is he doing?

I walked into the apartment and closed the door slowly, trying not to make much noise. Maybe he wouldn't notice me if I walked past him carefully. But he wasn't asleep as I had hoped. "Maddie, you're late," his voice grumbled at me.

I looked down at my phone. "It's 5 o'clock." And then I kept walking to my room.

"Young lady, you listen to me. If you were with that boy again, you're grounded. I don't like him," my father told me, making me roll my eyes.

He saw the action and anger flared in his eyes. "He's just my friend Harry. And I was with Kimmy anyway," I lied.

I could tell he didn't believe me because his eyes narrowed on the roses I held behind my back. "Who are those for?" He nodded to the flowers.

"Me," I told him, my heartbeat speeding up. "I thought it was ironic. You know, my name is Madison, these are roses. Good times." God I was stupid.

He placed his beer on the coffee table and stood up slowly. It looked like it was a lot of effort because he stumbled on his feet and fell sideways a little. He was drunk. But it wasn't a surprise.

"I'm just gonna go do my homework now," I started to walk back to my room but Harry took a step forward, a little more steady on his feet.

"Maddie, I'm serious about this boy. I don't care if you think you can do whatever you want or whoever but you're better than this. You're better than her." Harry was comparing me to my mother again.

If only she hadn't left us. If only she hasn't left me with him. Why didn't she take me with her? I could have gone and gotten away from Harry and his nonsense. I could have left this stupid town and gone somewhere. I could have been someone else.

But she did leave. And I had an amazing best friend and was on the verge of making another. I wouldn't let Harry or Samantha take that away from me.

"I understand Harry," I told him, even though I didn't. But I figured arguing would make him volatile again.

He looked at me surprised when I didn't talk back. And then he looked smug and I wanted to wipe it off his face. "And stop calling me Harry while you're at it. It's disrespectful."

I clenched my jaw in anger. How dare he talk to me about being disrespectful. The anger that bubbled up inside me was weird and new. Of course I had been mad at him before but the way I felt at that moment was pure anger.

But I managed to nod my head and he let me walk away. I found a vase in my room filled with fake flowers. I had tried to liven up my room at one point but it didn't really work. I filled the vase with water from my water bottle and put the roses in. Ace was the only thing keeping me calm right now.

Chapter 8

I found myself barely paying attention in English since all I did was talk to Kimmy or Ace. it was my best class so it wasn't detrimental to my grade but we were yelled at. A lot. It was mostly Ace's fault. He tried his hardest to make both of us laugh. I was pretty sure he did it on purpose too, just so we'd get into trouble. Getting yelled at just made us laugh even harder.

It was Friday and three days had passed since the night at the diner. Ace had turned to me during class today to inform me that his family wanted me to come over again tonight. They were having a family game night.

I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't nervous. I had already met them and it's not like Ace and I were actually dating. But it was still nerve wracking. Meeting parents were always weird to me. Even when it was just your friend's mom or dad. They still freaked me out.

We went to his house right after school and went inside, not knowing what to expect. Noah was standing by the door when Ace unlocked it and immediately wrapped him in a hug. Noah was short so he only reached his waist. Ace didn't even look taken aback.

"Hey ninja. How was school?" Ace asked him. The nickname was cute; it probably stemmed from the fact that Noah was a hyper kid.

Noah gave him a smug look. God what was Ace teaching this kid? "Mom didn't make me go today. We stayed home and made cookies for you and your girrrrlfriend." I looked over and Ace and he was holding in a laugh. "That's nice bud, lucky you."

"I bet you wish you could have been here to make cookies for your girrrrlfriend," Noah dragged the word again. I But Ace just chuckled and nodded, "mhm."

Noah gave a shy wave to me and I smiled back at him. He was adorable. A little blush appeared on his cheeks and I looked over at Ace and saw him still laughing.

"I think my brother has a crush on you," Ace told me as we walked into the kitchen, which seemed like his mother's favorite place to hang out. I gave him my most dramatic eye roll.

Ace's mom was in front of the sink, cleaning the dishes from what I can only assume was the cookies. She was humming a little to herself and continued to do so even after she saw us walk in.

"Hey mom."

"Hey Mrs. Ross," Ace and I said at the same time.

She smiled and dried off her hands. She walked toward us and gave me a pointed look. "I thought! told you to call me Anna?" I blushed a little and nodded. She looked over at Ace and told him, "Austin won't be home for another hour or so. You two can go upstairs or outside and do your homework or something. "Or something? "

Ace was thinking the same thing because he had a wicked smile on his face. I looked over at him and smirked, "you wish."

A bubbly laugh escaped his mother and she shook her head, "I didn't mean it like that. Oh dear, I'm just going to go back to the dishes. Have fun kids." She turned away and then turned back around. "But not too much fun," she warned us.

Ace and I both laughed and then headed up the stairs to his room. I hadn't been in his room the last time I was here. He opened the door all the way at the end of the hall. He let me walk in first and I looked around.

His room was painted a blue/grey color and his bed, placed in the middle of the room, had navy blue sheets. There were a few posters up by his window of old rock bands. He had a white desk and a flat screen tv hanging on the wall opposite of his bed.

I set my backpack down next to his desk which was right next to his door. He also had a bathroom attached to his room next to the desk. I sat in his desk chair and Ace walked over to his bed and sat down.

"Nice room," I told him, breaking the silence.

He nodded and threw his bag onto the bed and started unzipping it. I eyed him curiously as he pulled out a notebook and his binder.

When I saw him reach for a pen, I asked him, "what are you doing?"

"Homework?" He looked up at me and scrunched his eyebrows together.

I got up out of the chair and walked over to where he sat. On the front of his notebook, it said the class it was made for. "I didn't know you took psychology."

He took the notebook from me and put it back in his bag, embarrassed. "I just needed elective credits."

"Uh-huh, and I just get good grades because I want to," I raised my eyebrow and gave him a knowing look.

He looked up at me and smiled adorably. "Yeah okay, maybe I want to go into psychology for my career."

My smile widened, "wow, the Ace Craige has bigger dreams than staying out of prison the rest of his life." He just chuckled and opened his binder. "Since when do you willingly do your homework?"

"Well, my mom gave us the option of homework or something else and you shot down the ladder," he shrugged.

I mockingly frowned at him, "sorry that I refuse to hook up with you while your mom is downstairs."

"So you're saying that if she wasn't here, you'd hook up with me?" His eyebrow twitched up in question.

Dammit.

"No! I did not say that!" I squeaked.

Ace put his pen down and gave me smug look. "Admit it sweetheart, you want to kiss me."

"I really don't," I scoffed.

You really do.

Shut up! stupid mind.

"Mad..." Ace crooned And leaned forward, brushing his hand across my knee.

I jerked away from him when his fingertips touched my skin and his smile got brighter. Didn't he know that his touch was electric? "Ace," I warned and smacked his hand away.

He coughed a laugh and I glared at him. I went back to looking through his backpack and found a bunch of random papers crushed at the bottom. Well, we had that in common at least.

I looked up to ask him what other classes he was taking but he was already looking. My heartbeat sped up just a little and his eyes flashed with some unknown emotion. He leaned a closer, just the smallest bit and my eyes widened. As soon as I started to lean too, it was over.

Ace cleared his throat and sat up straight. "So, tomorrow, the guys and I are going to a party. Do you want to go?"

"Why would I go to a party?" I asked him, my voice higher than usual.

He shrugged, "I don't know. I mean you are my girlfriend and everything." He smiled and I rolled my eyes. "Anyway, don't couples do things together like attending parties?"

I cringed a little thinking about teenagers in a small confined space combined with alcohol. "I don't think the party life is for me Ace." He nodded and it was silent again.

God, why is it so quiet?

"I do want you to get to know my friends though..." He trailed off.

I laughed, "I'm pretty sure Loki hates my guts. Especially after your fight on Monday."

"He doesn't hate you Mad. He doesn't even know you," he tried to convince me but it wasn't working.

I gave him a pointed look, "He said, and I quote, "'what do you want?'" all snarky like when I came up to them."

Ace just gave me a sheepish look. "He was just having a rough day?"

"Stop trying to reason with me. Raze was the nice one anyway," I told him with a frown.

He sighed and put down his pen, "look Mad, I don't know why Loki acted that way towards you. He's just not used to me having a girlfriend."

"I'm not even your actual girlfriend! How is he going to treat me once we break up?" I questioned, putting air quotes around the words break up. But Ace shrugged which only increased my frustration. "Why can't you just tell them this is all an act?"

He rolled his eyes. "I already told you why. But since you're having such a hard time wracking your brain for the answer, I'll explain it again." I groaned in annoyance but he continued. "Raze and Loki are loud mouths. They don't know how to keep their mouths shut. If they knew what we were doing, the whole school would know within an hour. Word gets out our relationship is fake, my cousin becomes aware of our little secret and rats me out to the entire family. I will never live that down Mad."

"I mean, that seems like your problem," I teased but he didn't even crack a smile.

"A week and a half Mad, that's all. I'm just asking for another week and a half and then, if you want me to, I'll never talk to you again," he told me.

I don't want you to stop talking to me, I thought to myself. I felt myself frown a little and I turned my body away from him. I wanted to tell him how I had become used to his presence the past two weeks and I didn't want him to stop hanging out with me. But what was the guy going to do? After our future break up, he would be my friend? That's not how these things usually work out. And what would everybody else think? They would think that Ace Craige was friends with his ex. And that was bound to have some serious backlash.

But instead of asking him about any of that, I told him, "okay." And he didn't look pleased about it. But before he could say anything else, his mother called us down for dinner.

But before he could say anything else, his mother called us down for dinner.

The dinner was nice but a little awkward. I got along great with Anna but Austin seemed to keep to himself a lot. Noah had taken the seat on Ace's right and I had been placed on his left. Ace talked to Noah mostly the whole time. It was like he was ignoring me, only I didn't know why.

After I offered to help clean up and helped Anna put the dishes away, we walked into the living room to see a bunch of board games spread around on the floor. Noah and Ace were sitting next to each other with games surrounding them and Austin sat on the couch, looking exhausted.

"Have you boys decided on a game yet?" Anna asked them as she took a seat beside her husband and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Noah glared at his brother and told us, "well I wanted to play Sorry! but Ace wants to play stupid Candy Land."

Anna smiled and voted, "Candy Land."

She looked expectantly at Austin and he smirked over at Ace and said, "I'd like to play Sorry!"

Everyone in the room then turned to me to break the tie. Noah gave me an adorable smile and I turned to Ace who had somehow mastered the puppy dog look. Ace wanted to play Candy Land huh?

"Sorry!" Too bad.

Ace groaned and threw a deck of cards at me which landed in a heap by my feet. "Is there no such thing as loyalty?" He asked me.

I laughed and told him, "your brother's face was too cute to vote against."

"You don't think I'm cute?" His frown was back and his eyes widened into a pleading look.

I bit my lip to stop my laughter, "you look, crazy."

Ace glared at me and then leaped to where his brother sat and messed his hair up which caused Noah to yelp loudly and punch his brother in the bicep. By now, the whole family was chuckling and I leaned over and picked up the game board for Sorry!

It was a game for 4 so Anna and Austin decided to share a color. I was blue, Ace was red, Noah was yellow and their parents were green. Ace had his heart set on going for my pieces whenever he got the chance and on more than one occasion did I want to cuss him out.

Anna and Austin ended up winning and I got in second. Ace and Noah pouted, showing their whiny loser sides. Ace got to pick the next game in which he decided to pull out the cards instead of Candy Land.

"Let's play Go Fish," he smiled and he looked so happy just to be there with his family.

We started playing and when it was my turn, I looked at Ace and asked him if he had any Ace's. He smirked but lucky for me, he did. I placed my set down and stared at them as Noah asked Ace for an 8. Down on the table was a set of Ace of Spades.

Chapter 9

Call me pleasantly surprised when Ace asked me if I wanted to come over on Sunday, since his family were throwing another barbecue. But this time, it was at his aunt and uncle's house. I was excited to see his cousin, Katie and hopefully find out a few embarrassing secrets from Ace's childhood.

I agreed after he dropped me off at my apartment. I refused to let him come inside since the last time Ace was brought up in a conversation between Harry and me, it didn't end well. I told him to have fun at his little party the next day and he rolled his eyes and waved goodbye. The guy was really growing on me.

Harry was also in a good mood, making my entrance so much easier. He just grumbled a little about staying out late and sent me off to my room. I fell onto my bed and checked my phone. I had a missed call from Kimmy so I called her back.

She answered on the second ring. "How did it go?" She asked me, excitement evident in her voice.

I laughed and covered my giggles with my hand. "It was fun. I'm really gonna miss his parents once this whole thing is over."

"What do you mean, over? You aren't even going to stay friends with Ace after the next two weeks?"

I sighed. I had wanted to avoid this topic with Kimmy, knowing she would be upset and confused.

"Kim, it's not like he did this to become my friend. This is just a favor and nothing else."

"So you're telling me, you won't be even a little upset if you guys just stop talking?" She asked me, her voice sarcastic.

I groaned and let my face fall into my pillow. "I don't know." My voice was muffled from the cushion but I knew she understood what I had said.

"All I'm saying is, Madison, it's only been like a week and a half and you guys already know so much about each other."

I hated that she was right. Ace didn't know everything about me or my past but he knew a lot. It took me a while to trust people; but Ace had gotten me to trust him within a mere 10 days. What did that say about us?

Kimmy must have sensed my change in mood because she changed the subject from Ace to the history homework. I was grateful for Kimmy. Everything she did, she did in consideration of other

people's feelings. It felt like she could read me better than a book and could see right through me when I lied. At times, it was a curse. Other times, it was a God send.

We talked for the next hour and a half while we both started our homework but Kimmy finished before me and decided to retire to bed early. We said our goodnights and I plugged my phone in to charge while I got my towel from its hook for my shower.

I took a nice, long shower that wasted a bunch of water, but I felt like I needed it. This week had been insane and I was glad that it was over. I dried off quickly and returned to my room, dressed in my pajamas. I glanced over at my phone since the screen had lit up. On my phone there was a message from Ace.

Goodnight Mad. See you Sunday.

I didn't know what to send back. So instead, I went to sleep. But there was a new feeling in my gut that made my heart beat a little faster.

Saturday afternoon consisted of me driving over to Kimmy's house because she had the sudden urge to make brownies. Being the good friend that I am, I drove over to the nearest Walmart and bought brownie mix and her favorite icing.

We spent the whole day watching old episodes of The Vampire Diaries while eating our slightly burnt treats. We had just made it to season two when I got a phone call from Ace. I showed Kimmy and she gave me a weird look but I shrugged and answered.

"Hello?" It sounded like a question.

I heard some laughter at the other end. It was very loud, wherever he was. The music was pounding into my ears and I wasn't even there. "Madieeeee!"

I jumped when Ace's loud voice blasted through the speaker. "Having fun at the party?"

"Oh yeah! Toooons of fun," he laughed again.

I bit my lip and put him on speaker for Lilli to hear. "Ace, are you drunk?"

He scoffed but it was slurred. "Are you drunk?"

"No?" I told him, barely keeping my laughter in.

"Don't drink and drive Maaaaaad. It's illegal," his voice was all over the place and he hiccuped in the middle of his sentence.

Kimmy literally had to use her hand to cover her mouth from letting out fits of giggles. "I'll keep that in mind. Are you okay?"

He scoffed again until his mouth made some pretty weird noises. "I'm fiiiine. I want to hang out with youuu!" His voice turned whiny.

"You need to go to bed Ace. Your mom is going to kill you. Go drink some water and sober up," I sounded like an old woman, shouting demands to her child.

He laughed at me and I could picture the grin he must've been sporting. "Okayyy Meddie. Goodnighhhht."

I hung up the phone and both Kimmy and I burst out laughing. I looked at the clock and saw it was only 10:30. "How is he already so drunk?" I asked her.

"Must have started drinking early?" The laughter was still apparent in her voice. We both giggled a little while longer but then continued on our binge session.

It was an hour or so later when my phone rang again. But this time it was a text tone. I looked down at my screen and saw a text from Ace.

Why you're not home?

I rolled my eyes at his very incorrect use of the word, you're and texted back,

I'm at Kimmy's. Why are you at my apartment?

It took him a few minutes to reply.

i toLD U I wantted 2 hnG OUT!

Oh god, he was really drunk. I dialled his contact and waited for him to answer. "Maddd. Where are you?"

"I already told you, I'm at Kimmy's." It was now almost midnight and I was ready to go to sleep. I didn't want to talk with a barely functioning human being.

He made a few sounds of disappointment before asking me, "well, where does Kimmy live?"

"No, Ace! I'm going to sleep. Please get a ride home and go to bed."

He sighed, "you never want to hang out with me."

I groaned loudly, "Ace, we're literally hanging out tomorrow."

"I want to hang out with you nowwww. Pleeeeeeease, pleasssse?" I had never heard him sound like more of a baby. I hung up the phone. And a few minutes later, he texted me.

Ruode!

I was only 90% sure he meant to say, rude. I didn't let myself worry and I glanced over at Kimmy. The girl was already asleep. I sighed and set my phone on her nightstand and let myself fall asleep. I sighed and set my phone on her nightstand and let myself fall asleep

The next morning I woke up to Kimmy jumping on top of me. "Wake up Maddie! It's almost 11! You need to go home and shower."

I groaned, "5 more minutes..." She continued to jump and shake me. "Oh my gosh, okay fine. I'm up Kim."

She looked very pleased with herself and I eyed her suspiciously. "I packed your bag already for you. You are ready to go!"

"What did you do?"

She pursed her lips and looked away, "what are you talking about? I didn't do anything." I gave her the stink eye but didn't say anything more. It took me another few minutes before I was able to drag myself out of her bed and put on my shoes.

Kimmy walked me to my car and wished me luck for the barbeque. I drove away and headed toward my apartment.

When I made it there, it was about 11:30. Ace was supposed to pick me up at 1 so I figured I'd have enough time to shower and get ready.

I finished getting ready by 12:45 and I picked up a book to read for the next 15 minutes of waiting.

When the doorbell rang, I made sure to book it out there before Charlie did and sure enough, he was nowhere to be found. I opened the door to reveal Ace sporting a pair of ray bans.

"Hungover much?" I asked him.

He rubbed his forehead as if my voice was too loud. "Shut up. My head is pounding."

I just laughed a little and pulled him down the hall after locking the door behind me. We made it down to the car before he asked me, "so, I called you last night."

"And texted me," I added.

He paused and sighed, "yeah. Sorry about that. I do weird things when I'm wasted."

"Then why do you get wasted?"

He turned on the ignition and started to drive out of the lot. "It's fun? I don't know. Lots of teenagers drink. They don't have to have a reason."

I shrugged, "I don't drink."

"Yes, but you have a reason not to," he informed me.

He was talking about Harry. But surprisingly, it wasn't the reason I didn't touch alcohol. I shook my head, "no, I just don't drink because I don't feel like I need to. Who do I have to impress?"

Ace looked sort of, pleased? With my answer. "You have me to impress now darling."

I rolled my eyes, something tended to do more now that I met Ace. "So you aren't already impressed?" My voice held a sarcastic, teasing tone.

"I never said that," he glanced over at me and smirked and it made me smile.

I reached over and shoved his shoulder. "Hey! No hitting the driver. Do want to kill us?"

I just laughed and turned on the radio. My stomach was doing flips and I didn't know how to control it. Once we had both settled on a mutual station, I lay back against the seat and closed my eyes.

"So, what should I expect out of today?" I asked him, referring to his family.

He sighed and turned the music down a nudge. "Not sure. Probably the same as last weekend."

I nodded and let him drive. We arrived at Katie's house about 15 minutes later. She lived further away from town and in one of the fancier neighborhoods. I glanced around at the view, which was gorgeous. "Wow," I voiced.

Ace chuckled at my wide eyes and he rolled the window down for me, even though I could have done it myself. I stared out the window entire time and enjoyed the breeze that blew against my face.

We pulled into the very large driveway where most of his family was already parked. I was surprised that that many cars could fit.

I stepped out of Ace's car and he met me on my side, taking my hand. Cold heat rushed down to my stomach and my eyes glanced down to our intertwined fingers. I looked up at Ace and he smiled at me and led me to the front door.

It was sort of just like last week, walking up with our hands connected. It was comforting. The door opened before we even got to it and Katie rushed out, looking enthusiastic.

"Thank god you guys are here! Get inside please! Save me from my insane family," she pleaded, pulling on both our free hands.

The way she yanked us into the living room, caused our hands to lose their grip and Ace's hand slipped from mine. We stopped in front of the tv, where a bunch of their family was having a heated argument.

"Oh look guys, Ace and Mad are here!" Katie shouted, getting her family's attention.

One of their aunts asked, "who's better, the Packers or the Steelers?"

Oh no. Sports. This was going to go downhill. Fast.

Ace rolled his eyes but answered first. "Packers, duh." Half his family groaned but I raised an eyebrow.

"The packers suck. Steelers all the way," I told him. My family had been big fans of football back in the day.

Ace swung toward me, "you watch football?"

My cheeks heated, "I used to."

"Well, your team sucks sweetheart," Ace informed me.

My heart skipped when he called me sweetheart since he hadn't done that in a few days. "I think this is the break moment of our relationship. I can't date a Packer fan."

"Of all the teams, you had to be a Steelers fan? Wow, I really know how to choose em'."

Our banter was easy and I could see Ace's family eyeing us back and forth. "Whatever, nemesis. Now if you'll excuse me," I pushed him away from me and sat on the couch next to Austin, who was a Steelers fan, based on his clothing choice.

The game was already on its 3rd quarter when we arrived so Ace went and sat down with the Packers side of the family and glared playfully at me.

The Steelers were ahead by a few points and every time they scored, we would jump up and celebrate.

Finally, the game ended with the Steelers taking the win and I jumped up from the couch and high fived the ones who were next to me. I made my way over to a grumpy Ace and patted him on the shoulder. "Awe, don't cry! It's just a game."

Ace smacked my hand away from him stood up, towering over me. "You're lame," he told me as he swung an arm around my shoulder. The rest of his family was already making their way into the kitchen or the backyard so we followed them.

Once we were all outside, standing around by the bbq, Katie pulled up some chairs for us to sit in. "So, are you guys excited to graduate this year?" She asked us.

We both let out a heavy sigh and Ace answered first. "I don't even know what I want to do, or where I want to go. Maybe something here in California"

He looked over at me, waiting for me to answer. "I want to go to Emerson College. It's in Boston."

"What do you want to study?" Katie asked me.

I looked down at my lap and smiled, "journalism or some sort of writing major."

"You write?" Ace seemed interested.

I nodded at the two of them. "Yeah, all the time. English is my best subject. It's crazy to think that in just 3 months or so, we have to start applying. It used to seem so far away."

"Yeah," Ace agreed and it went quiet.

Katie cleared her throat, "thank god I still have like 3 years to go."

Chapter 10

Ace Craige really wasn't that bad. In a way, he was kind of perfect. Not perfect in the sense that everything about him was figured out and he had no flaws; but in a way that he was perfect as the guy he was.

I watched him as he let his brother tackle him to the ground outside. Ace had held a football above Noah's head, just enough to where he couldn't reach. Noah kept trying to pummel his older brother in the leg, stomach and back.

Noah pulled himself back and ran at Ace with as fast as he could and even I could tell he was going to try to knock him over. The idea of it was hilarious and impossible but Ace, being the good big brother he was, pretended to be surprised by his attack and fell to the grass on his back.

Noah sat on his check in victory and lifted his arms above his head and yelled, "I got him!"

Ace was laughing his head off, his perfect, white teeth showing. His grin was so wide, his eyes were squinted closed. He caught my eye and gave me a playful wink. I rolled my eyes, hoping to look somewhat annoyed with him; but he knew better.

In a quick motion, he had Noah over his shoulder, causing the little boy to shriek and slap Ace's back. But it only made Ace laugh harder as they made their way over to me. He set his little brother down and he immediately stuck his tongue out at him and ran away.

He leaned down and grasped both my wrists in his large hands and easily pulled me out of my seat. I groaned in fake anger and smacked his bicep when he let go. "What if I didn't want to get up?"

"That's not my problem," he smirked down at me which earned him another light smack.

He chuckled, the sound sending a small spark to my stomach. "What do you want?" I asked him as he began to pull me along beside him, his hand around my wrist once more.

"Dragging you up to my bedroom," he told me with no emotion.

I glanced over at him in alarm but my heart slowed when I saw the smirk still firmly planted on his face. "Shut up Ace."

"I was serious," he confessed, his eyebrows raised.

I huffed out a laugh and repeated the words I had told him once before. "You know Ace, not every girl wants to-"

My voice was cut off when he let go of my wrist and covered my mouth with it. "My mother is going to kill me if she hears that."

"Not my problem," I smirked, or what I hoped was a smirk.

Ace took on my signature move and rolled his eyes. "Chill out, I just wanted to show you something."

Yeah, but what?

At this point, I felt like Ace wouldn't try anything on me. He knew that I would seriously do some damage to him if he did. I followed him, willingly this time, up the stairs to his room. He opened the door that was all the way at the end of the hall and stepped in.

His room was exactly as I remembered. But what surprised me was the addition of the guitars in the corner of his room by the window.

He had two sitting on their stands; one was acoustic and the other, electric. There was an amp sitting next to them. I moved my gaze over to the opposite side of the rather large room. Ace also had a keyboard. The keys were shiny and it made me want to touch.

I had learned to play the piano from my mother when I was younger but after she left, Harry sold my keyboard and I hadn't bothered to buy another. My feet took me over to it and I sat down at the little bench in wonder.

My hands smoothed over the keys, not pressing down to make any sound. I barely noticed Ace sitting beside me until he spoke. "Do you play?"

"I did," I looked over at him and gave him a little smile. He looked confused. "Harry sold my keyboard a few years ago. I haven't really played since my Samantha left."

Ace's face scrunched up, probably uncomfortable with the way I called my parents by their first name. It happened with most people. "Why would he do that?"

I shrugged and turned back to the keys. "Didn't have enough money to buy what he wanted I guess." Even to this day I didn't know what he did with the money. Harry wasn't into drugs but alcohol was another story.

Ace turned on the keyboard and pressed a key, a dull sound escaping from it. He hit another key a little closer to me and then played a small little song with only a few keys. When he was done, he sat back and looked at me expectantly.

I rolled my eyes but lifted my hands from where they rested on my lap. "I don't know if I still remember anything."

"I think you'll find that it comes back rather easily," he leaned closer to me, practically whispering into my ear.

I held back a shudder and popped my knuckles in anticipation. I bit my bottom lip and placed my fingers accordingly, over the keys. I decided to play something fairly easy that I had learned early on. It was simple and short and Ace was surprisingly right; I picked up on the keys and their order quickly.

I looked back over to Ace with a pleased smile on my face and saw he had a matching smile. "Is this what you wanted to show me?"

"Well I was planning on showing you the guitars but I guess this works too," his smile turned back into his classic smirk.

I turned to look at the guitars across the room and stood up, walking over to them. "I will admit, they're pretty cool too."

"Don't tell me you play guitar as well..." he trailed off as I took the electric off its base.

He came toward me quickly, as if he was scared I was going to drop it. "No, I don't. I've always wanted to play guitar though."

He took it from my hands by its neck and sat down on the bed with it. "Plug it into the amp."

I did as I was told. As soon as it was on, Ace strummed a single note, filling the room with the guitar's shaking sound. My eyes lit with interest and I took a tentative seat beside him; but not too close.

He played a few more strings before handing it back over to me, helping me place it in my lap. He also took the time to place my fingers on the neck to make the C chord as he called it. I strummed lightly and looked over to him for approval.

He was smiling again but didn't say anything. He just moved my fingers once more and created the A chord.

This went on for at least another fifteen minutes until my fingers began to hurt. I looked down at them and saw them and wished I had built up callouses like Ace had.

I had never noticed the hard skin on his fingers before; but now, it was obvious and visible. He had the hands of a guitar player. Yet, they were soft when they held mine. I went to strum the chord one last time when his bedroom door opened, revealing Anna.

Her face held a small smile that was directed toward her son but it widened when she looked over at me. Ace pulled the guitar off my lap and placed it back where it belonged before facing his mother again.

"It's about time for everyone to eat. We're eating in the dining room," she told us.

We both nodded to her and I stood from the bed. Ace turned off the amp. "Is everyone still here?" Ace asked.

"Most are still here yes. Doug and Penelope left with Kolby. And Grace left with Molly; something about nap time," Anna waved her hand around.

Doug and Penelope were his aunt and uncle, Kolby, being his four year old cousin. Grace was his cousin and Molly being her two year old daughter.

Anna went to leave but turned around again, "keep this door open please." And then she made her way back downstairs, leaving the two of us with flushed cheeks.

Mostly everyone was already seated when Ace and I made our way down to the dining room. Katie saw us and patted the seat next to her. I sat beside her and Ace sat on my other side. The food was already placed in the middle of the table and everyone was digging in.

Halfway through my plate and talking to Katie, she looked over at Ace and studied him. And then she moved her gaze back to me and studied me even harder. Her eyes narrowed into little slits and I glanced behind me to Ace to see if he was seeing it too.

The look on his face was just as confused and scared as I imagined mine was. He caught my eye and his face changed from nervous to mischievous. The next thing I knew, his palm was over my knee, under the table.

My eyes widened but from the corner of my eye, I saw Katie looking with approval.

What in the world?

Katie went back to our conversation but I could barely concentrate with Ace's hand slowly moving up my leg to rest on my inner thigh. His thumb soothingly created circles on my skin and I held back a shiver.

Instinctively, I leaned a little closer to him, taking my chair with me. But he pretended not to notice. Katie's face morphed into the seemingly, family smirk whenever her eyes drifted to Ace's hand on my thigh.

When dinner was over, we waved goodbye to Ace's relatives and headed back out to his car. The night air was chilly blowing against my bare legs and I crossed my arms over my dress. I climbed into the car and waited for Ace to crank up the heat.

I didn't even have to ask him when I felt cold air blow into my face but slowly, it turned into warm air. We both shivered, waiting for the car to warm. Ace's face brightened as if he had come up with an idea as he reached behind him, into the back seat.

He pulled out a blue blanket and draped it across my body before clicking his seatbelt back to place.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked him, my teeth still chattering. He shrugged and moved his hand to the radio, turning it on. "Well, thank you," I told him, my cheeks flushed.

"Your dad would kill me if you come home a popsicle," Ace joked. But instead of making me smile, my lips turned down. Harry wouldn't care if I never came home at all. Ace seemed to realize this because his chuckles turned into uncomfortable coughs.

I settled for an awkward, "yeah," and pulled the blanket up a little higher.

The music was soft background noise most of the way back to my house. I wished he would turn it up to drown out some of the awkwardness but Ace kept one hand on the steering wheel. The other hand was tapping away on the center console.

"Eat lunch with us tomorrow," he suddenly burst out with.

I looked over at Ace and saw him keeping his eyes focused on the road ahead. "I'm assuming you mean with Raze and Loki, who hates me."

Ace rolled his eyes and tilted his head back toward me before turning back to the road. "Loki does not hate you Mad. He's just cautious."

"We're not even dating Ace! Why don't you just tell him that so he can go back to ignoring my presence?" He opens his mouth to answer me but I cut him off. "And don't even use that stupid excuse of needing them to believe it. I think you're just embarrassed about having to find a fake girlfriend."

Ace laughed, "and I thought I explained to you I wouldn't have an issue finding a real girlfriend."

"Then where is she lover boy?"

He was silent.

This got me to finally smile; and I closed my eyes with laughter until I felt his hand push me slightly in attempt to get me to stop. My grin grew wider when I saw the tips of his ears turn pink.

"You're one to talk Mad. You've never even had a boyfriend."

I smacked his bicep and scoffed. "I haven't tried to get one, asshole," I told him teasingly.

"So you're saying that if you tried to get a boyfriend, all the boys will come running?" He looked over at me again with a smile. It was hard not to notice how cute he looked with his smile reaching up his cheeks and his eyes dancing with laughter.

I shook my head, "I don't want all the boys rushing me Craige. Just one will do just fine."

"Who's the lucky guy King?"

The question made my heart drop to my stomach. I didn't have a crush on anyone; I rarely did. So why was I nervous? "There is no guy. I was just saying..." I trailed off.

He nodded swiftly and the drumming of his fingers started up again. "How did you manage to change the subject? Anyway, back to what I was asking before." I rolled my eyes. "You, lunch with me tomorrow."

"You, me and your stupid friends. Sounds great," my voice made my sarcasm very clear.

"I thought you liked Raze," he stated, his voice curious.

I played with my hands that were resting in my lap. "He's nice; doesn't make them less stupid."

"Hey! I'll have you know, we all maintain at least 3.0 average." He tells me proudly.

I give up a little chuckle before saying, "wasn't Loki in juvie like, last month?"

"Yeah..." Ace sounds playfully defeated. "Alright smart ass, we're here."

I looked up and see my apartment building. I hadn't even noticed we were pulling into the driveway. I sigh heavily before turning to Ace. "See ya tomorrow lover boy."

"Same to you, smart ass," the smile on his face had yet to disappear. As I pulled myself out of his car, he tugged on my wrist. "Lunch?"

I nodded, "I'll think about it."

Chapter 11

In my rush the next morning, I had missed Kimmy's texts regarding the fact that she was staying home with the flu. I frowned all throughout first period without her; even though Ace was there. He was in some sort of mood. He blamed it on Noah waking him up way earlier than necessary.

I was forced to spend my break alone in front of my locker, pretending I had something to do. Ace and I never hung out at break. It was his designated "boys only time" as Loki had made up.

I dragged my way through my morning classes until lunch time finally hit and I was left with a bundle of nervous energy in the pit of my stomach. Ace was expecting me to sit and have lunch with Loki and Raze. And I had been okay with that, until Kimmy decided to get the flu.

Now, my best friend wouldn't be here to support me or back me up if Loki insulted me. I sighed and walked as slow as I could to the doors outside of the cafeteria. Ace had planned on us meeting here before entering the madness that was the lunch room.

"Try to act less depressing when we go in there sweetheart," I heard the voice from behind me. I whipped around and caught Ace leaning his shoulder against the lockers across the hall. He looked good today.

As if he didn't every time I see him.

"Do something that makes me less depressed," I threw at him sarcastically.

He grinned and strode toward me with a confidence only Ace Craige could pull off. He stopped in front of me and smirked before lifting a hand to brush a stray hair away from my cheek.

"Whatcha doin' Craige?" I asked him, trying to keep my voice above a whisper.

He dropped his hand in one smooth move and placed it on my waist instead. "Doing what I can to help, Grey."

I shook my head, slightly in a daze from his touch. There was no one out here; aka no one to act in front of. I leaned closer to him before stopping, my lips close to his ear. "Still feeling the same as before."

His eyes were slightly widened when I pulled away and his grip tightened a little on my waist. It slid down to my hip and squeezed.

Oh boy.

I hadn't pulled back all the way yet so my face was still way too close to his. But before I could do anything about that distance, we heard a cough.

"Get a classroom," Raze smirked, whacking Loki, who stood next to him, in the stomach to get his attention.

"Get over yourself Park," Ace told him, his eyes had returned back to their usual, bored state.

Loki scoffed and Raze looked even more smug than before, if possible. "I'm not the one groping my girlfriend in the middle of the hallway."

"No one is groping anyone for your information," I butted in, only to be ignored. Ace's hand still hadn't removed itself from my hip so I stepped away from his warmth. He frowned a little with the action but I just rolled my eyes and picked my backpack up off the ground.

"Come on Acey, you can maul her with your eyes in the cafeteria too," Raze joked and Ace narrowed his eyes.

He didn't move from his spot so I walked over to him once more and grabbed his wrist, practically dragging him through the double doors. Ace shifted closer to me and pulled his arm out of my grasp.

That hand suddenly found its way to my lower back, guiding me through the wave of students. He was still grumbling in annoyance at Raze, who walked in behind us, and it made me smirk. "Stop smiling like that, I wasn't mauling you with my eyes."

"Mhm," is all I said and he groaned.

"I'm friends with a bunch of idiots," he whispered, only to me.

Wouldn't want his friends thinking we aren't actually dating or something.

We sat down their usual table, which sat in the middle of the cafeteria and was next to most of the popular students. I saw a glare from Farah Del Valle pointed my way and I turned my head away quickly.

Loki was uncharacteristically silent while Raze talked about some guys on the football team to Ace. Ace didn't really talk except for the random, "mhm," and, "yeah," throughout Raze's stories. I kept to eating my lunch, trying not to look up as much as I could.

About halfway through lunch, I saw Farah getting out of her seat from the corner of my eye. She straightened her white skirt and made her way over to us. She sat herself on the other side of Ace and sighed deeply.

Loki looked over at her but then, as if he was bored, looked away and I could have sworn I saw an eye roll. Raze visibly stiffened and a scowl appeared on his normally cheerful face. When she didn't get the reaction she hoped for, Sophie sighed again but this time, a little louder and exaggerated.

"Yes?" Ace asked her, his expression sort of amused.

She placed her chin delicately in the palm of her hand which rested on the table. "I miss hanging out with you Acey."

I swear Raze choked and Loki snorted. My eyes widened cartoonishly as Ace stared at her in blank confusion. His face had a question mark written all over it.

"You know, because we used to hang out all the time. It's been so long. We should do it again," Farah continued.

Didn't she realize his girlfriend was sitting right there? Fake girlfriend, albeit, but still.

Debating on playing the jealous girlfriend card, I leaned over Ace. "What are you talking about?"

She smirked a little, thinking she got a rise out of me. "Oh nothing to concern yourself about sweetheart."

I didn't like when she called me sweetheart. And neither did Ace.

"Farah, go away." Ace's eyes held a quiet fire in them. And I didn't know what it meant.

She looked pretty shocked, to say the least. She glanced over at Ace's friends across the table and they were both holding in laughter. To make his point clear, Ace shoved his hand back and held it out to me. I twined our fingers together and saw him smirk.

"Whatever, you'll get bored of her eventually Ace. You aren't one to keep a girlfriend anyway," and with that, she stood up and marched out of the room.

All three of the boys visibly relaxed and I was no longer seeing red. My hand was still in Ace's and neither of us made a move to remove them.

After that, Loki went back to eating but and Raze went back to gossiping. But this time, it was less awkward than before. Guess we all had one thing in common, our dislike of Farah Del Valle.

After school, I found myself getting into Ace's car and turning up the radio's volume. He had somehow convinced me to hang out and do our homework at his house and he'd pick me up in the morning to take me to school.

I wanted to argue since there was no point to him driving me over when I could drive myself. But I had learned not to argue when it came to Ace Craige. The kid got what he wanted most of the time.

"So, how did you feel about lunch today?" He immediately asked me when he drove out of the parking lot.

I smiled sheepishly. "Loki wasn't mean."

"I might have talked with him beforehand."

My smile dropped and I glared at him. "You didn't."

He just smiled widely at me, making my heart drop.

"What did you say?" I asked him, sticking my bottom lip out in a pout.

He shook his head. "I just said to be nicer to you, don't worry."

"Ughhhgghh."

Ace chuckled, "excuse me?" And I laughed, turning up the volume even louder, ignoring him.

His house was silent when we walked in. Ace shut the door behind me and locked it. He headed up the stairs to his room without saying anything so I started to follow.

"Where is everyone?" I asked him, looking around in the hallway.

He checked his phone quickly as we walked into his room. "Mom got held up at work, Austin never gets off before 5 and Noah is at a friend's house."

I just nodded and held the straps of my backpack awkwardly. Ace stepped toward me and pulled my hands away from the backpack and tugged it off my back. He set both of our bags down on his bed and sat down.

"So, we're alone?" I asked. He just arched an eyebrow at me.

Obviously you're alone idiot. That's what he just said.

"Don't worry sweetheart, I'm not gonna try anything," he smirked.

Darn.

But instead I said, "you better not." But it sounded more like flirting than a warning.

Ace didn't say anything, he just unzipped his backpack and started pulling out papers. He also pulled out the book we were reading for English, *The Kite Runner*.

"How far do we have to read today?" He looked up at me and I started taking out my things too.

I couldn't believe he was actually doing homework. "Like 3 chapters." We had recently started the book and weren't very far into it; but I was really already attached.

"Do you want to read it out loud or something?" He asked me, scratching the back of his neck.

I shook my head. "I hate reading aloud. I'd rather read in silence."

"Get to it then Grey."

I couldn't hold back the tears anymore. They started flowing down my cheeks and over my frown. I sniffled, determined to get rid of my tears, but it didn't work.

"Are you okay?" I heard a voice ask me.

I looked up and saw Ace staring at me, his eyes blown wide, filled with concern and confusion. Mostly confusion.

"Mad?"

I shook my head, "what page are you on?" He told me and I let out another sob. "Ask me again in 5 pages."

He looked at me weirdly before patting my head, like I was a dog, and went back to reading.

A few minutes later I heard him quietly cursing. "Holy cow. Oh my God. No way. Oh my God."

Ah, he made it to the part.

"I can't even believe," he paused and looked up at me. "Wow."

I nodded, "I know."

"But-"

I smiled sadly at him. "Yep."

He fell backward on his bed, landing on his back. I sat up straighter, to get a better look at his face. It was scrunched up in a mix of anger and sadness. My tears had stopped a few minutes before, leaving behind a scowl. "This author is cruel," I told him and he nodded in agreement, putting his forearms over his face.

"I can't even read anymore of this. We still have another chapter to read!" Ace sat up abruptly.

I patted his shoulder and set the book down. "I think I'll save the rest for later too. Let's just move on to math."

"Oh good. Now I'll be upset about algebra 2 instead," he told me, sarcasm dripping from his words.

We worked on our math homework and read a little bit more of the book before finally putting everything back into our backpacks.

"I'll drive you home," Ace told me as I tossed my back over my shoulder.

I smirked at him, "well, I wasn't planning on walking."

"Quit being a smart ass," he quipped and flicked my forehead as he passed by me.

I followed him down the stairs and saw that we were still here alone. "You sure you don't want me to stay until everyone gets back?"

He shook his head with a small smile. "It's okay. It's getting late anyway."

"It's 5:15," I deadpanned, trying not to smile.

He looked slightly flustered but lifted his chin. "You can get more sleep tonight if you go to bed early."

"Uh-huh."

"Shut up Mad."

I smiled and he pulled his car keys out and opened the front door. He walked out and didn't even wait for me, getting into his car.

Awe he was embarrassed.

The drive home was like usual; both of us singing way too loud to the radio and laughing when we tried to outdo the other person. We arrived at my house with full on smiles planted on our faces.

I was having so much fun I didn't even notice Harry's car in the parking spot next to ours.

"Goodnight sweetheart," he told me without thinking of what he was saying.

My heart seized up and I felt the immediate blush engulf my face and ears. Ace's face was a little flushed as well so I squeaked a small goodbye and hopped out of the car, practically running up the stairs.

I gave him a little wave letting him know it was okay for him to drive off and he left. I opened the front door with a dazed smile.

Sweetheart.

"Where the hell have you been?" I heard a loud and angry voice yell.

I glanced over to the couch, where Harry sat with a Corona in his hand and a few crushed beer cans on the coffee table in front of him.

"I was studying with Kimmy," I lied.

He scoffed and tried to stand up but he stumbled a little. "Yeah right. Just like I've said before, you're just like your mother."

I kept my head down and started walking toward my bedroom. He was drunk and the last thing I needed to do was talk back.

"Don't you walk away from me you little brat."

Gosh. He was in one of those moods.

I walked back to him slowly, stopping in front of the tv. There was enough distance between us to run to my room if I needed to.

"Tell me the truth. Where were you?" Harry growled at me.

I swallowed hard, no matter what I said, he'd be upset. If I said I was with Kimmy, he'd call me a liar. If I told him I was with Ace, he'd call me slut. "I was studying."

"All alone?" His voice was low, practically a whisper.

I shook my head as a silent answer.

"With who Maddie?"

"With Ace," I told him quietly. I thought maybe he didn't hear me but then he took a step closer and then another.

And when he was right up next to me, I closed my eyes. "I thought I told you not to hang out with that boy anymore." Not wanting to argue, I nodded. "Why did you disobey me Madison?"

"I'm sorry. But we were just studying," I told him, my voice came out weaker than usual.

This only seemed to piss him off even more. "Is that code for sex?" I shook my head back and forth as fast as I could. "Because you aren't old enough to be having sex Madison."

"Okay," I told him.

His fists tightened. "Okay what?"

What?

I must have looked confused because he took a deep breath. When he exhaled, I smelt the alcohol on his breath. "Say, yes dad."

But I couldn't. The guy I used to call my father was long gone and replaced with a monster. He was an unrecognizable man. To me, this wasn't my dad, this was Harry. So I shook my head, no.

He grabbed onto my wrist which was resting by my side. His grip was so tight that I yelped in pain. But he didn't let go; he just held on tighter.

"You're hurting me," I told him, pain clear in my voice.

He laughed, "you deserve so much worse Maddie."

His hand squeezed my wrist harder and it felt like the fragile bone would break. But then when I yelled out again, he let go.

I immediately held my throbbing wrist in my other arm. Harry gave me one last withering, angry look and then walked back to the couch. He took a long sip off of his corona and turned to the tv.

I launched myself back to my room and grabbed my old wrist brace from when I sprained it in Sophomore year. I put it on my now aching wrist and it felt a little better. I didn't know how I would explain that one away.

Chapter 12

The next day I took my time getting ready, mindful of the aches from my wrist. The brace was still on and it was starting to itch. It looked warm and sunny out so I carefully pulled on a white skirt that ended halfway up my thighs and a thin, long sleeve shirt. It was black and helped the outfit seem more decent and reserved.

I hadn't showered the night before, afraid to leave my room, so I pulled it up into a ponytail. My face was free of makeup until I covered my under eye circles with concealer, swiped on blush to hide my pale skin and mascara to liven up my eyes.

I grabbed my backpack on the way out and saw Harry sitting at the dining table, a bowl of cereal in front of him. "You don't need to wear a skirt to impress the boys Maddie."

His words elicited a shiver of disgust. "I'm not wearing it to get noticed. It's warm out."

"Just like your mother," he muttered and went back to eating.

My phone dinged with a message and I saw Harry narrow his eyes.

I'm here.

A smile made its way to my lips and I opened the front door without saying anything else to Harry and headed downstairs. He was waiting in his car out front and I hopped in and set my things down.

"You're pretty chipper for a Tuesday morning," Ace told me, looking suspicious.

I turned to him with a light smile. "Is a girl not allowed to be happy?"

"Not when there's still a whole day of school ahead of her," he rolled his eyes at me but then glanced down at my arm. "What did you do to your wrist?"

For a moment, I thought about telling him. I thought about Ace wanting to help me and take me away from Harry and his anger. But instead I forced a blush. "I tripped on the stairs taking out the trash last night and landed on it wrong."

He eyed me for a moment but when he decided I was telling the truth, he smirked. "Only you, klutz."

"I thought I was sweetheart?" I asked, to get his mind off my wrist but to tease him a little as well.

"You are sweetheart," he paused, "sweetheart."

I rolled my eyes this time and told him to start driving. If we kept this banter up, we'd be late to school; and I would not be having that.

"So, your family leaves this weekend right?" I asked him, not knowing what I was starting.

He glanced over at me quickly. "Yeah."

I sat there for a couple more seconds in silence. "So, less than a week until we break up," I told him, making air quotes around break up.

"I guess so." Ace was suddenly quiet; which was unusual for him. But I had gone quiet too. "We'll still be friends right?"

"I didn't know we were," the words weren't meant to be mean. But they sort of came out that way.

I could tell by the look on his face that I had hit a nerve and he was upset. "What do you mean we aren't friends?"

I simply shrugged, "I don't know. This whole thing has been confusing."

"How?"

I groaned, "because, we met, you fake asked me out and then we started fake dating. It's all just a bit complicated."

He shook his head. "It's really not. You became my friend the second you agreed to help me out. It was a favor only a friend would have stuck to."

"Well okay, we're friends then," I told him, my voice going up an octave.

"The fact that you didn't know in the first place says a lot Mad," Ace complained.

I tugged on the edge of my skirt and looked down. We were in complete silence except for the radio. It played a song I didn't recognize. For the rest of the car ride to school, the air was tense. Neither of us spoke but Ace hummed to the songs that played.

Almost ten minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot and he turned off the engine. Ace made a move to open his door but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. He turned to me, awaiting what I had to say.

"Are you mad at me?" I finally asked him. My voice was small and mousy.

He sighed a little and sat back all the way in his seat. "Should I be?"

"I don't want you to be angry with me," I told him truthfully.

"Then I won't be mad."

I shook my head. "Ace," I stopped. But he didn't say anything so I continued. "If you want to be mad at me, then be mad. I don't control your emotions, nor do I want to."

He just shook his head and looked anywhere besides me. "I'm not angry with you Mad, I just can't believe you still don't get it."

"Still don't get what?" I asked him, and my voice went up in volume.

But he said nothing; he just got out of the car and grabbed his backpack. He started walking toward the school, without looking back at me. So I ran after him to try to catch up.

We both ended up in class but we didn't speak to each other. Kimmystill wasn't here, the flu was kicking her ass. I didn't have anyone else to talk to.

He sat in front of me, as usual but didn't make any attempt to turn around and make conversation. The whole thing was sort of ridiculous. What I had said was stupid, yes. But I truly hadn't meant that I didn't want to be his friend.

When the bell rang, he didn't even bother to wait for me. He just got up, and left, going to his next class. I let out a small sigh and Karlie, a girl who sat close to us, pulled me aside.

"Did you and Ace break up or something?" She looked sort of upset about it.

I shook my head, "nah, he's just mad at me."

She gave a small snort, "why?"

I shook my head and shrugged. I couldn't exactly tell her it was because he thought I didn't want to be his friend. That pretty much went against what we were going for with the whole, fake relationship thing.

At lunch, I didn't even bother to go the cafeteria, knowing Ace wouldn't want me there. I resorted to walking around the halls, pretending to do something on my phone. About ten minutes into lunch, Ace texted me.

Where are you?

I stared at it, confused. Why did he care?

Walking around. I decided was a good answer.

Well, come to the cafeteria

I rolled my eyes. Was he mad at me or not?

But you're mad at me.

It took him a minute to reply.

We have a reputation to keep up Mad.

Right. Of course, it wasn't because he wanted me there. It was all for his little act.

A reputation. Right.

I sat down against the lockers I was walking past.

Don't be like that. You're the one who didn't want to be my friend. You can't be mad at me now.

I didn't even respond even though it was a petty move. A few minutes later I heard a sigh and then someone sat down next to me. I didn't need to look up to know it was Ace.

"You didn't answer my text," he opened with. Being the child I was, I didn't answer him. "This isn't fair. You don't get to be mad at me. I was mad first. This whole ignoring me thing is childish."

I scoffed. "I was mad first," I mocked.

"Fuck this Mad. Why are you angry? Talk to me; don't just ignore me."

I stood up and started walking to where my locker was, across the school. "I've just realized that I don't like being used."

"And I'm using you?" He asked, in total disbelief.

I stopped and looked up at him. "Don't look so surprised. We have a reputation to keep up? That was a low blow Ace."

"It was true," he defended.

"And that's not using me?" I came back with. He opened his mouth to say something but closed it when what I said dawned on him. "I get this whole thing was a favor to you but what do I get out of it? This whole favor seems really one sided if you ask me."

I kept walking and he followed. "Are you really that selfish to ask for something in return? It's what friends do Madison."

Oh hell no.

"We weren't friend when you asked Ace!" I whisper yelled at him. "And as for the selfish part, thanks."

There was a pricking feeling behind my eyes but I refused to cry. "So, what? Are we calling this whole thing off?"

I shook my head. "I don't know Ace. I'm mad at you."

"For what Madison?" His voice rose.

I saw my locker and sped ahead of him and started opening it angrily. "For calling me selfish, for thinking I don't want to be your friend, for using me!"

"Maybe I should have never talked to you in the first place. Then this whole thing never would have happened and you could still be living in your self absorbed bubble," he yelled, but not loud enough to alert anyone.

I grabbed my things and started heading toward the front of the school. If he was so angry, I wondered why he kept following me. The prickly feeling was back so I knew I needed to get out of there quickly.

"Where are you going?" He asked me as soon as we were outside.

"I'm taking my self absorbed ass home Ace," I cried out. "I hate fighting with you and I'm done acting like I'm okay with it."

I sped over to where my car had been parked yesterday and started to unlock it. There were angry tears mixing with sad tears on my cheeks that I didn't want Ace to see. I almost made it into the car when Ace spun me around, using my good wrist.

He looked as if he was about to yell at me some more but stopped completely when he saw my face. "Mad?" A silent way of asking if I was okay.

But another tear fell down my cheek for an answer. Instead of saying something about me being selfish for crying, he yanked me forward until I was wrapped completely in his arms.

He caged me in but no matter how warm his chest felt against my cheek, I was still mad. So I tried to pull away, resulting in him hugging me tighter.

I let him hold me for a few seconds before breaking away with a sob. I made a move to jump into my car when I felt his hand gently grab my wrist again. I was breathing heavily when he turned me around. Just the feel of his skin on mine was making me crazy.

I wanted to relish in the sensation until he clenched his jaw, making up his mind about something. He pulled me forward, his eyes never leaving mine and I felt his lips meet mine.

I was too stunned to do anything about for one, two, three seconds. But then, I closed my eyes and kissed him back. I had no idea what I was doing. Ace was my first real kiss, not counting ones from kindergarten.

My lips moved against his and his fingers let go of my wrist and moved to my cheek, wiping the wetness from my tears. I sunk my hands into his wild hair and lightly tugged when I felt its softness.

Ace leaned me up against my car and continued to kiss me. His tongue met mine and all thoughts vanished.

Well this is a good way to stop me from being angry.

I briefly wondered if that's why he was doing it, kissing me. But I felt as if not even Ace was stoop so low. So I let myself enjoy it. His lips were soft but moved with a roughness I didn't realize I liked. His free hand moved to stop by my waist, pressing it against the car.

I hummed in response to his hand moving to my hair. I moved mine down his neck and over his back, stopping at his waist.

I wasn't sure how long the kiss went on. It could have been a minute or a few years. But when he pulled back, I couldn't even open my eyes, being so dazed by his lips.

My breathing was fast and ragged, just like his. When I finally opened my eyes, I saw that Ace's were still closed. His lips were tinted red from my mouth and I couldn't help but stare.

But then his eyes opened and I looked up into his green orbs. He was so much taller than me, he had to bend down to kiss me. His body was still bent as he looked down at me that when he straightened, I had to crane my neck a little to look up at him.

I was about to say something to him, not even knowing what, when I heard the bell ring in the distance.

"You still want to go home Mad?" Ace asked, his voice much huskier than before.

I shook my head, "no, I think I'm good." My voice sounded like a squeak, making him smile.

"I'm sorry about what I said. You aren't selfish or self absorbed. I was just angry. I didn't think you wanted to spend time with me after this was over and it killed me," Ace whispered, starting to play with a strand of my hair that had come loose from my pony tail.

I nodded, "I'm sorry too. I honestly didn't mean to make you think I didn't want to be friends with you. I do, I just didn't know how to express myself."

"Well, I think you just did," he told me and I blushed. "Come on sweetheart, you aren't one to be late to class."

Chapter 13

I didn't see Ace for the rest of the day. I wasn't sure if it was purposeful because he didn't want to see me after the kiss or if it was purely accidental.

All I knew was, I needed a second to clear my head and think. If I were around Ace anymore that day, I'd probably end up kissing him again. And even though I was pretty sure I wanted that, I needed to think this through.

So I drove myself over to Kimmy's, praying she didn't give me her flu. But I needed to talk to my best friend.

I didn't even bother knocking on her bedroom door when her mother let me in, it was a best friend kind of thing.

"Mom, you don't need to keep checking up on me I'm fine," she groaned, her eyes closed.

"I guess I'll come back later then," I joked, waiting for her shocked expression.

Aaaaand there it was.

Her eyes widened and she smiled. "What are you doing here? You'll get sick!"

"There are worse things Kim," I pointed out.

She scoffed. "Ace would kill you if you missed school. Any chance for you to play his fake little girlfriend."

"That's actually why I'm here." Now or never Madison.

She looked at me with a confused expression. "About missing school or Ace?"

"Ace," the thought of him and his kiss made me smile a little. She nodded for me to go on. "He kissed me."

"Who did?" She asked without hesitation.

I narrowed my eyes at her, "Ace."

"Ace Craige?" She asked slowly and I nodded. "Wait what did he do?"

I rolled my eyes. "He kissed me."

"Ace Craige kissed you?"

I groaned in frustration. "Yes Kimmy, Ace Craige kissed me."

"Holy moly! Did you kiss him back?" She shouted. I nodded my head. "How come?"

I took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of her bed. "Kims, I think I like him."

She didn't speak for a solid ten seconds. But then she screamed, "you what?!"

"Am I going to have to repeat everything I say today?" I asked her, already exhausted.

She shook her head, "no, sorry. I'm just so confused. When did you start liking him?"

"I'm not sure. I just started to realize that he wasn't the guy everyone thinks he is. At least not to me. He actually cares about people. He's funny and sweet to me, most of the time when he isn't teasing me. And it doesn't help that he's cute too."

Kimmy smirked at me. "Ace Craig isn't cute Maddie. The boy is Hot with a capital H."

I rolled my eyes, "whatever. I think..." I trailed off and took a breath. "I think I've wanted him to kiss me for a while now."

"I'm happy for you Maddie. But are you sure he has the best intentions when it comes to you? Why did he kiss you?" Kimmy asked me timidly.

I shrugged. "We were fighting all day. I was pretty damn close to calling the whole fake relationship off. But when I started getting into my car, he kissed me." Her eyebrows furrowed. "What?" I asked her.

"It's just, what if he only kissed you because he thought you were ending it?"

No, Ace wouldn't. Would he?

"That's ridiculous Kimmy. Why would he do that? You only kiss people you like," my voice was smaller and less confident.

She shrugged, "not in his world Maddie. He used to kiss girls all the time before you." I blinked a few times, trying not to show my disappointment. She rushed to continue, "but I'm sure he likes you back! I mean, how could he not?"

I appreciated her trying to raise my spirits again but now I was scared she was right. What if Ace had only kissed me to save our fake relationship until the end of this weekend? I wanted to believe he would never do such a thing to me though.

"Anyway, I just came over to tell you that. I'm just gonna go home now. Are you coming to school tomorrow?" I asked her, shaking off the weird feeling that was beginning to suffocate me.

Kimmy looked as if she had more to say but she just nodded her head. "Yeah, I'll be back tomorrow." I stood up from her bed and began to move toward her door, ready to just go home and sleep. "Maddie!" She called out to me.

I turned back around, "yeah Kims?"

"Talk to Ace about it. I'm sure he kissed you for the right reasons," she smiled at me sadly.

I returned her smile, "you're sure?"

"I hope," she finished.

I wasn't expecting to find Ace sitting outside my front door when I got back home, but there he was, waiting for me. He sat with his knees up to his chest, still dressed as he had been for school.

"What are you doing here? What if Harry saw you? He'd kill me," I asked him, without saying hello.

He stood up from where he sat and leaned against the door. "He isn't here."

"Not the point," I tried to reason. He shrugged.

There was the Ace Craige I know.

"So, why are you here?" I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice. I kept thinking about what Kimmy had told me.

"What if he only kissed you because he thought you were ending it?"

Ace stepped a little closer to me but moved out of the way when I went to unlock the front door. "I didn't get to talk to you after school. I thought you'd wait for me or something."

"Why would I do that?" I asked him, sounding like a brat.

He leaned his shoulder against the door frame and stared at me as I fumbled with the house key.

"Don't do that."

I opened the door and he followed me through. "Don't do what Craige?"

"Grey," his voice sounded like a warning. "You always close off to me when something happens between us."

I shook my head, not looking at him. "No I don't."

"The first time you met my family, you yelled at me. When I didn't want to stop being your friend, you accused me of using you. And now, you're acting odd again after we kissed," he pointed out.

It was weird, realizing that he really did pay attention to little things like that. "I'm just tired Ace."

"Oh good, another excuse for you to not talk to me." I ignored him. "So are we just not going to talk about it?"

I shrugged, eliciting a frustrated groan from Ace. "Look, there isn't much to talk about. We kissed and it was nice. What about it?"

But acting like the kiss hadn't meant much to me proved difficult. He had to know that it was my first kiss by now. It had to have meant something, to me at least. He wasn't buying my little act.

"You aren't the kind of girl who lets a boy kiss her just for the hell of it Mad. So, let's talk about it," Ace followed me into my room as I put down my things.

I sighed, "I may not be the type to kiss someone for no reason but you are Ace."

"What are you talking about?"

He took a seat on my bed and I stayed standing. "Why did you kiss me? Was it just to keep our reputation?"

Ace screwed his eyes shut and laced his hands over his head. "So that's what this is about? You still don't trust me."

"What do you mean, still?" I asked him, confused.

His eyes opened again. "It's just, Mad, everytime something happens, you think the worst of me. And no matter how many times I try to prove to you that I'm not a bad guy, you find some way to turn me into one."

I clenched my jaw, knowing he was right. "I don't trust people easily Ace. I've only known you for 2 and half weeks. I'm not used to having friends to lean on and to trust."

"What can I do to prove to you that I'm not trying to hurt you? That I'm not just your friend because of that stupid favor?" Ace begged.

I sat next to him on the bed, giving up. "I hate not having an answer for you. I truly don't know what's wrong with me."

"Nothing is wrong with you Mad. You have a hard time trusting people, fine, that's understandable. But why do I have to continuously prove myself to you? I feel like I can never do anything right."

I shook my head. "That's the thing; you do everything right. You're the only person I know who's ever stuck with me when I get all inside my head. Kimmy has been my best friend since we were little so it's easier to trust her. But you, I just met you. And even when I mess up, you're still there."

Ace swallowed hard. "Do you know why I'm still here Mad?" I shook my head and he continued. "Because you really are special."

I stared at him in awe and confusion.

Me? Special?

"Madison Grey, you are the only girl who doesn't put up with my shit. You're so weird and I must be crazy because, I like it," he laughed. "You're strong Mad. Whatever the hell you put up with with your dad and your mom, you don't let it bother you. You're still bright and smart and just impossibly you."

The words coming from his lips were simple but they were beautiful. Everything he said made me weak in the knees with happiness. I never thought anyone would ever think of me in that way.

"So, what you're saying is, the kiss wasn't for show?" I asked him, a little bit more confident.

He chuckled and nodded, "the kiss was definitely not for show." He leaned over to me and took my good hand into both of his. He started playing with my fingers as he looked up at me.

"I want to do it again," I told him, not even thinking about how it sounded.

But Ace just smiled a little. "You're an eager little thing." I blushed, hard.

"Which reminds me. That didn't happen to be your first kiss was it?"

Sheepishly, I reminded him, "I told you I've never had a boyfriend before."

"Didn't seem like it was your first kiss," his smug voice pointed out.

I blushed even more, heat spreading down my neck. "Well, trust me when I say it was."

Ace then stood up and stretched, reaching his arms up above his head. His tee-shirt lifted a little but not enough to get a peak of what's underneath.

"What time does Harry get home?" He asked me.

I shrugged and smiled sadly, thinking about my wrist. Without realizing it, I started cradling my still sore arm.

"Does your wrist hurt still?" Ace asked, concern laced into his smooth voice.

I nodded, "a little. It's just achey; feels like it's throbbing."

"You really sound like you took a nasty fall," he chuckled.

I started thinking about Harry, gripping onto my wrist, squeezing it without mercy. "Yeah, real nasty."

Chapter 14

I didn't know what Ace and I were. I was still playing his fake girlfriend but now that I knew we both had some sort of "feelings" for each other, I didn't know where we stood. We hadn't kissed since the first time three days ago and neither of us had brought it up since our talk.

It was now Friday, aka two days before most of Ace's family went back home. The goodbye barbeque was the next day but Ace planned on hanging out with just me tonight.

At lunch, Raze talked about how he was going on a "semi-date" with a girl from his economics class that night and Loki rolled his eyes. "You've talked to her twice dude."

Ace and Raze frowned at him and Raze slapped his arm. "She's hot."

"That's no way to talk about your date Park," Ace told him, messing around.

Then it was Raze's turn to roll his eyes. "Ace, we get it bro, you're all romantic and shit. But not all of us are angels." I laughed too loud when he implied Ace was an angel and he gave me a warning, but playful look.

"Well, I'm sorry that I talk about girls in a less demeaning way," he pouted, bottom lip sticking out and everything.

I leaned forward on the table toward Ace's friends. "Oh yeah he's totally right. Just yesterday he walked up to me and asked, "what's up hot stuff?" I mimicked his deep voice.

"That's different!"

Raze grinned at his best friend. "You're a hypocrite Ace James Craige."

"Oh god, why did you have to go there with the middle name and everything?" Ace complained, placing his head on the table. He covered himself up with his arms until only parts of his brown hair showed through.

Loki's face remained pretty expressionless but his fingers danced on the table. I figured by now that he hated me. I didn't know what I had done to piss him off so badly but Ace refused to see it.

Once the laughter calmed down from Raze I asked Loki, "Ace and I are hanging out tonight, do you want to come with us?"

I told myself I was doing the right thing by trying to be friends with Ace's best friends; now that I knew he'd stick around after this weekend was over. But Loki's eyes only widened slightly.

I looked over at Ace and he gave me an encouraging smile, urging me to go on. "We don't know what we're doing yet. We might just go bowling or something and get ice cream afterward. Unless you don't like ice cream; because if not we can totally-"

But before I could say anything else, Loki stood from the table and walked out of the cafeteria. This time when I looked over at Ace, he looked just as confused as I was. Raze was silent and started taking massive bites out of his pizza.

I was disappointed that no matter what I did, I couldn't get anything right with Loki. I was still looking at Ace but his frown turned back into his half smile and he threw an arm around my shoulders. And I relaxed a bit.

After lunch, I texted Kimmy about what had happened. She had been back at school since Wednesday but she was making up a math quiz during lunch.

She told me not to worry about it too much. She figured that he was just shy and awkward around new people and just needed time to get to know me. But I seriously doubted a 17 year old boy who had probably been to juvie was just shy.

I sighed and let the whole thing with Loki go, knowing there was nothing I could do about it. I started to put my phone away but I felt it vibrate in my hands, signaling a text. It was from Ace.

Sorry about Loki. I don't know why he's being such a dick to you. I'll beat him up if I have to:p

I laughed quietly at the text, knowing he was kidding but happy he had known it was bothering me.

No need. I can do that myself if I have to:)

And then a few seconds later, he sent,

Cute.

We texted back and forth for a few minutes until my teacher started her lesson plan for the day.

Ace ended up deciding that we would go hang out with Raze and his date at the bowling alley. Loki had been right when he said Raze had barely spoken to the girl. He didn't even really want to be all alone with her yet. He was like a child.

Ace and I arrived first, renting the lane and our shoes. I was wearing a light blue pair of skinny jeans and a dark blue sweater. I had finally taken off my wrist brace and it felt better now. It wasn't 100% there yet but I could carry most things without any pain. I hoped a bowling ball wasn't the exception.

Ace wore dark blue jeans that were rolled up slightly at the bottom and a black button up shirt, the top two buttons undone. He was sure a sight to be seen. The girl who rented our shoes to us, kept staring too, not that I blamed her.

The boy was hot.

Raze arrived with the girl almost ten minutes later. He rushed through the door, pulling her alongside him until he found us, already putting our names into the computer system. His hair was all messed up, sticking up every which way. And the girl beside him was flushed.

"Were you guys making out or something?" Ace asked, his amusement clearly on display.

Ah, so that's why they both look very out of breath.

Raze glared at my date and the girl only blushed harder. She was cute; with her red tinted hair and freckles. She was pretty tall compared to me but still much shorter than Raze. Her skin was very pale, making her blush much more apparent.

Raze mumbled in response to Ace but didn't say anything else. "Daniela, meet my best friend Ace and his girlfriend, Maddie."

For a second I almost asked who Maddie was but then I remembered it was me. I had definitely gotten too used to Ace calling me Mad. "Nice to meet you," I smiled at her, which she returned.

"You too," she turned her gaze onto Ace and her smile drooped just a little. He looked slightly uncomfortable himself, which confused me. But he still nodded to her as a hello.

If Raze noticed their weird behavior, he didn't say anything. He just pulled her over to rent their shoes and she followed him, obviously. "What's up with you?" I asked Ace, curious.

He scoffed. "What makes you think something's wrong?" He asked me, his voice a higher pitch than usual.

"Uh, I don't know. You just looked majorly uncomfortable when Raze introduced you to Daniela," I shrugged, not really understanding why he was acting so odd.

He shook his head, "nothing, I'm just nervous for Raze. I think he really likes her."

But Raze has barely even spoken to her.

Raze ended up beating all of us twice; which made Ace very grumpy. He was pretty terrible at bowling, even though he claimed his family went often. Ace kept whispering to me that he was losing on purpose, to make Raze look better for his date but I didn't believe him. Ace used every chance he got to show off.

After bowling, we headed down the street a little to get some ice cream. The ice cream there didn't compare to Ida's but ice cream was ice cream after all. Ace tried to sit next to me but I moved out of his way and sat next to Daniela.

She smiled shyly and looked over at Raze, who just took that as his cue to sit next to his best friend instead.

"What flavor did you get?" I asked her.

"Double chocolate fudge," she answered. She looked over at my ice cream. "What about you?"

I smiled and took another bite. "Cotton candy; it's my favorite." I set down my spoon and turned my body to angle toward Daniela. "Are you a senior too?"

"Yeah, I'm new this year."

That explains why I hadn't seen her much before. I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw Ace reaching over to my ice cream. Before I could stop him, he had my spoon in his mouth, taking a huge bite of my ice cream. "Hey! Get your own!"

"Sharing is caring baby," he teased, the spoon still in his mouth. But I just glared at him. He smiled sheepishly, handing me back my spoon. "Okay, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you."

I waited.

"You can have two bites of mine," he was trying to charm me but it wasn't working. You don't mess with a girl's ice cream.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I don't want your ice cream. I wanted mine." He smirked at me. "And besides, I don't want your nasty boy cooties."

I could see Raze and Daniela watching us with amusement. Raze was trying not to laugh at our childish banter and his date was smiling sadly. I wasn't sure why she was doing that.

"Hate to break it to you sweetheart, but you already have my cooties." He paused, letting me digest his words. "All over that pretty mouth of yours."

I blushed profusely, uncomfortable with the fact that now Ace's best friend and possible future girlfriend knew that I had been kissed by Ace Craige. Of course, none of this was news to Raze since we had apparently been dating for a few weeks now. Little did he know.

I leaned forward, across the table between us, and smacked him a few times on the shoulder and his chest; whatever I could reach. He chuckled at me and held my hand on the table when I had sat back down.

At this point, Raze and Daniela were no longer paying any attention to us. They were in the middle of a conversation about, horses? Ace and I had obviously missed a lot. I kept glaring at Ace while biting into my cotton candy heaven, making him smirk.

After we had all finished our ice cream, we walked around a little, passing by the stores. Ace and I both witnessed Raze attempt to hold Daniela's hand but only to get rejected. She stuffed her hands in her pockets and looked around awkwardly.

Neither of us were sure if it was a sign of her not feeling anything for Raze or if she was just embarrassed. My guess was the latter. And just to make Raze feel even worse about the situation, Ace pulled me until we were in front of them and then made a big gesture about holding my hand.

I wanted to yank it out of his grip, feeling bad for Raze, but I liked the way his hand felt in mine. So I kept it there, squeezing his fingers around my own.

After Raze decided to call it a night and take Daniela home, Ace and I were in his car. Raze's date and I had exchanged numbers, after a bit of convincing on my end. I didn't get it. I wasn't really that bad. Or was I?

The radio played, as always; and we sat, bobbing our heads, in comfortable silence. I had had a really fun night but I was slightly nervous to go home. I didn't want to know what Harry would say about me being out so late again.

I was so caught up in my thoughts, I didn't notice how close to my apartment we were until Ace's melodic voice brought me back. "So, you were right."

"Aren't I always?" I smiled. I didn't know what he was referring to.

His lips lifted slightly and he glanced at me quickly. "Tonight, you said I was acting weird."

I nodded, "yeah, you were acting a little off."

"I slept with Daniela."

I blinked.

"Like in past tense. I've slept with Daniela."

I said nothing.

"Mad?"

What the shit?

"Say something please?" He begged.

I let out a long breath. "Whoa."

Ace laughed nervously. "You okay sweetheart?"

"Way to just put it all out there," I admitted, my eyes still blown wide. I could see Ace's tensed hands loosen their grip on the steering wheel.

He coughed in response. "Sorry; I should have eased you into that."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

I played with the hem of my sweater. "Why did you sleep with her?"

"That's what I did Mad," he whispered.

I sighed, "can you elaborate?"

"I slept with girls. Come on, you knew that. Everyone knew that."

He was right but over the last few weeks it was almost like I had forgotten that side of Ace Craige. "But Daniela doesn't seem like the type of girl who just sleeps with a guy for fun." I had already categorized her as someone like me; shy around new people and reserved when it came to things like sex.

"And she isn't like that. At least I don't think so. It was over a month ago. I don't know; I took her out on a date. She probably thought I meant it, her being new and all. But I only had one thing on my mind. I'm not sure why she let me kiss her that night. I'm not sure why she let me do other things either. But she did," Ace finished.

I had a feeling that Ace could be pretty damn convincing when he wanted something.

"I didn't talk to her after that. I left right afterward; I never stay. I haven't even seen her around campus since then. I didn't expect Raze to be into her and take her out."

I clenched my jaw. "Raze isn't trying to do the same thing you did, right?"

"Nah. Raze acts like he good with the ladies but he's a softie," he laughed a little.

"Hey! You are too Ace Craige Underneath your I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude, you have a good heart," I told him, looking up and smiling.

He smirked and pulled into the driveway. "Don't go around telling people that sweetheart. You'll ruin my reputation."

"Oh whatever," I teased him and leaned forward to kiss him on his cheek.

He seemed stunned by the small movement and he awarded me with a genuine smile and leaned back in his seat. "Do you want me to walk you up?"

"No, it's okay," I told him, thinking of what Harry might do to him if he walked me up to the door.

He ran his fingertips over my cheek. "Alright. I'll come pick you up tomorrow, yeah?"

I nodded, "see you then. Text me when you get home so I know you're safe."

"And you say I'm the softie."

I rolled my eyes, kissed his cheek again before I thought anything of it and bounded up the stairs to the apartment.

Abuse warning.

Harry was waiting there. He wasn't drunk and he wasn't watching TV. He just stood there, right in front of the entryway when I walked in. The smile that had been placed there by Ace was torn away by the terrifying feeling Harry put in my stomach.

"This is the last straw Madison Grey. I've told you to stay away from that boy and yet, you don't listen to me. You never listen to me. I am your father and I deserve some fucking respect," he told me, his voice clear of any slurring.

But I just ignored him, hoping to walk passed him to head to my room for the rest of the night. But Harry grabbed ahold of my sweater and yanked me back. "I'm going to sleep," I told him in a small but firm voice.

"You can sleep when I'm done with you."

I did not like the way his words made me feel. They created a slimy feeling in my gut and my entire body cringed. So I pulled myself away from his grip and started to make my way down the hall, a little faster this time.

But Harry wasn't drunk. He had no problem going after me and using his full strength to push me to the ground. I yelped and landed on my back, all sprawled out weird. He stood above me with a determined look in his eyes and he crouched to be level with me.

He kneeled on the carpet and pulled my body up until I was sitting instead of lying on the floor awkwardly. The fact that he didn't reek of alcohol made him even scarier than he was when he was drunk.

Now, his breath smelled of mint gum instead of beer but it still made me feel sick. He leaned forward and sneered in my face. "Are you going to listen to me now Maddie?"

He wasn't drunk so I knew he wouldn't make the mistake of hurting me. He wouldn't have an excuse to why he had done it. "Ace makes me happy Harry. I can't just stop seeing him."

He slapped me across the cheek. "You little bitch. I give you everything Maddie." He gestured around the dirty, almost empty apartment. As if it was something grand to show off. "And you still disrespect me."

He slapped me again and my cheek burned with a stinging pain. I closed my eyes to stop the tears that were forming from the pain. "Stop," I pleaded.

"This is for not doing what I asked of you," he whispered and then, slapped me again, creating a bruise I'd bet. "And that was for calling me Harry."

He stood up and walked over to his bedroom and went in, without another word. I sat there, wordlessly for minutes or hours. He had just hit me enough times for me to almost lose count. I couldn't recall a time he had ever done that before.

The doorbell rang and I did nothing. It rang again and then I heard knocks. I waited for Harry to come out, but he didn't. I still sat on the floor, a hand now covering my cheek.

When the doorbell kept ringing, Harry finally came out from his room and he glared at me. "useless, I swear." And then he answered the door.

And Ace was standing there with a scared expression.

Chapter 15

No one said or did anything. Harry stood there with a bored, expectant look on his face, waiting for Ace to say something to him. I sat on the floor with a hand holding my left cheek, trying to block my pain from the boy at the door. And Ace held his stance outside, staring at me with his jaw slack and lips parted.

It was like a game of who would break first. I almost wanted to get up and run to my bedroom but who knows what Ace would think then.

"What do you want kid?" Harry asked Ace with a sigh.

Ace's eyes flicked up to Harry's for a split second but then went back to me. Or more likely, my cheek. "What happened to you?" He whispered to me.

I barely picked up on it, but I heard something in his voice that made me shiver. I don't think anyone has been so scared for me before.

When I didn't answer, Harry growled, "she's fine. Goodbye." And then he tried to close the front door.

Ace wouldn't let him. He put his arm out, stopping the door. I could see his muscles tensing, his biceps straining with effort to keep it open. In the end, Ace was stronger than Harry and he burst through the door.

He made his way over to me quickly and knelt down. I backed up a little, scared Harry would do something to him since he was helping me. Ace slid his thumb across my bruised cheek and I winced. His eyes hardened.

Harry had obviously decided the scene before him wasn't worth his time because he started walking toward his room. But Ace stood, calmly walked over to him, stopping him, and punched him in the face.

He went down and was out cold. I screamed and he looked back over to me, shaking out his hand. How the hell did he do that?

He went back to me and held his hands out. I took them and he pulled me up and took me to my room. "Pack your things."

"Why?" I asked him, my voice still shaky.

He walked to my closet and opened it, searching for something. A few seconds later, he pulled out a backpack and threw it to me. "You're staying at my house."

"But why?" I asked, starting at the bag like it was a foreign object.

He stepped closer to me until my face was in his hands. "Mad, did your father hurt you?"

I stared at him and the scared expression he wore and tears welled up in my eyes. I nodded. He cursed and pulled me into his chest, holding me.

I let him squeeze the life out of me. It was almost as if he needed it more than me, to make sure I was there and okay. "He's never going to hurt you again sweetheart, I promise."

And if this hadn't been happening my whole life, I would have believed him. But it had, so I didn't. I just held onto him tighter, burying my face into his chest. He smelled good, I realized. He wore cologne but it wasn't too much.

The scent is what kept me sane in that moment. Because it was Ace; and Ace made me feel safe. "Okay, I'll pack some stuff."

But he didn't let go of me. His arms were over my arms and one hand cradled the back of my head. I chuckled lightly, the sound was weird with my cracked voice.

"Ace, I can't breathe," I smiled against his shirt.

He pulled back, holding my upper arms. "Gosh! I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," but he knew I wasn't.

We left my apartment, Harry still passed out on the living room floor. And we made our way down to his car. I had packed a bunch of clothes, just stuffing as much as I could into my bag.

As he drove, a muscle ticked in his jaw every few seconds. I could help but stare at him and tune out the music playing in the background. He really was gorgeous.

"What were you doing back at the apartments? I thought you had already left," I asked.

He smirked a little. "I was. But I realized I forgot something."

"What did you forget?" I asked, confused.

"I wanted to kiss you goodnight but I had wussed out in the car," he smiled but then it dropped.

"What if I hadn't come back Mad? What if I had never shown up?"

I sighed and reached over, covering his palm with my own. "Harry was already done with me. He was back in his room. I couldn't move from the floor to answer the door."

He shook his head. "I was so scared Mad; when you didn't answer. At first I thought you just couldn't hear it so I rang the bell again, and again and then pounded on the door. But no one heard me and it scared me."

"I'm sorry Ace."

He looked over at me and then laced our fingers together. "Don't you dare be sorry Mad. I'm sorry I wasn't there in time to stop it."

"You couldn't have stopped him. He was a man on a mission," I voiced.

We were quiet for the rest of the way to his house. But once he pulled into the driveway, he looked at me seriously. "What do you want me to tell my parents?"

"We're telling your parents?" I squeaked.

He was still holding onto my hand. "Well I can't just say, 'hey guys! So, my girlfriend is going to be staying over here for no reason at all!' That wouldn't fly with them."

"Do you want to tell them the truth?" I asked him and he nodded, looking slightly ashamed that he would want that. "Then tell them."

"You don't mind me telling my mom about Harry hurting you?" His was was disbelieving.

I nodded, "I trust you Ace. Whatever you need to do."

He smiled at me and then kissed the back of my hand. "I'm sorry Mad. You are literally the last person on this planet who deserves a father like him. You don't have to ever see him again if you don't want to."

"Ace, we both know that it's unlikely. Even if we somehow get him out of my life, he'd come back. He'd always find me." I was blushing from when his lips had touched my skin.

"I just want you to be happy Mad. You deserve so much better than living with that piece of trash. Can't you go live with your mom?"

I shook my head, "I told you, she left us when I was 14. I haven't spoken to her for three years. I don't even know where she is."

"God, this is so shitty." He sat there for a second, thinking things over. "Okay, we don't need to go over this right now. Let's just go in and you can get some rest."

I said nothing and we climbed out of the car, grabbing my bags from the back. We went inside and he yelled to his parents, letting them know he was home. They called him into the living room and he latched onto my hand and pulled me along with him.

Ace's parents' eyes widened when I walked in. I wasn't sure if they had seen the bruise forming on my cheek or if they were just shocked to see me. I wave them both a half hearted wave and they both did the same back, confused.

Ace swallowed and his grip tightened on my hand. "Mad is staying here for a few days."

Anna's eyes glanced back over to me and her gaze traveled over my features. A frown appeared when she saw my cheek. "What's going on Ace?"

I thought back to earlier that night, Harry screaming at me and hitting me over and over. I couldn't stop the tears from welling in my eyes. Ace glanced over at me and must have seen the look on my face.

"Baby, go upstairs and get some rest, okay?" I had never heard his voice so soft before. It was soothing and stopped the memories immediately. I nodded, dazed and went back into the entryway.

Grabbing my bags on the way, I went up the stairs and to Ace's room. It was the same as the last two times, with a few items of clothing spread along the floor. I set my things down on his bed and rifled through them. I picked out a pair of sleep shorts and a tee-shirt and threw them on, my gaze on his door the whole time.

I walked into his attached bathroom and looked at myself for the first time in his mirror. The sight was not pretty; my face was pale and my eyes looked sunken in as if I hadn't gotten enough sleep.

There was indeed a bruise forming on my cheek and just the sight of it made me turn away in displeasure. I washed my face and put my hair up before going back into his bedroom. I crawled in his bed, needing to be wrapped in the warmth of the blankets.

It was a while before I heard his door crack open, revealing Ace. He wore a small smile and he crept over to me. I blinked my eyes at him, sleepily, since I had almost been asleep. "Mad, my parents said you can stay here as long as you need, okay?"

I nodded and pulled his face down to me by his hand. I moved my lips until they were by his ear. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Please don't thank me Mad. I'm not doing this because I have to. I want to make sure you're okay," he sat on the bed next to my body.

I nodded, "thank you anyway; for caring about me."

Ace ran his hand through my hair a few times and leaned down to kiss my forehead. "Get some sleep sweetheart. I'll see you in the morning."

But before he could leave, I grabbed his hand. "Where are you going?"

He blinked, "to the guest room."

"Stay here, with me," I asked him, pleaded him.

He stared at me for a few seconds before nodding and going to his closet. He picked out a pair of pajamas and went into the bathroom.

He came out in a pair of blue sleep pants and a white shirt. He went to the other side of his bed and climbed in next to me. I had shared a bed with him once before but it was still weird to think I was in bed with a boy.

Even if it was completely for comfort and not for anything sexual, it was weird. I flipped over until I faced him and then scooted closer. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me even closer.

My head eventually rested on his chest, one of my arms thrown across his abdomen, the other curled to my chest. His arms protectively held my waist and stroked the back of my hair, playing with strands of brown hair.

"Goodnight Ace," I whispered to him, tightening my hold on his body.

He kissed the crown of my head and then pulled back. "Sleep well sweetheart."

Chapter 16

I woke up the next morning with my head on a body instead of a pillow. I was on my side, my head resting on Ace's shoulder. He was nuzzled into the juncture of my neck where it met my shoulder. I could feel his breath, soft and warm against my skin.

I pulled away a little, only so I could see what Ace looked like when he slept. The last time we had slept in the same bed together was the first time Ace had witnessed Harry's anger. And the next morning, he had woken me up; I never got to see him asleep.

But now, I was able to openly watch as he took involuntary breaths, as his eyelids fluttered softly. He looked sweeter when he slept, I realized. There was no need for him to act like a "bad boy" in his dreams. And before I knew it, I was tracing the once harsh lines that lay on his forehead.

My fingers swept along the shape of his jaw and over his chin. They went back up to his forehead to trace his eyebrows. But when Ace's eyes began to open, I pulled my needy hands away. I was sure he didn't want me touching him when he was trying to get some rest.

When I finally saw his clear green eyes staring back at me, I smiled. He didn't. Instead, he frowned and brought his own hand up to my face and touched my cheek. It hurt a little but he only lightly swept his fingers across the bruises.

"Do they hurt?" He asked me. I noticed his morning breath wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.

I nodded, "a little." But then I closed my mouth and started to get up. Just because his breath wasn't terrible in the morning, didn't mean mine wasn't either. I felt his hand on my hip, trying to pull me back into bed, which made me smile. "I'm just brushing my teeth, calm down."

Ace pouted a little, bottom lip jutted out and everything. I turned around and went toward his bathroom, rooting around my bag on the way there. Of all the things, of course I had forgotten to take my toothbrush.

"Do you have an extra toothbrush?" I asked him sheepishly.

He chuckled, "No."

Well then.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. Now I'd have bad breath for the rest of the day. I looked over at Ace and saw his eyes brighten. He hopped up and went into the bathroom.

He came back out, producing a toothbrush. "I was kidding. Here," he handed it to me. I smiled.

"Thank you."

I went past him into the bathroom and put toothpaste on and began brushing my teeth. Ace stayed, leaning against the door frame, watching me. There was something oddly domestic about him watching me brush my teeth but I didn't feel like addressing it.

Once I finished, I set the toothbrush down and looked at Ace. "Aren't you going to brush your teeth?" He nodded and picked up the same toothbrush I had just used. "What are you doing?" I asked him.

"Brushing my teeth Mad," he smirked.

"Where's your toothbrush?" I didn't want him using mine.

He held the one in his hand up. "Right here sweetheart."

"But I just-" I stopped. Oh he did not. "Ace! You made me use your toothbrush? Gross!"

He laughed, putting toothpaste on. "I didn't make you do anything. I never said it was an extra. And besides, why are you getting all worked up? Your mouth has been on mine before, how is this different?"

"Sharing a toothbrush is just nasty Ace James Craige!" I insisted. He started brushing his teeth and smiled at me through the foamy paste. I made a disgusted sound and went back into his room. At least my mouth was clean.

A few minutes later, Ace came out of the bathroom; but he was missing something. Oh yeah, his shirt. I had never seen Ace shirtless before but, man, it was a wonderful sight. He wasn't too muscular, but his stomach was toned, with a slight formation of abs, making my mind go crazy. His biceps flexed everytime he made a move, drawing my eyes.

"It isn't nice to stare sweetheart," he told me, his voice low and incredibly sexy. I swallowed hard and looked away, toward his bed. Not a good idea.

The bed just gave me more ideas that I refused to act on. I knew I was blushing; I was probably the color of a firetruck at this point.

I took a deep breath and went back to what I was doing, which was sorting through my overnight bag, looking for something to wear. I could feel him standing right behind me, my stomach was turning in embarrassment.

God, he was doing this on purpose.

I felt his hand on my waist and I turned around, about to tell him off for being such a hot jerk but the look in his eyes stopped me from doing anything. His green eyes were dark and he pulled me

closer. Ace gave me a small but lingering kiss, making my eyes flutter closed. He kissed my lips once more before pulling away and going to his closet.

I just stood there, trying to figure out what had just happened. "Um, what was that for?" I asked him, my cheeks still flaming.

"I told you last night Mad, I forgot my goodnight kiss."

"It's morning," my voice was dazed.

He chuckled and threw on a white tee-shirt. "A good morning kiss then."

If he keeps kissing me like that, he can have a kiss at any point in the day.

"Good to know," he smirked.

Oh dear, I really said that outloud.

I blushed even harder, if that was even possible and went back to looking through my bag.

I hadn't realized that most of Ace's family would be downstairs already. I had actually forgotten that tonight was the final family barbecue before most of them left.

We were holding hands on our way down, but when Ace had seen his cousins running around, he ushered me back up the stairs.

"What the hell?" I asked him as he shut his bedroom door.

He turned around and faced me. "You can see the bruises."

"So? They're just bruises."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "My family is very nosy Mad. First, they'll ask what happened. And when you refuse to tell them, they'll think it was me."

My eyes widened. "Um, why would your family assume it was you?"

"I'm not exactly the greatest kid sweetheart."

"You've never hit a girl before, have you?" I asked him cautiously.

He shook his head and glared at me. "No, of course not. I'm just saying; that is exactly what they'd do."

"Is Katie here?" I asked.

"Probably. Why?" He started pacing his room.

I rolled my eyes and walked over to him, stopping his feet from moving anxiously. "She's a teenage girl. She probably carries around concealer and other makeup things." He didn't even say anything. He just spun, walked to his door and ran downstairs. I sat on his bed patiently, waiting for him.

Katie was muttering a bunch of curses when the door finally opened after a few minutes. I lifted my hand in a wave and her eyes widened and she gasped.

"Are you okay? What happened?" She asked in a rush.

Ace shook his head and pushed her closer to me. "She's fine. She's just very clumsy. Listen, do you have any face cover up stuff?"

"Concealer?" She asked, acting like he was stupid.

But I understood. I mean, come on, face cover up stuff? Priceless.

We both nodded and she dug through her mini purse. She pulled out a small tube containing the very much needed makeup and she headed over to me. It took a good five minutes for her to apply enough to cover up my bruises and Ace had just watched from the corner of his room. He looked concerned, biting his thumbnail the whole time.

"Voila! She's ready," Katie told Ace and set her things back into her bag.

I stood up and did a little twirl for their amusement. "How do I look?" I asked, posing and fluttering my eyelashes.

"You look beautiful," Ace spoke quietly and made his way over to me. "But you could have asked me that earlier before the makeup and I would have said the same thing."

I blushed, not used to him giving me compliments and good morning kisses yet. I whispered a thank you and kissed his cheek.

Katie just sighed, "god I want a boyfriend."

Me too. But just one boy in particular.

Chapter 17

I was making small talk with some of Ace's older cousins when I saw Anna make her way over to me. She was smiling, but it seemed a bit forced. I then remembered that Ace had probably told her and Austin everything.

She didn't make a move to pull me aside; instead, she merely joined the conversation. We were talking about Ace's and my "first date." I had thought it would have been difficult to come up with something on the spot but instead, I just ended up changing around the first time he took me to Ida's to get ice cream.

"How long have you two been going out?" Ace's older cousin, Grace, asked me.

For a second, I hadn't known what to say. We hadn't really discussed the supposed time frame of our relationship before. I went with the safest answer. "A few weeks I think," I muttered the last part to myself.

"You think?" Anna laughed.

I flushed a little, "I'm not quite sure when it became official," I saved. Luckily, it seemed to work because she smiled at me.

"It's amazing; seeing him care so much about someone besides the family or himself," her eyes seemed to glaze over with happiness.

I squinted in confusion. Was she talking about me? If so, Ace must have been a damn good actor. But it didn't stop me from telling her, "I care about him a lot too."

She gives me another smile and looks over to Grace. "Do you mind if I steal Mad for a second?"

Grace shakes her head and gives me a small wave. Uh-oh. I already knew what this conversation would be about and I definitely was not ready for it.

"We can go up to Ace's room. No one can hear us up there." I said nothing as she led me up to her son's room. I sat on his bed the moment I made it into the room. "Alright honey, first of all, are you okay? Hurting at all?"

I nodded. "Just a little bit. I have some bruises on my face but Katie covered them with concealer."

"Has your father always been like this?" Anna got right into it.

I took a deep breath. "Not really. He's never hit me until last night. That's why I was so shocked. He started drinking heavily when I was 14 because my mom left."

She nodded. "Are in contact with her?"

I shook my head, no, unless once a year counted. "I see. Was that your choice or hers?"

"She disconnected her phone number and she isn't in the phone book. I don't know where she ran off to," I told her sadly. She called from different numbers every year.

Anna had sat down on the bed next to me and began rubbing circles on my back reassuringly. "So your father, he used to be normal?"

"He was up until I was 11. He lost his job and started acting different. He was mean to everyone around him, not just my mom and me," I shivered. "But I never thought-" I couldn't finish my sentence. A weird emotion gripped my throat.

Anna continued to comfort me. "Alright. Well, I don't want you going back there for awhile Mad. You're welcome to stay as long as you need."

"Thank you Anna. I hate relying on people like this though. I wish I didn't have to put this on you and your family," I put my head down, looking at my hands.

She shook her head. "You aren't putting anything on us. Austin and I want to do this for you. Even if you weren't Ace's girlfriend, we'd still want to help."

I felt my eyes prickle a little, unbelieving anyone could be so kind to me. "What if he tries to find me?"

"Don't you worry about it honey. We're gonna figure everything out. Austin's sister is a lawyer, you know."

I looked back up at her. "What are you gonna do to him?" I wasn't asking because I was scared for him; I asked because I wanted them to do their worst.

"Well, you're going to be 18 in a few months right?" She prompted.

I nodded, "in January."

"Until then, we'll figure out, living wise. We'll try to take him to court; file a case. We've already called child protective services and their going to be sending someone out to come see you sometime soon. They'll help us figure out the next step," Anna explained as if it was common sense. No one had ever cared for me like this.

Samantha had been a pretty good mother, just as Harry had been an okay dad. There had been no need for her motherly instincts to kick in when she was living with us because Harry wasn't drinking much.

"Last night, when Harry hit me, he wasn't drunk, at all." I didn't know why I was telling her this. It's not like it was really relevant. I just hadn't had the time to explain it to anyone really. I hadn't even told Ace. "He's always drunk when he threatens me. But I noticed it as soon as I walked in. He wasn't stumbling when he walked, his voice didn't slur and his breath didn't smell like alcohol."

She sighed sadly. "Make sure you tell that child protective services that, okay? That might help your case even more."

"Really?" I asked, my eyes going wide. She nodded. And then, for some reason, I started to cry. I wasn't entirely sure why. I was upset, of course, because of yesterday, but I was also happy. There were finally people who knew about Harry and his terrible ways. And they wanted to help me.

Anna pulled me into a hug and continued to rub my back as she held me. I sobbed into her blouse and placed my fingers over her shoulder blades. I couldn't stop crying and I didn't even know why.

It was a few minutes later when the bedroom door creaked open. I heard footsteps run over to the bed and gently pull me from Anna's grasp. My eyes were closed but I knew it was Ace. Then his arms were around me and I sobbed into his chest. My fingers curled into the front of his tee-shirt, bunching the fabric.

He didn't say anything as he held me; and he didn't know, but that was exactly what I needed. I just wanted him to sit there and let me cry until I couldn't anymore. Anna didn't leave either. She just sat next to us, rubbing my arm softly.

My tears began to dissipate and my cries hushed. I started sniffing against the material of Ace's shirt and wiped my eyes with my hand. I didn't want to look up at him because I was embarrassed that I had just cried so hard in front of him and his mom. It wasn't that I hadn't cried in front of him before, because I had. It was more because I didn't know why I was doing it in the first place and his mother had been the one to comfort me first.

His mother, who thought we were dating. She thought she had been comforting the girl her son was with. But that was all a lie; we weren't together. She had been comforting a lie.

I looked down at my hands, refusing to look up. But the back of Ace's hand pushed my chin up, making me look up to him. "It's okay to cry Mad. You're allowed to be sad. Please don't hold back from me."

I sniffled again, giving him a flicker of a smile but it didn't reach my eyes. He moved aside a strand of hair with his thumb and brought his head closer, giving me a kiss on the forehead. I leaned into the small kiss and closed my eyes, savoring in the moment that wouldn't last as long as I wanted it to.

Eventually, I pulled away, hoping I didn't seem too needy and emotional. Anna went back downstairs after one last hug and left Ace and me alone. I needed a few minutes to collect myself and thoughts before going downstairs to make conversation with my fake boyfriend's family.

Ace sat with me as I calmed my breath and wiped my tears. Thankfully, I hadn't been wearing any makeup, minus the concealer to cover the bruises. Katie had left the tube of it up here just in case I needed to re-apply. So Ace helped me apply it to the places needed and I blended it out with my fingers.

Katie had also left some powder up here to set the oily concealer so I applied it with the brush next to it and was ready. My under eyes had been puffy from crying so I had put concealer there too.

Back downstairs, after I had pulled my shit together, we sat around the bonfire, a usual occurrence with Ace's family. The night always seemed to end around the fire with a guitar and music.

Austin sat in the chair next to the couch Ace was sitting on, said guitar in his lap. I had yet to sit down because I had gotten myself of plate of food to eat before sitting with everyone since I had missed dinner. Ace motioned for me to sit next to him and I complied.

He tucked me against his side, wrapping a warm arm around my body. I snuggled into his chest and resting my folded knees on his thigh. Ace had given me one of his hoodies to wear even though I had packed jackets of my own. I was totally okay with it, seeing as it was warm and smelled just like him.

His whole family began to sing quietly and harmonically to Austin's soft strumming. I could feel Ace's chest vibrate from his singing and it was surprisingly comforting. His voice was still beautiful; I could listen to him sing for the rest of my life and never get bored of the rasp in his voice.

The night ended too quick for my liking and soon we were hugging everybody goodbye. Ace genuinely seemed upset about most of his family leaving already and he hugged each and everyone of them tight.

They all said sweet things to me about how adorable Ace and I were together and how much they enjoyed my company the last two weeks. It almost felt as if my own family was leaving. And that sucked. They had all been so kind to me and I wished one day I would get to spend time with them all again.

Chapter 18

I stayed the night at Ace's house for the next week, but now, in separate rooms. Anna only had one rule for us while I stayed there and it was, "no sleeping in the same bed as your girlfriend Ace James Craige." He had nodded, a little scared and I agreed to it quickly, not wanting to upset her.

A week after the final family barbeque, I woke up to someone nudging my arm repeatedly. I let it go on for awhile, not wanting to wake up. But eventually, the incessant poking got to be too much for me. "I'm up," I groaned.

"I was beginning to think you were dead," Ace whispered into my ear, making me jerk away.

I opened my eyes slowly and saw his face directly above mine. I wanted to reach up and kiss him but remembered the fact that morning breath was a thing. "Have you got a spare toothbrush for me yet?" Even after a week of me staying there, Ace still made me use his toothbrush. I truly wanted to die.

He smirked down at me. "Sweetheart, you can always use-

"I'm going to hit you."

He laughed and pulled away from my face. I sat up in the large spare bed and tried to smooth down my hair, which was surely a mess. I was in his hoodie and had thrown on a pair of sleep shorts before climbing into bed the night before.

"Did you sleep well without me there?" Ace asked with confidence.

I shoved him aside when he leaned in again and chuckled. "I went a whole seventeen years without sleeping in the same bed as you. I'm pretty sure I can do it for one week without feeling deprived."

He lay a hand against his chest. "Are you telling me that without my presence, you are able to function? Properly?"

"Get out of my way, I need to get ready. What time is it?" I asked him. But he had already turned my usually bad morning, better.

The corners of his eyes crinkled in the corners when he looked at me. "It's 7:30."

"School starts in 20 minutes Ace!" I shot up out of the warm bed and ran into the hallway, into his bedroom. My things were still in there; I had been too lazy to move them.

I grabbed a pair of jeans and a long sleeved red sweater. I went into his bathroom and took the quickest shower known to man, brushed my teeth and then dressed. I pulled on my pair of converse and combed through my hair simultaneously. I guess my hair would have to be wet today.

Ace sat on his bed, on his phone the entire time, already dressed and ready to go. This had practically been the routine since I started staying with Ace's family. He didn't even look at me when I stood in front of him with my hands on my hips. "I'm ready to go now. Thank you so much for waking me," I practically growled.

He glanced up quickly. "Well don't you look cute? What took you so long?"

"If you don't shut up, I'm going to tear my hair out," I told him, grabbing my backpack and went into the hallway.

He followed me downstairs and into the kitchen where Anna was handing Noah a plate of waffles. Ace grabbed one from his plate and shoved it into his mouth. "Hey!" Noah whined at his older brother.

I smacked Ace on the arm quickly and glared at him. "Don't take your brother's food Ace. It's not nice."

"I'll take it into consideration mom," he teased me, his eyes sparkling.

Anna took this as the perfect opportunity to hit her oldest son in the back of the head. "Listen to your girlfriend and your mother then. Don't be mean to your brother."

Ace rolled his eyes, still chewing on the waffle. I stuck my tongue out at him and he rolled his eyes again, with way more drama. Anna handed Noah a new plate to replace the sad, stolen waffle off his old plate.

My so called "boyfriend" handed me a waffle from the stack on the counter and we were out. I get into the passenger seat of his car and turn the music up as loud as I can, just to irritate him. "Damn, what is your issue this morning?"

"You woke me up late," I huffed, crossing my arms.

Ace reached over and patted my knee. "You're lucky I woke you up at all. You looked all cute, snoring up a storm."

"I don't snore," I fake pouted, my arms still crossed over my chest.

He started driving and since school started in five minutes, there were no empty parking spaces. I kept mumbling how it was his fault the entire time but he just chuckled, amused.

We were 5 minutes late and the teacher gave us a glare, probably blaming our tardy on something other than parking spaces. Kimmy just smirked and winked, earning an eye roll from the both of us. Whatever she was thinking was incorrect. Ace hadn't kissed me since last Sunday morning and I hadn't tried to make the next move yet.

Ace didn't talk to me after class; it probably had to do with the fact that I wouldn't stop kicking his chair all throughout class. I tried tugging on his arm, backpack and belt loops. He just ignored me.

So there we were few hours later, silently walking side by side to the cafeteria. "Do we have to sit with Raze and his girlfriend and Loki?" Ace said nothing. "All Daniela and Raze do is make out. And Loki just glares at me constantly. Why would you subject me to that? You're the worst fake boyfriend on this planet."

"Would you stop calling me your fake boyfriend?" Ace finally sighed.

Warning bells rang in my mind. "That's what you are. I don't remember establishing a fake breakup."

"What we are is anything but fake Mad."

So, we were going to have that talk.

"Once again, I don't remember us doing the whole breakup thing," I repeated, not knowing what else to tell him.

We walked through the cafeteria doors and I spotted our usual table. And I had been right. Daniela and Raze were close to ripping each other's clothes off, Loki looked like he wanted to rip off his own skin and Kimmy just looked bored, eating her lunch.

"Why would we 'breakup?'" Ace asked me, clearly not giving up on this.

I groaned. "Because Ace. If you don't want the whole fake relationship thing anymore, that's cool. But I don't know what else you could possibly want."

He opened his mouth so say something else but we had reached the table so I looked away from him. I was being stubborn and I knew it. Raze and Daniela didn't notice us but Kimmy smiled, as if she were grateful we were finally here. I sat next to her and Ace sat next to Loki, opposite me.

Odd.

He always sat next to me. Was he actually angry? I said nothing as Lilli leaned over and asked, "what's wrong with your boy?"

"Stop calling him that," I chastised her. "And I don't know. We were kind of talking about our relationship. I really don't know what we are."

She gave a low whistle. "You should really establish that babe."

I rolled my eyes but nodded. "Well aware."

Ace and I basically had the same lunch everyday now. His mom had started to pack me a lunch and had even gone as far as buying me my own sort of lunch box. It was one of the kindest things anyone had done for me.

I had forgotten to grab my lunch bag that morning and thought Ace had forgotten too; but he pulled both out of his backpack and handed me mine.

"You forgot this," he whispered to me and I took it from him.

"Thank you," I whispered back with a small smile.

He leaned forward and tugged lightly on my hair, forcing me to tilt my head to the side. I scowled playfully at him and he smiled.

I waited in the parking lot next to Kimmy's car, waiting for her to show up. Normally, I'd be going home with a certain green eyed boy, but today I needed my best friend.

Ever since last week with Harry and me staying with Ace and his family, I felt like Kimmy and I were drifting. And it was all my fault. I had a feeling she was beginning to feel left behind because I spent my time with mostly Ace.

Kimmy didn't deserve to be left behind. She had been there for me since we were in kindergarten. She knew all about Harry and his disgusting, mean words. She was my best friend and no one could replace her.

When she saw me, she smiled and practically slipped over to her car. "Hey stranger. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I just wanna hang out with my best friend. I miss you," I rolled my eyes but told her sincerely.

She unlocked her car and hopped in, starting it up. "So what are we doing today BFF?"

"Well we can start off with you not calling me BFF every two seconds," I told her sarcastically.

She laughed and turned up the volume on the radio and started singing obnoxiously loud. "Oh my god," I groaned while simultaneously laughing.

"You love me!" She yelled over the music.

"Less and less everyday," I yelled back. She let out a snort and turned the volume down; but only a little.

We decided to get coffee at Lilli's favorite cafe. Back when we were sophomores we used to walk there everyday after school since neither of us could drive. We ordered our coffee and a pastry to share, aka for Kimmy, and we sat down.

"So, did you talk to Ace?" She asked, probably already knowing my answer.

I took a long sip of coffee. Mmm. "No, but I kind of live with the guy. He's probably sitting by the front door waiting for me to get back just so he can pounce on me with questions."

"I just don't get you Maddie. Ace obviously has a thing for you and you like him back. Why is it such big deal if there's a label on it?" She asked.

I shrugged. "Guys like him don't like girls like me Kims. It's as simple and cliché as that."

She heavily rolled her eyes at me. "I don't believe that and I don't think you do either. I think you've learned by now that Ace is a completely different guy than we thought he was."

And she was right, of course. Ace was the literal opposite of a bad boy if I've ever met one. I wasn't even sure how anyone could misidentify him as a bad kid. He was the sweetest guy I had ever met.

"I don't know Kimmy. I think I just have an aversion to relationships," I confessed, looking down at the half eaten pastry in front of us.

"Yeah, that's pretty damn obvious Maddie. Listen," she settled in her chair and leaned closer. "I know everything with your mom and Harry but it's not fair to let that dictate how you live your life. What were you planning on doing Maddie? Avoid a relationship your entire life? Never get married or have a family?"

I sighed, feeling my face start to heat. "I don't know Kims. I hadn't planned that far ahead. I always figured I'd fall in love one day and everything with my parents' wouldn't affect me. But it did, it does."

Kimmy pushed the pastry toward me and I shook my head. She gave me an expectant look and I eyed it. And then ate the rest of it. "I'm sorry that this isn't easy for you babe. I just want you to be happy."

"I wish I could just date Ace and be happy without any insecurities but alas, my childhood decided otherwise."

Kimmy eyed me for a few seconds. "Maybe it would be helpful if you talked to him about it, Ace I mean. He's the only other person you really talk to about stuff like this. He listens, he would understand."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"Put it this way Maddie, how do you think he's feeling? You practically reject the kid everytime he mentions anything about relationships or feelings. That's gotta sting," Kimmy made me contemplate.

I inhaled sharply. "I don't want to think about it. I know it probably hurts his feelings that I'm not as open as he is and that sucks. I don't want to do that at all. But I can't help the uncomfortable weight that comes with the thought of commitment."

"Well, you can't expect him to wait for you to figure yourself out forever babe. Take my advice and talk to him. You never know Rose, maybe he understands you more than you think."

Chapter 19

The first thing that happened when I got back to the Craige/Ross residence was something I didn't expect. Kimmy had dropped me off and I had walked in the front door, my mood in between brooding and repine. But what I wasn't ready for, was Ace to be behind the door when I opened it.

He jumped out in front of me and yelled, "boo!" as loud as he possibly could, scaring not only me but Noah, who was in the living room. We both yelped at the top of our lungs, the sound shrill.

"Ace James Craige, don't do that!" I hit his arm repeatedly. It did no harm to him, seeing as his arm was as hard as a solid piece of concrete.

He chuckled and snatched the backpack off my shoulder, swinging it over his own. "You know, the longer you stay in this house, the more I notice you act like my mother."

I start to walk up the stairs. "I don't know what you've heard Ace, but boys with oedipus complexes aren't cute."

"What's an eddipus complex?" I hear Noah yell from the other room.

Ace followed me up the stairs. "Nothing!" We both answered.

We ended up in the guest bedroom, where I was currently sleeping and Ace set my backpack on the bed. "So, how was your history test?" I plopped down onto my back.

"How did you know I had a history test?" He questioned.

I rolled my eyes. "You told me a few days ago you were stressed for the test on Monday."

"Oh right, you actually pay attention to what I say," he nodded, sitting on the bed beside me, pushing my bag out of his way.

I glanced over at him quickly, "as opposed to who?"

"Raze."

"Raze listens to you, quit being a baby," I teased him as I leaned back against the pillows propped up against the headboard.

Ace did the same and then picked up my hand, running his thumb over my knuckles. "Not to sound cliché, but guys don't really hash things out like girls. Raze and I don't talk about our feelings like that, whenever we do, it's awkward."

"Well personally, I like listening to you talk about what's bothering you," I pause. "It makes me feel useful and trustworthy."

Ace let go of my hand and moved his fingers to the front of my hair. His fingers wove through the shorter strands in the front, curling them around. "So you want to know what's been bothering me?"

"Yeah," I told him half-heartedly, watching him play with my hair.

Suddenly, we were both lying on our sides, next to each other, propped up on our elbows. "Us."

How could I have forgotten?

"Us?" I repeated, hoping I had heard him wrong. But he confirmed it by nodding. "What about us?" I decided to play the innocent card.

Ace wasn't having it. "About today at lunch. Why do you avoid talking about us?"

"Is there even an us?" I asked him and he stopped playing with my hair.

"Since when was there not an us?" The amount of times we had used the word "us" was making my head hurt. And when I don't answer, he continued. "Mad, don't act dumb with me. You know exactly what I'm talking about. I just don't understand you sometimes."

You and me both.

"I'm not too good with expressing myself," I admitted.

He nods, still looking at me. "How many more times do I have to tell you that that's okay before you actually understand it?"

I smiled sadly. "How long are you willing to wait to find out?"

"As long as I need to." He confessed it so easily. It was almost as if the thought of spending time with me for a long time wasn't so scary to him.

I took a deep breath and he waited, now knowing how hard it was for me to let him know what I wanted. "I've never been in a relationship, you know this already. I don't know what it means to be in love," I paused after seeing the scared look on Ace's face after the mention of love.

I didn't want to say anything else after seeing the look on his face. So I turn my head to the opposite side of the room and stare at the wall. I hadn't even noticed I had crossed my arms over my chest.

"Hey, why'd you stop?" He asked me, gently pulling my arms away from my body.

I rolled my eyes but Ace couldn't see my face so I turned toward him and gave him a look which made him back off. "Nevermind, I don't really want to talk about it."

"What did I do?" His eyebrows were scrunched close together.

Oh, I don't know. Maybe look at me like I'm insane for saying the word love?

"I'm finally telling you how I'm feeling and as soon as I mention love, you look completely freaked out! I wasn't going to say I was in love with you, gosh," I let out without thinking.

Ace sighs and sits up, pulling me up with him. "I'm sorry, I didn't even realize I was doing anything. You can keep talking; I swear I won't make any offensive faces."

"I'm not sure if I want to Ace," I whisper, slightly heartbroken that he was so revolted by the thought of me being in love with him. Which, I wasn't.

He shook his head. "You are the most stubborn girl i've ever encountered."

"Is that good or bad?"

Ace stood from the bed and walked to the door. "I'm not joking with you Madison."

Oh no, the full first name.

"I never-" I began.

Ace interrupted me. "I don't think you understand me when I tell you I want there to be an us. Mad, I like you and you like me. I know you have a rough time explaining your feelings to me, to everyone but for once, I don't want you to laugh my feelings off. My feelings matter too."

I stared at him, unblinking. His outburst caused a little snap against my heartstrings and I couldn't look away from him. Ace was breathing heavily, as if he couldn't catch his breath and I had a feeling I looked the same.

"So make up your mind Madison. You either like me or you don't. You want there to be an us or you don't. Do you want to be my friend? Because I sure as hell don't want to be yours but if that's what you want, I'll do it. I'll do it because I want you to be comfortable and happy. I'd sacrifice my own wants for you to be happy Mad, don't you get that?" Ace finishes before storming off down the hall, slamming my bedroom door shut in the process.

It was a while later before I could bring myself to walking down the hallway to Ace's room. I had already finished my homework for the night and had showered, leaving my hair in a wet, detangled mess around my face.

I knocked on his door lightly, hoping he might be asleep so I wouldn't have to do this. But the door opened a few seconds later, revealing a disgruntled looking Ace. "Hi," I said to him, a frown on my face.

Ace's hair was a complete mess; his slightly curly brown hair strewn in every which way, making him look kind of like a mushroom. But a very cute mushroom. He had changed into blue flannel pajama pants and a white tee shirt. The shirt was tight enough to see the outline of his hard muscles.

I almost completely forgot why I had come to his room in the first place.

Right! Ace was angry with me.

He didn't tell me hi back; but he let me into his room by stepping aside. I walked in and told myself not to sit on his bed but did anyway. "You know, I hate when you're angry with me."

"I'm not."

"I also don't like when you lie to me," I volley back.

Ace sighed and then it turned into a groan. "Why are you here?"

"I kind of live here as of right now," I joke but then stop smiling after remembering what he said about me laughing about his feelings. "You never let me say anything after your little outburst."

He let out a harsh laugh. "Little outburst huh? Well, I was just trying to tell you how I felt but I see that it wasn't seen as such."

I shook my head. "I'm not making fun of you Ace-"

"Do you even care about other people's feelings Mad? Because it doesn't really seem like you do," He chuckled angrily.

This was so not how I saw this conversation going. "Just let me talk-"

"Oh so she finally speaks?" Ace said, mean spirited.

"Stop, why are you acting like this?" I asked him, not liking his douchebag behavior. He rolled his eyes and I stood up, no longer comfortable sitting on his bed. And suddenly, I wanted to be mean too. "I just wanted to tell you I just want to be your friend Ace, nothing else."

Gosh, that's not what I wanted to say.

But Ace had already absorbed my answer. I could see the short spark of sadness in his eyes before they flashed in anger. "Great! Goodnight," he all but shoved me out of his room.

"Ace-"

But he had already slammed the door in my face.

I wasn't sure how the next day would go. I had definitely made things awkward with Ace but he had acted completely normal. But his normal was weird for me.

He didn't joke with me as much as normal and when he did, it was forced and it was difficult for me to even grant him a genuine smile. I knew he said no matter what my decision was, he just wanted me happy.

But so far, neither of us seemed happy. And I sort of wished he would call me on it because I so wanted to take it back. I didn't want to be Ace's friend. I wanted to be so much more.

But a few days passed and soon it was Friday. We had spent the whole week dancing around each other and I was sick of it. We had driven to school in complete silence, except for the radio.

He still sat in front of me in first period but he didn't bother turning around to talk to me anymore. Kimmy had given me weird looks up until Wednesday, when I told her what went down. She had been a good friend and took me out for ice cream, thinking it's make me feel better.

But ice cream had easily become a thing Ace and I did together. And just that reminder that Ace wasn't here, made me so incredibly sad.

I was sure by now, it looked as if we had "broken up" to the school. We didn't talk to each other, Ace didn't walk me to class and we didn't eat lunch together. But he was still giving me rides back to his house and to school.

I made a mental note to have him take me back to Harry's apartment to get my car so it wasn't a hassle for him anymore to take me places when he clearly didn't want to.

I had already made plans to spend some time with Lilli since she was clearly my only friend, once again. When I had told him I didn't need a ride, he didn't look happy or sad. His face had been void of emotion.

Kimmy and I went to the movies and saw a book to movie adaptation. But the book had been better, obviously. But it had helped me take my mind off the whole Ace situation and let me relax.

But once the movie was over, I went right back to being sad. The whole thing had been my fault, of course. If I had just been more clear with my emotions, we wouldn't have fought and I wouldn't have gotten scared to tell him I wanted him too.

Kimmy spent nearly an hour convincing me just to walk right up to him and kiss him until neither of us could breathe properly. But I wasn't bold enough to do so. So I settled for me at least trying to talk to him again and hoping it'd turn out better than the last conversation we'd had.

So after getting out of Kimmy's car, I ran upstairs and put my things down and quietly walked to Ace's door, unsure if I was even ready to do this. Because after this, Ace and I would never be the same.

I knocked quietly but no one heard me. I figured Ace was asleep so I turned around and started to walk away. But then realized it was a cowerdish of me to walk away from him so easily so I flipped back around.

Screw knocking.

And then I opened his door, ready to be met with his angry face and ready to reveal everything I was feeling to him. Because I wanted it, I wanted him. And I would do what I could to convince him to give me another chance.

But instead of seeing Ace's indifferent face staring back at me, I saw Farah Del Valle, underneath him; both without a shirt on.

Chapter 20

Farah Del Valle wasn't my favorite person. That was no surprise. But what was a surprise was finding her shirtless and underneath Ace, kissing him on his bed. My first instinct was to immediately throw him off of her and push her out of the window.

But I didn't do that. Instead, I apologized. "Sorry! You didn't answer when I knocked and I wanted to talk to you..." I trailed off.

Both Ace and Farah whipped their heads toward me. Ace looked like he had seen a ghost but Farah looked pleased. As if my getting flustered was her intention all along.

Before I could do or say anything stupid, I turned around and started to walk back to my room. It was going to be difficult as hell to stay in the room across the hall if he kept this up.

I heard the bed creak with movement and turned back to see Ace shooting off of it. He somehow ended up in front of me and held his hands out to stop me from pushing passed him.

"Mad," he whispered.

I clenched my jaw in an effort to stop myself from tearing up. There was no way I was crying in front of him. He doesn't get to see me sad. I tried to keep my face as emotionless as possible but I didn't think I succeeded.

"What?" I finally answered him, my voice barely above a whisper.

He sputtered for a few seconds, not knowing what to tell me. "It's not what-"

"It's not what it looks like, right?" I finished his sentence. It was almost sad how cliché and overused the line was. Ace said nothing. "Whatever, okay? So you're into Farah, that's... cool. I'm going to bed."

And then I pushed past him and walked into my temporary room. And he stayed there, out in the hallway. It was a few minutes later when I heard his footsteps padding back down the hall to his room and back to Farah.

I woke up to the light sound of knocking against my door a few hours later. I looked over at my phone and saw it was almost 9:30. I rubbed the sleep away from my eyes and headed to open the door.

I wasn't even thinking about who it could be so when I saw Noah standing there, with a frown on his face, I was surprised to say the least.

"You didn't come down for dinner and Ace didn't talk the whole time," he told me sadly.

I nodded, "sorry buddy, today was exhausting. I just wanted to sleep."

"Why is Ace sad Mad?"

Good fucking question, kid.

But I only shrugged, "don't know."

Noah's eyebrows scrunched close together in confusion. "You always seem to know what's wrong with Ace. It's like your superpower."

"I don't have superpowers Noah," I ruffled his hair and then looked down at his hands. He was holding a plate full of pasta.

He looked at the food and then shoved it toward me. "Mommy said you were probably hungry. We heated it up for you."

I smiled gratefully at him. "Thanks kid." He followed me into the room as I set the plate down on the nightstand and then sat down. He sat beside me, kicking his legs over the edge.

"I don't like it when Ace is sad. And it's even worse that you both are. Please don't be sad Mad," he pleaded.

It broke my heart to see Noah so confused at his brother, and my, behavior. He truly didn't understand why we were upset; but I was guessing Ace hadn't spilled the beans to his family. "I don't like when Ace is sad either bud. But sometimes, you just have to let someone be sad, even if you don't quite understand why."

He nodded, "no one can stay sad forever, right Mad?"

"Right," I answered even though I wasn't quite sure of the answer myself.

Noah scooted a little closer to me. "This one time, I was sad because a kid in my class called my hat stupid. And I was crying a lot in my room when Ace came in. He told me it was okay to be sad sometimes but you should never hold it in."

He looked like he had a lot more to say, but he stopped. "What else did your brother tell you?"

"He said the only way to let it out completely, was to let someone hug it out of you," he whispered, holding his hands in his lap.

Damn Ace for being adorable with children.

I nodded Noah on. "Is it okay if I hug the sadness out of you Mad?" He asked me sheepishly.

He could try.

My heart swelled up with compassion for this kid. He was truly something else. "I would love a hug from you Noah," I admitted. And with that, he wrapped his small arms around my waist and squeezed me. I held him around his back and lightly squeezed back.

And it turns out Noah was right; somehow, hugs were able to extract a lot of pent up dejection. At least, temporarily.

The next morning was a drag. I never had the chance to ask Ace to bring back my car so I couldn't go out and just drive around. I could have called Kimmy and asked to hang out, but I wasn't in the mood to interact with other people.

I took a quick shower and got ready before heading downstairs to eat breakfast. I immediately headed to the kitchen, planning to eat some cereal and then go back upstairs to wallow in my sadness.

But as I passed by the living room, I heard someone call me. "Madison?" I backtracked a little and looked to where I had heard the voice.

"Raze? What are you doing here?" I asked him, looking around for Ace. Because if Raze was here, Ace had to be nearby.

He stood up and walked over to me. "I could ask you the same thing. Did you guys make up already?"

"No?" I told him, confused but then remembered that no one besides Kimmy knew I was living with Ace for the time being.

But then I heard another pair of footsteps coming down the stairs. I crossed my fingers mentally, hoping for someone other than Ace. But of course, as luck would have it, it was the last person I wanted to see.

"Raze, man, what are you doing here?" Ace asked him calmly.

"I wanted to talk to you. Now I really wanna talk. Do you want to tell me why your ex girlfriend is here, at your house, in her pajamas?" Raze looked beyond comprehension at this point.

Ace paused and finally glanced over at me. "She's staying here for a while," he told him, his eyes on me the entire time.

I looked away from him and back to Ryder. He wore a face full of concern and confusion. "How come?"

"None of your business," Ace spat at him icily.

Raze held his hands up in surrender. And I decided I didn't want to be in the same room as the boy who had left a crack in my heart. "Where do you think you're going?" Raze asked me with sass.

"To my room?" I avoided Ace's gaze.

"No, no, I need you here too, now that I think about it," Raze smirked.

I sighed. "Okay, what's wrong?" Raze might have been smirking but there was sadness in his eyes.

His smirk fell and he sat back down on the couch. Ace and I both stood awkwardly on either sides of the living room. "Daniela broke up with me."

I immediately went to sit by his side and rested my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Raze. Did she at least tell you why?"

He shook his head but told us, "she did. But I think she was lying. She said she just didn't see us lasting. But this entire week she had been telling me how much she liked me. I just don't understand."

"I don't think I'm the one to go to for relationship advice Raze. I'm shit when it comes to expressing my feelings," I conceded, looking down at my hands. I had forgotten about the boy standing beside the couch.

Ace snorted under his breath. "No kidding."

"Excuse me?" I whipped around, my hair smacking me in the face.

He stepped closer. "I mean, that's no secret Mad. It's kind of the reason we broke up."

I stood from the couch. "No, that's the reason we stopped talking. The reason we broke up was because I walked in on you making out with Farah."

"WHAT?!" Raze yelled from the couch, hopping out of his seat.

I turned back to Raze, mostly because I didn't want Ace to see my eyes watering. "Oh yeah. Ace didn't tell you? He got so tired of me trying to figure out my feelings that he decided to figure them out for me."

I heard Ace scoff behind me. Raze gave him a glare that told him to shut up. "Last night, I planned on telling him that I wanted to be with him, for real this time," I saw confusion, once again, take place on Raze's expression. I continued. "But of course, I find him shirtless, on top of fucking Farah Del Valle of all people. And then tries to tell me it wasn't what it looked like."

At this point, the tears had started to silently fall down my cheeks at a rapid pace. I was still fully turned toward Raze who looked slightly uncomfortable to be put in the middle of this. "So I told

him I just wanted to be his friend. But being his friend was the last thing I wanted to be. But I guess I'm not even that now," my last sentence came out like a sob and I finally turned to face Ace.

"Sweetheart," Ace ground out when he saw my tears. There was guilt and regret shining in his eyes and I saw his hand stretch out to hold me.

But I yanked away, far from him and I ran back up the stairs and closed the bedroom door. I leaned up against it and tried to slow down my sobs and breathing but ended up crying harder. I had yet to cry; so I did. And let my heart break along with it.

Chapter 21

I stayed in the room practically the entire weekend, only coming out to use the bathroom and to grab snacks. I had made Noah sneak into Ace's room to grab my duffle bag full of my things so I wouldn't have to face him.

It's safe to say that I had not had a good weekend and for the first time, I was ready to go back to school; where I would see Ace. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

On Monday, I moved sluggishly, taking a shower, getting dressed; all the necessary things. Kimmy was picking me up five minutes earlier than the time Ace left for school. I trudged downstairs with my backpack on and didn't even stop in the kitchen because I heard far too many voices.

Her car was already parked on the sidewalk and I hopped in, not even telling her 'good morning.' She gave me the side eye the entire way until that didn't work. So she started sighing dramatically. She wanted to know what had me so upset.

I had yet to tell her because it hurt too much to even think about, let alone discuss for the second time. After I had sobbed to Raze and Ace about my feelings, I had felt empty inside. I had let my feelings out, why let them crawl back in?

"I know you told me not to ask you about it, but Maddie, I'm dying here. I hate seeing you sad," Kimmy told me, pleading in her voice.

I sighed dramatically like she had just been doing. "Ace and I's fake relationship is over." She raised an eyebrow. "And so is whatever real one we had too," I added.

"What happened to the plan we came up with on Friday? You know, the whole telling him how you feel about him. It was all romantic and shit. Did it not work?"

I hugged my backpack to my chest. "I never even got to spew how much I wanted to be with him."

"But why?" She egged on. I said nothing. "Alright, Madison Grey, I am your best friend. I have been since we were little. And when have I never not been there for you?" I shrugged. "Exactly. Why aren't you telling me why you're sad?"

"Because it hurts," I whisper softly.

We had pulled up to the school and when Kimmy Parked, she turned to me. "I know it hurts. But I just want to help you not be sad anymore."

I sighed and opened the car door, taking my backpack with me. Kimmy did the same, be grudgingly. "It's stupid. I'm so stupid. We weren't even together yet so I guess what he did shouldn't even make me upset."

"God Maddie, what did he do?"

But before I could tell her about finding the boy I liked on top of the girl I now hated, Ace's car pulled into the parking lot. I heard a squeal behind us and I whipped around to see Farah running toward it.

We watched as Ace got out of the car and walked toward her. And then Farah kissed him on the cheek but Ace held a hand to her cheek and pulled her into a full on kiss on the lips. I turned back to Kimmy, feeling sick to my stomach.

Her eyes were wide and her mouth was sewn into a grim line. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah," I whispered and turned back to the oh-so-happy couple. I caught Ace's eyes and his shown in guilt but his lips turned to a smirk.

-

There were a few things I never expected from Ace James Craige.

One: I never expected him to be the sweet guy I had come to know. I had always thought he was just a mean bad boy.

Two: Ace Craige was a cuddler. Definitely didn't expect that one.

Three: I never thought Ace Craige was capable of holding my heart in his hands and crushing it beyond belief. I never thought he'd steal my breath from my lungs just so I wouldn't be able to breathe. And I never thought he'd stoop so low to want to hurt me so terribly.

And four: I didn't think I'd ever be the girl to fall in love. Even after breaking my heart into a million shattered pieces, I didn't think I'd fall in love with Ace Craige. But I was falling.

-

Farah and Ace passed right by me and he didn't bother looking my way. Kimmy pulled me back into the car and tried to calm me down. I told her I was fine but she could always see right through me. She offered to take me somewhere, anywhere but I didn't want to miss any school.

And so I went to class with Kimmy beside me and I ignored the stares that followed us. I sat in my seat and kept my gaze down the entire hour. And that's what I did for the rest of the day; the rest of the week.

Eventually I started going over to Kimmy's house most days for dinner so Anna and Austin had no reason to ask me to come to the dinner table. And then I'd fall asleep in the guest bedroom at Ace's house, knowing he was directly across the hall from me. And I knew I couldn't do it anymore. I had to go home.

So that weekend, I had Kimmy drive me back over to the apartment where I lived with Harry and had her drop me off by my car. I hadn't told her I planned on moving back in because if I had, she wouldn't have allowed it. But I needed to get away from Ace and I didn't want to put my burden on my best friend who had dealt with my moping the entire week.

I opened the front door with the key I still carried everywhere and stepped in.

For once, I hoped Harry was there. My wish came true. "Maddie?" I heard the soft voice from the couch.

"I'm home," I deadpanned and started walking to my room. There was someone sleeping in my bed. "What the fuck?"

"What are you whining about?" Harry yelled from the end of the hall.

I turned and walked to him, stopping in front of his face. "Who the hell is in my room?"

"I needed more money so I rented your room out," he slurred.

Oh great.

"You-" I paused, catching my breath, done with his bullshit. "It's my room."

He chortled. "You left with your little boyfriend Maddie. I didn't think you'd come back."

"You're the most unbelievable person I've ever met Harry Grey. A terrible father and a terrible man. No wonder mom left you," I spit out, disgusted.

He pushed me against the wall by my shoulders. "What did you just say to me?" Her ground out.

I push against his hold and surprisingly, his arms fell away from me. "I said, you're a disgusting human fucking being. I don't deserve to be treated like this."

Wow.

Standing up for myself felt amazing and I was surprised I didn't do it more often. Harry glared at me with an intimidating look. Two weeks ago, I would have been scared of that look. But now, I was fed up with being treated like a rag doll with no emotions. I had feelings and I could be hurt. But I no longer was going to let Harry's words or Ace's actions hurt me or make me weak.

Fuck that shit.

"You little bitch. Who told you you could speak to me like that?"

I rolled my shoulders and stepped closer. "I did."

Harry shoved me against the wall again, my back hitting it with force. But

I shoved right back. He wasn't expecting it but he should have been. This past month had taught me to expect even the most unexpected things.

He fell back and I leaned over his sprawled body like he had done to me two weeks before. "You will never fucking touch me again you pig. Now get the goddamn guy in my bed out of my room."

Harry eyed me with surprise and respect and even a little bit of fear. "You're a big girl Maddie. Get him out yourself."

I shrugged and walked back to my room and ten minutes later after a lot of yelling and shoving, the drunk as hell man was out of my house.

Sometimes, you just had to do shit yourself if you wanted anything done.

Chapter 22

I woke up the next morning to my cell ringing in my ear. I groaned and looked over at the caller ID but when I saw it was Ace, I shot up, sitting up straight.

I don't know how long I stared at the screen, wondering whether or not to answer the damn thing. Did I want to talk to Ace? No. But what if it was important? I answered the phone.

"Hello?" I picked up shakily.

"WHERE ARE YOU?" Ace immediately yelled.

I held the phone further away from my now possibly damaged ear. "I'm... at Kimmy's."

I heard him sigh deeply. "Why didn't you tell anyone? We were all worried. Mad, none of your things are here."

"I'm aware. I'm not staying with you anymore. I can't," I tell him, swinging my legs over the side of my bed.

There was a long pause. "So you're staying with Kimmy now?"

I didn't want to lie to him but I knew there would be hell if I told him I was back home. Even if Harry was unlikely to touch me now, Ace would never believe it. He would storm over here and take me back to his home over his shoulder if he had to.

"Yeah, I'm staying with Kimmy. Stop worrying about me Craige," I told him, wanting to get off the phone already.

"I'm always gonna worry about you Grey. I can't help that," he paused, waiting for me to reply, but I didn't. "So, how are you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Ace, I don't want to talk, especially not to you."

"I understand that Mad. But I want to make sure you're okay," he admitted.

I scoffed loudly into the phone. "Yes, I am completely fine. How your girlfriend Ace?" I deadpanned the question.

"Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?" He joked, making me see red.

"How are you joking about this right now?" I whispered and pulled back to hang up.

I heard him say something else, so like the stupid girl I was, I pulled the phone back to my ear. I caught the last part of whatever he was saying. "-sorry Madison."

"You're sorry? For what? Breaking my heart or joking about breaking my heart?" I laugh, unamused.

"Both. I just- I want to talk to you Mad, in person. I want to apologize to you in person. I don't want to do this over the fucking phone," he rambles on.

I shake my head even though he can't see it. "I'll see you at school Ace," I told him before hanging up.

I drove myself to school for the first time in what seemed like years. In actuality, it had only been a few weeks, three at most. But it was lonely, being in a car without Ace or Kimmy. So I blasted the music a little louder than I normally would, to drown out the silence.

Once at school, I met up with Kimmy before heading to class where the person I did not want to see would be. I had a feeling he would try to get me to talk to him and knowing how persuasive he could be, we would end up talking. And then somehow, he'd convince me to be his friend again and then to stay with him and his family once more. And I didn't want that.

All I had to do was stand my ground and ignore anything he said to convince me. And it worked, until he walked into the room and immediately his eyes sought me out.

"What is he doing?" Kimmy whispered to me as he started walking our way.

I sighed. "He wants to talk to me. But I really don't want to."

"I can help with that," she smiled deviously.

Oh no.

When Ace made it over to my desk, Kimmy stood up and went in front of him. "Oh no you don't mister. Back away from the girl."

"Kimmy, I'm only going to ask you nicely once, please move out of my way," he asked her calmly.

She pretended to think about it. "Huh, how about no?" She replied sarcastically.

Ace smiled tightly, mouth closed. "Move Kimmy."

She shook her head with a smile. "Back away Acey boy. She doesn't want to talk to you, and frankly, neither do I. So this conversation is wilting my good mood. Do us both a favor and go sit across the room, away from Madison."

"Mad," he whined, looking around Kimmy to me. I just looked away.

Kimmy crosses her arms over her chest and stood there, unwavering. Have I mentioned how much I love my best friend? Ace rolled his eyes at how ridiculous she was being but walked to the seat he had taken up in the past week.

Kimmy turned back around to look at me, smiling brightly. "Thank you," I told her and she smiled wider in response.

"Anything for you Madison Grey. You deserve better than a boy who gives up after it gets hard."

I wish I could agree with her. I didn't even think I deserved the small amount of time I got with Ace.

At lunch time, Kimmy and I were stuck between eating in the cafeteria or to walk the halls. Kimmy figured we'd have to eat in there someday so we might as well get it over with. But I still didn't want to be in the same room as Ace willingly.

But like always, I gave in to Kimmy; but mostly because I was hungry. So we made it to the cafeteria and sat down with our food. And I avoided looking at Ace's table.

But when I saw Kimmy looking behind me with bug eyes, I turned around. The table where Ace normally sat was practically empty. Raze was the only one there.

I looked around the room in an effort to locate the other two boys and my heart dropped to my stomach when I found them. They were at Farah's table; even Loki.

Both of them looked absolutely miserable; especially Loki. But neither boy moved or looked to where Raze sat. Farah kept her arm wrapped loosely around Ace's upper arm while she ate.

"Kimmy, I really don't want to be here." I had started fidgeting in my seat.

Kimmy was silent, staring at all three of the boys who looked less than pleased with their current situation.

"Can we please just go?" I asked her. But before she could respond, Ace caught my eyes. He saw me sitting there and quickly shook Farah off his arm and stood.

She looked around in confusion until she saw where his gaze was. She sent an icy glare over to me and started trying to pull him back down but he merely flicked her off like an annoying bug.

Loki turned to look at me, slight amusement flickered on his features for a few seconds before he returned to his grumpy state. Raze was still stabbing at his food with a spork but glanced up when Ace started walking over to my table.

I looked to Kimmy, my eyes wide with question. What was he doing? She shrugged and shook her head as if she had read my mind, confused herself. I turned back to where Ace was and stood when he got even closer.

I grabbed my backpack and started walking toward the door. This was not happening right now. But as soon as I had almost made it to the door, I felt warmth touch the middle of my back and I flinched.

I whipped around and saw Ace, his eyes wild and filled with regret and determination. "What do you want?" I asked him.

"You said we could talk at school," he answered as if I should have already known.

I scoffed. "I never said that."

"See you at school?" He said, trying to jog my memory.

I sputtered. "Well yeah. I meant I'd see you here. Not that I'd talk to you here. I don't want to talk to you."

"Well I want- no I need to talk to you Mad," he pleaded.

I shook my head. "You've hurt me too many times already Ace. And we weren't even together. If we did the whole girlfriend/boyfriend thing, who knows what you'd do to me then."

"The only reason I lashed out and made the stupid mistake of hurting you was because we weren't together Mad. Trust me when I say, if we were together together, I would do everything in my power to never let you be hurt again," he told me loud enough for half the cafeteria to tune in.

I looked around embarrassed. "I can't do this right now," I told him and then spun around to complete my mission of leaving the room.

But Ace wouldn't let me. He reached out and caught hold of my wrist and pulled me back to face him. "Don't leave- please."

"What do you want me to do Ace?" I raised my voice even though I knew everyone was straining to listen.

He stepped closer, still holding my wrist. "I want you to be able to kiss me and not regret it. I want you to hold my hand and for it to be real. I want you to be able to call me your boyfriend without cringing inside and I want you to be with me."

My breath came out in heavy bursts and my heart felt light and heavy at the same time. I bit my lip softly when his voice cracked at the last sentence.

"I want you Mad, if that wasn't already clear as fucking water."

And without another word, he pulled me in close and gave me the softest kissed I had ever felt. His hands shook when he held my face in between his two large, callused hands as I kissed him back.

I realized then that I wanted to kiss him for the rest of my life. Even if he hurt me a million times; I would still want him to kiss me like that.

Chapter 23

The entire lunch room was silent; save for a few quiet conversations. Most heads were turned toward Ace and me but some were faced away, as if they were trying to give us privacy. I pulled away from Ace and looked over to where Kimmy was.

Her jaw was hanging open, completely shocked. My eyes widened, silently asking her what I should do. But she only shook her head, not knowing what to do. So I looked back to the boy who had just kissed me in front of half of the school's population.

His face, for once, was full of emotion as he looked at me. His eyes told me how sincere he was and his upturned lips told me how happy he was to have kissed me like that. But my mind was telling me to get out of there.

So I swallowed harshly and avoided eye contact before running out of the room and out of the school. Ace was too shocked to run after me and I was too confused to actually go anywhere. I stayed in my car for over half an hour thinking about everything and nothing.

Eventually, the passenger door opened to reveal Kimmy. I turned to her and gave her a blank stare. "Before you ask, no, I have no idea what that was."

She was still shaking her head like she had in the cafeteria. "I wasn't going to ask that. I know what that was Maddie. That was a kiss," she sighed. "One hell of a kiss," she mumbled under her breath.

"He's... very confusing. I feel like I have whiplash. One second, he's angry at me and making sly comments and then the next, he's acting as if I'm everything and more. I just don't get it," I complained.

Kimmy settled a hand on my shoulder before letting out a long and heavy breath. "That's something you guys need to figure out together babe. I'm not sure I can help you out there."

"Every time we talk, we end up fighting," I groaned.

She tilted her head. "There must be a reason for that Maddie. Maybe when you guys talk, you sound accusatory?"

"What do you mean?" I asked her, slightly self-conscious when it came to criticism.

She shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't seen you guys argue. I'm just saying maybe he takes what you say the wrong way and that's why you guys fight. It's just lack of communication and perhaps you guys should work on that before getting into a relationship."

"How are you so good at giving advice when it comes to boys? You've never even had a boyfriend Kims." I leaned back in my seat and rested my hands on the steering wheel.

She shrugged once again. "Not sure. Maybe I'm just smart," she told me and flicked my forehead playfully.

"Hey!" I exclaim and smack her hand away.

"I'm just kidding. I read a lot of books and that's where I learn most of my street smarts," she told me proudly.

I chuckle at her weirdness. "Yeah, okay Miss street smarts."

She lightly pushed on my shoulder and scoffed. "Don't make fun of me, it's not nice Grey."

I had never heard Kimmy call me by my last name before but it was odd. It felt wrong and misplaced. I had gotten used to Ace calling me Grey. Then again, there were a lot of things I had gotten used to because of Ace.

News spread quickly to students who hadn't been in the lunch room during Ace's grand gesture. By the next day, I had girls coming up to me and telling me how "cute we are together" and how "Farah is too much of a bitch for him."

But while I mostly agreed with them, I still wasn't sure where we stood. Yes, I liked Ace and I knew he liked me back. But what I didn't know was whether or not he had broken up with Farah. And that was at least a little important.

I wanted to talk to him about it but he wasn't in first period and he hadn't called or texted me yet. I would make the first move to talk; but only if it was in person. Which was why I decided to go to his house after school when he never showed up that day.

I knocked on Ace's front door and waited patiently for anyone to answer. When the door finally opened, it was Anna. I smiled politely at her and her eyes grew wide.

"Come in, honey," she ushered me inside.

I looked around, half hoping to see Ace just sitting on the couch or standing by the stairs. But he was nowhere to be seen. "Ace is home right? I saw his car."

Anna nodded with a bright, a slightly relieved smile. "Yes, he's upstairs. Are you staying for dinner?"

"Depends on how this goes, if I'm being honest," I chuckled awkwardly.

She smiled again and started to walk away. "Alright. Door open when you go up there please."

"Anna," I blushed and shook my head. She giggled and I made my way up the stairs. I knocked on Ace's bedroom door and hoped I wasn't waking him up from a nap. He was cranky when he was tired.

"Mom, I'm fine. Go away," I heard his irritated voice through the wood.

I raised my eyebrow even though he couldn't see it. "Don't you know it's rude to talk to your mother that way?"

"Oh, it's you."

"You sound thrilled," I told him sarcastically.

Ace sighed. "Come in if you must."

I twisted the knob and pushed it open. I stepped in slowly, looking around the room. It was usually kept clean but as of now, clothes were strewn everywhere and plates filled any empty space.

"Finally, you show signs of being a normal teenage boy," I referred to the mess. He groaned and flopped, quite gracefully, on to his bed and groaned. "You are so dramatic sometimes."

"Somebody has a sense of humor today," he told me, monotone.

I stepped toward him and he patted the spot next to him. I laid beside Ace and we both adjusted until our heads were next to each other, looking up to the ceiling.

"You didn't come to school today."

A pause. "Thank you, captain obvious."

I looked over at him and smacked his arm. He smirked. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want to deal with everyone; especially Farah."

"Screw Farah," I said bitterly without even meaning to.

He chuckled and flicked my nose. "Yeah, screw Farah."

"You did that already," I told him with a smile to let him know I was joking.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah but that was before I met you. Now I get to screw you."

"Cheeky," I told him sarcastically.

"Anyway, so you didn't come to school. I wanted to talk to you."

"So now you're here."

I nodded. "So now I'm here."

Ace sighed and ran a hand down my wrist. I looked down and latched onto his fingers until we held hands. "This is probably when you yell at me huh?" Ace asked cautiously.

"Nah. It's pretty exhausting being mad at you. I don't like it."

Ace squeezed my palm. "I'll try my hardest to stop making you mad, how about that?"

"Sounds like heaven if I'm being honest," I told him.

He turned his face to me and smiled smugly. "Why? Because I'm so dreamy?"

"More like unrealistic," I snorted.

Ace turned fully until his whole body faced me, letting go of my hand. "I didn't know you weren't religious."

"You think you know a person," I retorted sarcastically and added a "tsk," for effect.

"Alright alright. What did you want to talk to me about?" Ace laid back again and took ahold of my hand.

I snorted. "Stop playing dumb. I know you aren't. That stunt you pulled yesterday, kissing me in front of everyone. Why? Why all of this?"

"Contrary to what you may think, I didn't plan on kissing you yesterday. Honestly, I shouldn't have; not with Farah on my ass," he shuddered in fear.

"Yeah about that. Does she have something on you? Is that why you dated her?" I asked him curiously.

He shook his head. "No, she just fed on the fact that I wanted to be a dick and hurt your feelings a little. I didn't think she'd make out with me in front of you."

"So it wasn't planned? Me walking in on that?" I asked, thinking back to that horrible night I caught them kissing in Ace's bed.

"Definitely not planned. Trust me, I told her I didn't appreciate that. I wanted to keep the kissing to a minimum and only if absolutely necessary," he amended.

Playfully, I pouted. "How come she was allowed to kiss you when she fake dated you but I wasn't."

"Who said you weren't? Sweetheart, if you were down, I'd have been game too," Ace smirked.

Sweetheart.

Sweetheart.

Sweetheart.

It was the only thing I could think about. I couldn't even remember the last time he'd called me that.

"Mad?" His voice brought me out of my stupor.

I shook my head of their current dreamy thoughts. "Yeah?"

"You zoned out for a minute there. What was that about?" He asked.

I decided to be straight up and stop pretending as if his words didn't affect me. "You called me sweetheart."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, I do that quite often."

"You haven't called me that in a while," I sighed.

He leaned closer and tucked a stray hair behind my ear like we were in some cheesy teen romance movie. "So you admit you like it when I call you sweetheart?"

"I don't think I ever denied it," I smiled sweetly.

He chuckled softly and pulled our conjoined hands to his lips and kissed the back of my hand.

"You're so fucking adorable."

My heart seized a little at his sweet words and my smile spread so far that my cheeks hurt. God I was so in love with him.

Wait what?

Whoa. There was no way I was in love with him right? We weren't even dating for real. Plus, I had never been in love. So there was no possible way for me to know what love felt like.

I couldn't love Ace Craige after knowing him for such a short time, could I?

Chapter 24

The thought of loving Ace drifted from my mind as another thought clouded it instead. "So, Kimmy gave me some advice."

"Oh did she?" He asked me in a tone that made me believe that he would expect something like that.

I nodded. "She says we need to work on our communication."

"What's wrong with our communication?" Ace asked in a defensive voice that mirrored my own when Kimmy had talked to me the day before.

"Let's be real here Ace. Neither of us are good at telling the other how we're feeling; me especially," I smiled over at him.

He sat up from his current position and began pacing his bedroom. I flipped over onto my stomach and watched and he chewed on his thumbnail in concentration. "Okay, so how do we fix our little problem?"

"No clue. I didn't get that far," I admitted.

He walked over to me and squatted in front of me. He placed his hands on my cheeks and pinched lightly. "Well get your cute little ass up and help me come up with something."

I swatted his hands away from my face, feeling like a toddler when he pinched my cheeks. "I don't know, why can't we just promise to tell each other stuff?"

"You are the most dysfunctional problem solver I've ever met," Ace sighed.

I sat up and rested my elbows on my knees. "Yeah, but like, a cute dysfunctional problem solver."

He nodded in agreement and I felt myself smile widely. He thinks I'm cute.

Or does he?

I squinted my eyebrows, deep in thought. Maybe he wasn't agreeing with me. What if he just happened to be nodding his head after I said-

"You okay over there?" Ace's suspicious voice asked, pulling me from my self conscious thoughts.

I shook my head, mentally of course, and met my eyes with his. "Yep, completely fine. One hundred percent good." An amused look filled his face and he sat on his desk chair. "Whatcha doin?" I asked.

"Brainstorm time baby," he rubbed his hands together maniacally. Still looks hot though. "So, I actually think you had a good point."

"What? When?" I asked him, confused and also not paying much attention. He looked really adorable when he was concentrating.

He rolled his eyes at me, as if he could tell exactly what I was thinking.

Not good.

"When you said we should just promise to tell each other how we're feeling."

I scrunched my nose up. "But there's no guarantee that will work."

"There's never a guarantee sweetheart. If we want to have better communication we need to trust that whenever there's a problem or we're feeling a certain way, we'll tell each other,"

I bit my lip a little. "You're smarter than you lead on, you know that right?"

For once, the smile Ace wore was a shy one. "Thanks beautiful."

Ouch, my heart; another nickname.

"So what now?" I asked Ace.

His smile turned into a smirk and his eyes turned mischievous. "Now, I get to kiss you whenever I want." I raised an eyebrow. "Let me rephrase. Now, I get to kiss you whenever I want and you want it too."

I smiled. "I guess I can work with that." Ace stood from his chair, came toward me and grabbed my hands. He pulled me up until I stood and covered my lips with his.

I let him kiss me for awhile, his hands pushing through my hair, savoring the way he felt against me before I pulled back slightly. "Am I your girlfriend now? For real?"

Ace's lip's froze against mine and I pulled back to look at him. "We don't have to put any labels on us, do we?"

I blinked a few times before pulling back completely so I was out of his arms. I plopped back onto the bed. "I guess," I lied.

Ace stared at me for a few seconds before sitting beside me and held one hand on my cheek. "Mad, what did we just promise each other?"

"To tell each other exactly how we feel," I answered him quietly.

His thumb stroked my cheekbone. "So, stop lying and tell me how you feel about what I just asked."

"I don't like it," I conceded in answering.

Ace's jaw clenched and he looked passed me. He took a deep breath. "I just don't want to call you my girlfriend yet."

"Why not? We've done it before."

His eyes found mine again. "And look how that turned out. I just don't want to lose you again and I feel like if I'm getting exactly what I want, it will be pulled away from me."

"So what you're saying is, if I become your girlfriend, something will go wrong and I won't be?" I asked him, confused.

He nodded.

"Ace, that's crazy. How will you ever get anything you want if you're too scared to go for it?" I sighed, leaning into the hand that held my cheek.

He shrugged. "I just don't want to hop into us right away. All good things come to those who wait."

"That was cheesy," I told him, my voice sounding sad.

We just looked at each other for minute before we heard Anna calling us down for dinner. I stood from the bed and started to make my way out the door when Ace gently grabbed my wrist.

"Baby, it's not because I don't want to be your boyfriend, you know that, right?"

Boy, he was sure full of nicknames tonight, wasn't he?

I gave Ace a small and sad smile. "Yeah." But I don't think I knew if that was true or not.

Anna insisted that I stayed for dinner. She had apparently "missed me" in the week or so I had been gone. So I sat in between Ace and Noah as Austin talked about his day at work.

They were so normal, I realized. I had never really had this; not with Harry and Samantha. While there was a period of time in which my family was happy, we never sat at our dinner table and talked about our day.

We would sit in separate rooms and make separate dinners and have separated conversations. And those conversations were usually between Samantha and me. I wasn't ever close with Harry so we never talked about how my day went.

Samantha on the other hand, I was close to. She was my mother after all. And when she left, it devastated me. I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that my own mother had left me.

With him.

And she was gone and out of our lives for over a year before she finally contacted me again. It was right before my sixteenth birthday when she called me from an unknown number.

I was so angry with her for leaving. But not only that, leaving me and not telling me or talking to me since.

She was honest; she didn't regret leaving Harry and his emotional abuse. But she did regret leaving me. But she explained how she couldn't come back, wouldn't. She thought I would be fine on my own for the next few years because in her eyes, I was stronger than she ever was.

At this point in my life, Harry didn't hit me or yell at me. He would ignore me. So I believed her; I could get through that for two years without her.

But she didn't know how he had changed since then. If she did know, I had a feeling her feelings on me being able to stay strong would change.

But now, every year on my birthday, I received a phone call and a present; more than what I got from Harry.

But sitting there at the Ace/Ross family table, it felt more than home than mine ever did.

"I'll see you at school tomorrow. Do you want me to pick you up?" Ace smiled down at me as he walked me to my car after dinner.

I panicked for a second, remembering he still didn't know I was back at home. "No, it's okay. I don't mind driving."

"Will you eat lunch with me tomorrow?"

We had reached my car and I leaned myself against it. "I don't know Ace."

His eyebrows scrunched. "Why?"

"You sat with Farah and her friends for a week. You didn't sit with Raze and you barely talked to Loki. You guys need to talk through whatever you're fighting about," I told him.

Ace ran a hand through his hair and then placed it on the back of his neck. "Do you know why I haven't talked to Raze?" I shook my head. "He's mad at me because of what I did to you, to us."

Wow, I knew I loved Raze.

"Really? He stopped talking to his best friend because you screwed up with your fake girlfriend?" I raised an eyebrow.

He sighed. "Well, he's mad about that, and the fact that I didn't tell him about our pseudo relationship."

"Yeah, sorry for telling him about that by the way," I looked down at my feet, ashamed that I had told Raze our secret.

Ace shook his head. "Don't be. I should have told them in the first place."

We both stood there without talking for awhile until I unlocked the car and started to get in. "I'll see you tomorrow Ace."

"Wait," he said. I waited. "So, is that a yes, you'll eat lunch with me or?"

I rolled my eyes and got in the car. "I told you I'll think about it."

Ace sighed dramatically but let me get in the car. "Alright, see you tomorrow Grey."

I chuckled and started up the car but remembered something. "Wait, Ace, just so we're clear, you and Farah broke up right?"

"Oh yeah. She dumped me so hard and so fast after I kissed you yesterday," he laughed.

I smiled. "Good. I'm glad that you got broken up with." And then he closed my car door for me and I drove home.

Chapter 25

The first thing Ace did when he walked into class the next day was flick my nose with a perfect smile before sitting down in his seat in front of me.

The second thing he did though, was annoy the absolute shit out of me.

For the entire period he tapped his pencil against the desk as if it were a drum set. He combined that with hitting the side of his desk with his hand.

But if I'm being completely honest, it sounded pretty good. I wouldn't even be surprised if he told me he played the drums too.

But it was still annoying.

So annoying that in five minute intervals, I would kick his chair until he stopped pretending he was Ringo Starr. But then within three minutes, he would start right back up again.

Kimmy kept covering her smiles and light chuckles behind her hand whenever I would sigh dramatically in frustration. I would send her an icy glare and she would only shrug and laugh a little harder.

Whose side was she on, anyway?

The bell finally released me from the hell that was Ace's annoying tapping habit and I rushed out of the classroom without waiting for the traitor or the wannabe drummer himself.

"Mad! Wait up, Usain Bolt," Ace sped walked over to me with an easy going smile.

I slowed down slightly but didn't stop. "You're the most annoying person I've ever met."

"Shut up, you like everything about me. Don't even deny it," he scoffed.

I raised both my eyebrows. "I can name like 20 things I don't like about you."

"Do it," he challenged.

I thought about it. And then I thought about it some more.

Nothing.

"Back off. I have class," I tried to scurry away from him.

He laughed, the sound booming through the hallway. "See ya at lunch sweetheart."

Gosh.

I had totally forgotten about sitting with him at lunch. It wasn't that I minded sitting with Ace, I did like the boy after all. But it was nerve wracking.

After the last time we were in that room together and the gazes that would for sure land on us for the whole 30 minutes of our lunch break, who wouldn't be a little nervous?

Ace Craige, that's who.

I was pretty sure Raze was still angry with Ace because he hadn't specified otherwise. Would it just be Ace and I? Or would Loki join too? And Kimmy?

What do I do about the lunch situation?

I texted Kimmy, hoping she would give me good advice. I trusted her opinion; not only because she was my best friend, but also because her advice had helped me a lot in the past.

Uh, sit with your boyfriend???

She answered back. I groaned and rolled my eyes.

First of all, he isn't my boyfriend. Second, it's more complicated than just sitting with him.

I made it to my classroom and sat down before receiving her next message.

It's literally not that deep Ro. Keep it simple, just don't think your crazy thoughts. It's just lunch babe.

I groaned out loud again and earned some odd looks. I didn't care.

You're the worst. I thought you were good at giving advice.

She responded with,

I am. You're just terrible at receiving it.

I didn't answer her.

Lunch came around and I decided to stop being a nervous wreck and to just walk into the cafeteria, sit beside the boy I liked and have a nice conversation with whoever was sitting with us.

And I had been right. Sort of. Ace sat at his usual table with Loki across from him. Kimmy was also already at the table; which was weirdly bold of her.

Before I could even start to walk over to the table I saw Raze come up beside me and sigh. "So I see you forgave him?"

It was more of a question than a statement so I answered, "yep."

He sighed again, but with more drama. "I guess it's my turn then."

"Why were you even mad at him anyway?" I asked him, still looking over at Ace's table.

"What he did was wrong and childish Mad. Do you mind if I call you Mad? I know you go by Maddie but Ace always refers to you as Mad so it just seems easier that I-"

I interrupted his rambling with, "that's fine Raze. You can call me Mad. It seems more like my name now anyway."

He nodded and continued. "He may be my best friend but I refused to stand by him when he's that stupid. And I felt like if you weren't the only one ignoring him, he would step up and apologize quicker."

"You're a smart guy Ra," I admitted with a smile.

He smiled back in triumph. "Thank you." He gestured for me to walk ahead of him. "After you."

We both walked over to the lunch table, me slightly in front. Ace looked up and smiled when he saw me and it widened when he saw Raze.

Wow I wonder who he's more excited to see. Because it sure as hell isn't me.

I sat next to Kimmy which also happened to be next to Ace.

Okay, I see you Kimmy.

Raze sat where he always had; which was next to Loki. Loki still hadn't said anything, not that he usually said much in the first place. That was something I needed to figure out.

I hadn't brought any food with me that day but I had brought money to buy some. But as I started to stand to get my lunch, Ace pouted at me and pulled me back down.

"I need to buy food, stop being a baby," I told him, trying to inch away from his grip around my waist.

He leaned his cheek on my shoulder and looked up at me with a puppy dog look in his eyes. So dramatic. "Don't leave me."

"Help me," I whispered to Raze who just smiled at us and raised his hands in defense.

Ace sat up quickly and pulled up his backpack. "You can share with me!" He perked up as the idea came to him.

He pulled out a ham sandwich, a bag of chips, a granola bar and a water bottle. "You're such a little kid at heart," I teased him.

"At least I get food everyday. Unlike someone I know," he defends. He hates it when people make fun of him for taking packed lunches to school.

"I'm joking. Your mom is very sweet for doing this everyday for you and Noah," I told him sweetly and stole the granola bar from in front of him.

Ace happily chewed his sandwich and Raze and Kimmy were in the midst of a conversation. The only person not talking to anyone was Loki, like always. He wasn't eating anything either.

"Ace, why didn't you offer any food for Loki if you did for me?" I ask him under my breath but it seemed like most everyone heard me.

Loki lifted his head from his phone and stared me. But for once, it wasn't a mean glare. "Loki doesn't eat lunch usually." Raze answered since Ace had a mouthful of food.

"Why not? Lunch is the second most important meal of the day," I asked, turning completely toward Loki.

Loki set his phone on the table and told me, "I usually only eat breakfast and dinner because it's things from my house. If I buy lunch, I have to use my own money. I'm saving up."

"Saving up for what?" I ask him curiously.

I glance to my left and see Ace smiling a bit. "College and I just bought my car."

"That's cool. What kind of car did you get?" I asked him, getting caught so caught up in the conversation to realize that Loki was talking to me.

I saw Loki shift a little in his seat before glancing at Raze. "1969 Dodge Charger."

"Never heard of it," I told him truthfully and the guys all laughed.

Ace kissed my temple. "He probably didn't expect you to sweetheart." I blushed a little, embarrassed.

"Here's a picture of her," Loki told me, pulling up a picture of his car on his phone.

I smiled. "She's a beaut. I don't know much about cars, but I do know I like that one."

Ace chuckled and Loki, although he didn't smile, his lips tilted up just a little.

Progress.

I could get through to him, I knew I could.

Chapter 26

"Do you wanna go on a date?"

I turned around in my desk and looked at my best friend. "Kims, I didn't know you batted for both teams."

"Shut up! I meant like a friendship date," she rolled her eyes at me.

I pretended to think deeply and nodded slowly. "I think that you could have just asked me to hang out with you."

"I wanted to be cute, okay?" She admitted with a sigh.

I blinked my eyelashes flirtingly. "Well in that case, I would love to go on a friendship date with you Kimmy."

"Yes!" She yelled louder than she should have in the classroom.

"Can you keep it down? I'm trying to take notes," Ace spoke up sarcastically from in front of me.

Kimmy scoffed. "You're just jealous that I'm taking Rose out on a date before you do."

"Am not. Besides, we've been on a date," he pouted.

I lifted an eyebrow. "When?"

Ace looked wounded that I didn't remember our so called date. "When I was trying to get you to talk to me again. Remember? The note? The flowers? The chicken nuggets?"

"Chicken strips," I corrected.

He held up his hands in surrender. "That was a date."

"You never formally asked me on a date. You didn't even like me then," I amended.

Kimmy chuckled. "Okay, sure."

"I did too! You were just oblivious," Ace told me.

I rolled my eyes. "Right."

"So, you want me to formally ask you on a date?" Ace quirked. I squinted, processing what he was probably about to do.

It would probably be stupid and embarrassing.

I heard Kimmy sigh beside me and lean back in her chair, arms across her chest in defeat. Ace smirked at me and then stood up.

In the middle of class.

"I have something to say," Ace announced to our teacher and class.

Our teacher just rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mr. Craige?"

"I wanted to ask my girl out on a date," he paused. "Formally."

I closed my eyes and let my face hit my desk. End my suffering. "Is this really necessary, Mr. Craige?" She asked.

Ace merely shrugged with his heart stopping smile and proceeded. "So, what do you say Mad? Will you go on a date with me?"

I lifted my head miserably and winced when I saw the whole class's eyes on me. "If I say yes, will you never torture me like this again?" He nodded encouragingly. "Then yes."

His smile widened and he looked back to our teacher. "Okay, I'm done."

"Thank god," I heard her mutter.

I saw Kimmy pouting in her seat. I turned my body back to Ace. "I'll go out with you after Kimmy and I go on our friendship date though."

Kimmy perked up. "Really? You'd choose our friendship date over a real date with that?" She gestured to Ace.

"Of course I would. Chicks before dicks and all that jazz," I smiled at her and nodded.

Ace frowned. "But you guys get to hang out everyday! I only see her at school and sometimes for dinner. Kimmy gets all night."

Kimmy chuckled. "What are you talking about?"

Oh shit.

"She lives with you," he said.

Oh no no no no.

Kimmy tilted her head. "No, she lives with you," she stated, a little hesitant now.

"Maad moved out a while ago. She said she was staying with you," Ace's voice picked up some anger.

Fuck.

Kimmy turned and looked at me and I stared at my lap. "Maddie, what is he talking about?"

I pretended not to hear her.

"Mad, I swear to god if you're staying with that piece of shit again," Ace's voice was low and guttural.

I swallowed harshly. "It's not a big deal," I murmured.

Ace looked like he wanted to say more but our teacher interrupted with, "no more talking! Do you three want detention?"

"We'll talk about this after class," Ace told me.

Can't wait.

The end of first period came way too quick. I was dreading what Ace would say about my current living situation, mostly because he would probably be right.

I tried to edge my way around his tall figure and onto my next class, but he wasn't having it.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ace's eyebrow lifted in an arch.

I chuckled nervously. "Oh. You wanted to talk to me now?"

His expression didn't change. "Yes Mad, I would like to talk to you now. Preferably, in my car."

"Why? So you can kill me and then drive my body out to the woods?" I asked lightly.

Ace merely blinked and started walking to the front of the school. I followed him like a lost puppy.

When we reached his car, he held open the door for me while I got in. He shut the door lightly and moved to his side. When he got in, he stared at me as if he was trying to read my mind.

"Why would you lie to me Mad? I thought you trusted me," he admitted sourly.

I shook my head. "I do trust you Ace. I told you I was living with Kimmy back when I was still mad at you."

"So, what? You just forgot you were living back with your abusive father after we made up?" He sounded angry and concerned, a scary combination.

I took a deep breath. "I wish you had been there to see it Ace. I actually stood up for myself and didn't take his shit. He backed down, he really did. I feel a lot safer living there now. He can't hurt me if I don't let him."

"It's not about that Mad. Don't you get it? You lied to me," he whispered, hurt sounding from every syllable he spoke.

I swallowed thickly. "I don't like pushing my problems onto someone else. Your family was so kind, letting me stay at your house. But I felt like I was abusing it. I couldn't stay there forever. And the same with Kimmy; her family would let me stay, no doubt. But I hate using our friendship as an excuse to have somewhere to sleep. I'm sorry for lying to you but I'm not sorry for staying with Harry. I needed to learn to handle things on my own, and that's exactly what I did. I'm proud of myself for standing up for him and I want you to be proud of me too."

Tears had started to well on top of my lower lash line and threatened to fall. Ace stared at me for a few seconds before pulling my body toward his. His arms wrapped around me and his hold squeezed the breath out of me.

"Sweetheart, I'm incredibly proud of you for standing up to your father, you have no idea. But you have to understand that I just want you safe, at all times, under every circumstance," he whispered into my hair, right next to my ear.

I shivered at our close proximity and held him tighter. "And I love you for that," I let out without thinking.

Ah fuck.

"You what?" Ace pulled me back and his eyes frantically searched mine.

I kept my big mouth shut and suddenly I felt very, very hot. My blush was probably the intensity of Lilli's favorite red lipstick.

There was no way I had just said that. Even though it was true, I loved Ace, it was scarier when said out loud, out in the open and to him directly. Plus, he didn't feel it back; it wasn't possible. He didn't even want to be my boyfriend.

"Madison Grey, did you just say what I think you did?" Ace prodded.

I shook my head.

He grinned.

"Say it again."

I shook my head once more.

Ace stared at me again, his eyes moving back and forth from my eyes to my lips, where the words "I love you" had just tumbled from them.

I shied away from him, knowing that if he had somehow felt the same way, he would have said it already. The moment my body was no longer in contact with his warmth, I felt cold; physically, yes, but also mentally.

He didn't love me back.

And even though I already figured that, it still hurt like a bitch. My eyes teared up again and I opened his car door and got out. Ace was still sitting there, looking stunned but I just wanted to get away as soon as possible.

I made it halfway across the parking lot when Ace finally shook himself out of his stupor and ran to me from his car. At this point, my tears had already found their way down my cheeks and I sniffled, unhappily.

"Mad, what wrong?" He stopped me and pulled me off to the side by some other cars.

I shook my head, since it seemed that that was all I was capable of doing since telling him how I felt. He couldn't really see my face because I kept my head down so my hair waterfalled over my face.

He lifted my chin and flinched a little when he saw my tears. He swiped them away quickly and pulled my head into his chest. "You're okay baby."

I let out a sob into his chest and soon after, I felt his hand in my hair as he stroked reassuringly.

"Tell me what's got you upset," he whispered.

I sniffed again, trying to stop acting like a baby. "I'm embarrassed."

"Because you told me you love me?" I could hear the confusion in Ace's voice.

I nodded. "I said that to you but you don't feel it back," and then I sobbed again. I tried to burrow my face in his chest again but he pulled me back and kissed my forehead.

"Why do you think that?"

My watery eyes met his, "think what?"

"That I don't love you," he swallowed harshly.

My eyes continued to well. "You didn't say it back."

"I mean, you didn't give me much time. I was pretty shocked you were the one to say it first," he told me without shame.

My eyes widened. "What are you saying Ace?"

He pecked my lips quickly and swiped underneath my eyes again. "I'm saying that I'm in love with you Grey."

Chapter 27

I was moving back in with Ace's family. It seemed more logical to everyone, including myself now.

"There's a perfectly fine extra bedroom for you to stay in Mad, don't be ridiculous. And if my son screws up again, he'll be the one I kick out, not you," Anna had told me the same day Ace had said he loved me back. Ace smirked but pretended like he hadn't heard her threat.

His arm had been attached to me basically the entire night. If we weren't holding hands, his arm was slung around my shoulders or my head was resting against his bicep.

It was like neither of us wanted to let go of the other if we didn't have to. Call it the honeymoon stage, but I was pretty happy with it.

When it was time for us to part ways that night, he pulled me in for a long kiss that had my heart racing beyond what would be considered normal.

I had to stay at least one more night in the apartment. I was going to spend the night, once again, packing up my things. I would drive my stuff and myself to Ace's house bright and early before school and then ride there with Ace. And then, I would hopefully never step foot in that old apartment again.

The next morning after avoiding Harry, I moved my things into my car and headed to the Craige/Ross residence. I got there pretty early and I didn't expect most of them to be up. But after knocking lightly on the front door, Noah answered with a bright smile.

"Ace is still asleep but you can come in," he told me while grabbing my hand and tugging me inside.

"He's asleep? Isn't he aware school starts in like, half an hour?" I asked out loud.

Noah shrugged.

This reminded me of when Ace used to let me sleep until we only had 20 minutes left before the first bell. I smirked evilly.

"I'll go wake him up," I told Noah before running up the stairs and flinging open his bedroom door.

Ace was laying in bed with the sheets twisted around his hips. He was shirtless, lucky me, and his arms were thrown above his head.

I tiptoed over to the edge of his bed and then proceeded to jump on him, throwing the entirety of my body onto his.

He woke with a gasp and then practically threw me off of him with a yelp. "Calm down, it's just me!" His eyes were squinted shut and he looked like he was in pain. "Uh, are you okay?"

"Sweetheart, I may love you but knee my jewels again, and I'll hire someone to assassinate you and make it look like an accident," he promised in his husky morning voice.

I didn't even get to appreciate him saying he loved me for the second time because I felt bad about hurting him and a little scared, thanks to his threat.

"I'm sorry?" I squeaked.

He opened one eye and then smirked. "Kiss it better?"

I rolled my eyes and shoved him back so he laid down again. "Go back to sleep."

He laughed and sat back up and leaned toward me with pursed lips. "I meant to kiss me here," he pointed to his full lips.

"How about you brush your teeth and then we'll talk," I told him, pushing him back once more.

Ace threw the covers off of himself and rushed into his bathroom. I laid back against his pillows and scrolled through my social medias while I waited for him.

He came back in with a newly cleaned smile and he gracefully crawled on top of me, naked torso and all. "What are you doing?"

"Kissing you," he replied as if I were stupid.

I squinted, taking a good, long look at him. "Teeth?"

"Brushed."

I somehow managed to squint harder. "Armpits?"

"What does that matter?" He asked, confused and a little disturbed.

I raised my eyebrows. "Trust me, it matters. So, armpits?"

"Deodorized?" He told me slowly and formed as a question.

I bit my lip in thought. "Is that even a word?"

He shrugged.

"Alright. You can go for a kiss," I allowed.

Ace rolled his eyes but crawled a little higher to reach my lips. He leaned down and our lips met. As he kissed me, I tentatively placed my hand against his cheek. He seemed to like it, because he leaned into my touch.

He balanced himself with one arm, using the other to hold onto my hip and squeeze gently.

Holy crap, we were making out. I was making out with Ace Craige. And he was still shirtless.

Ace pulled back slightly, probably realizing I was having a mini intervention with myself. "We're gonna be late for school," he told me.

"I don't care. Kiss me again," I asked in a daze. How embarrassing.

He chuckled but caved, pecking my lips a few times before hopping off the bed. I frowned as he pulled a shirt out of a drawer and put it on.

Show's over kids.

I went back to scrolling through my phone as Ace continued to get ready. And in less than five minutes, we were out of his bedroom and heading to the dining room.

"Well there you two are. That seemed like an awful long time for you to wake him up Mad," Austin teased while drinking his coffee.

Ace smacked his step-father's shoulder but smiled. I blushed a little and then blushed even harder when Ace's fingers intertwined with mine.

The silence was like a tell tale sign saying "I just made out with your son!"

Anna set down a plate with pancakes onto the table and smiled down at our hands. "Did you eat already this morning, Mad?"

I started to lie and nod but Ace playfully took hold of my chin and shook my head, no. "Doubt it," he answered for me.

I rolled my eyes but when Anna looked over at me for confirmation, I agreed. "He's right, I didn't eat."

Ace pulled me by the arm over to sit at the table, ruffling Noah's hair on the way there. "Hey! Do you know how long it took me to get my hair just right?" Noah asked.

"What? All of, maybe, five minutes?" Ace snorted.

Noah pursed his lips. "Maybe."

I chuckled a little and grabbed the plate for me that Ace had piled with pancakes. I stuffed as much food that could fit into my mouth without passing out from lack of oxygen and tried to ignore Ace's obvious staring.

He had an eyebrow quirked and a half smirk on. "Eat your food," I scolded him with my mouth half full.

"Chew yours," he retorted back.

I did as he recommended and swallowed before sticking my tongue out at him.

He did it back.

"You two fight like siblings. Don't you find that odd?" Austin asked neither of us in particular.

My nose scrunched up at the thought. "Ew, please don't ever suggest she's like my sister ever again," Ace shivered with disgust.

Austin held his hands up in surrender. "Yikes, okay."

Anna finally joined us and we all just sat around, stuffing our faces with her delicious meal. I checked my phone for the time and almost spit out my orange juice.

"We're gonna be so late. Kimmy is going to kill me!" I screeched much louder than was probably necessary.

Ace casually and slowly checked his phone. "Meh, we have 15 minutes."

"I hate you," I deadpanned.

He smiled and leaned closer. "Oh sweetheart, we all know that you don't."

As much as I hated it, the idiot made me blush. I stood without saying anything and grabbed my backpack from where I had left it by the stairs. "I'm leaving with or without you Acey," I mocked.

He groaned but stood up, giving Anna a kiss on the cheek goodbye. "What about me?" Austin frowned. Ace shoved him in the shoulder, almost knocking him over. Noah and Anna both giggled. "Traitors," he told them.

"Let's go then, slacker," Ace scolded playfully, knowing it would annoy me considering he was the one making us late.

"I'm going to knee you in the balls again Craige," I smiled sweetly at my.... whatever the hell he was and fluttered my eyelashes menacingly.

Ace opened the front door but didn't let me through. He blocked me from getting out, crowding my small body with his tall one. "Your threats don't scare me Grey."

I hissed at him. Yes, hissed. And it made him burst out laughing, doubling over. It gave me enough time to shove him out of the doorway to make my escape.

By the time he had stopped laughing, I was already at his passenger door. "Time is ticking Craige."

He unlocked the door and hopped in after shutting the door behind me. "What would you say if I asked you to ditch first period with me?"

"I swear to god Ace James Craige-"

"Kidding. I'm only kidding!" He amended. And then he started the car and drove us toward school and Kimmy, who would most likely yell at me for lying to her and Ace for weeks.

Gosh.

Chapter 28

I truly thought Kimmy was going to bite off my head the moment she saw me. Considering after yesterday and her finding out I had lied to her and my somewhat boyfriend. I think.

If there was one thing I knew about Kimmy, it was that she hated dishonesty. It was her biggest pet peeve, besides trash talking about people behind their backs. She was a good person and I felt terrible for lying to her. Just like Ace, I knew she was going to go in on me not trusting her even though I did, completely.

All of that is the reason I made Ace stop at the grocery store on the way to school just so I could buy her a box of chocolates. I didn't care if I was late to class, Kimmy loved chocolate more than anything in the world. And I was hoping she would forgive me the second she saw the heart shaped box.

Ace and I crept into class and handed out teacher our late passes. She gave us a suspicious look but said nothing.

As soon as I was in my seat, I turned to my best friend. But she had her arms crossed and her lips pursed. "Kimmy," I tried to get her attention.

I knew she was doing her best at ignoring me but when I gently waved the chocolates in her face, she gave in. "You got me chocolates?" She asked me.

"It's part of my apology," I let her know. "Can we talk after class?" She took the box from me when I handed it over and nodded her head, giving me my answer.

I turned to Ace with a big smile on my face. He had one that mirrored mine and his eyes glimmered with adoration.

I kissed Ace gently on his cheek after class and made my way toward Kimmy. We weren't going to really get into it yet but I wanted to walk her to class to show her that I was really trying.

"I know you wanted to talk to me now Maddie but I really don't think an 8 minute passing period is enough time," Kimmy told me without even looking in my direction.

I nodded even though she probably didn't see it. "Yeah, I know. I just wanted to walk with you. We can talk at lunch or after school; whichever is good with you."

"After school. Can you come over? I'll give you a ride back home," she said home with disgust.

I stopped her and pulled her to a set of lockers. "I'm not staying there anymore. You guys were right, it's stupid for me to stay there when I could just stay with Ace."

Kimmy gave me a small smile and a nod of acknowledgement. "Good. I'll drive you back to Ace's after then."

"Sounds good to me." We had made it to her class so I turned to walk to my own. But Kimmy pulled me back by my wrist and brought me into a tight hug. I closed my eyes and squeezed her back. "I'm sorry I lied Kim."

I felt her nod against my shoulder. She pulled back and told me, "I know you are."

At lunch, most things seemed back to normal. And by normal, I mean Raze was making out with some girl at our table, Loki looked like he wanted to do lots of illegal things while viciously eating an apple, and Kimmy was typing something on her phone, looking bored.

Ace wrapped an arm around my shoulder and tugged me closer while we walked through the cafeteria. Most people were staring, especially at Farah's table. Aka, Farah.

Yikes, note to self: you do not want to look her in the eyes when she's giving you a death glare.

We sat down at our table and Ace slid his arm off of my shoulder and took my hand instead. I looked up at him and beamed brightly. He leaned forward slightly and-

"For the millionth time, get a room," Raze told us.

I looked away and blushed. Ace scrunched his eyebrows. "Raze, you were literally just making out with- I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Leah," the blonde deadpanned.

"Yeah, I was. What's it to you?" Raze interrupted.

Ace rolled his eyes. "Don't tell us to get a room. You get a room," he told him, very maturely.

Kimmy looked up from her phone at no one in particular. "Oh good, they're done sucking face."

I almost wanted to laugh at the conversation but then I glanced over at Loki who had stopped biting into his apple. He was looking right at Ace with a sad, almost dejected look on his face. I tilted my head in confusion and caught his eye. He glanced back down to his apple and mastered his stoney expression.

Weird.

"Hey, so there's a party on Friday at Peter's house, are you guys going?" Raze asked all of us, carelessly slinging an arm around Leah.

Ace sighed and rubbed circles onto my hand with his thumb. "I wasn't really planning on it. Mad doesn't really like parties."

"Awe, you'd stop going to parties for her?" Kimmy cooed. I gave her the universal "shut up" glare and she smiled, but stopped talking.

Ace nodded. "Well yeah, but it's not like I really enjoyed going to stupid high school parties in the first place."

"But you guys have to go! I heard it's gonna be huge," Raze begged.

"Even more reason not to go," Ace told him, his tone harsh and direct.

Raze resorted to puppy dog eyes.

"Give me a break," I heard Loki mutter under his breath.

Raze frowned at him and turned back to Ace and I. He focused in on me. "Please Mad! I promise you'll like it! I'll make sure you have an absolutely wonderful time!"

I saw Ace roll his eyes out of the corner of my eye and Kimmy chuckled. Sigh. I turned my body toward Ace. "I guess I'll go. But only if you go with me."

He blinked three times before letting out a tentative, "are you sure?"

"I'm not five, Ace. I can go to a party," I told him.

He nodded, "Okay, we'll go."

Raze's smile grew half an inch. "Yes!"

"But nothing happens to her Raze, I'm serious. No drinks, no drugs and no one will touch her but me, got that?" Ace's protective side came out.

Raze rolled his eyes. "Yes sir. Do you want to shake on it too?" He asked sarcastically.

Ace leaned over and shoved his shoulder back. "Shut up douche."

I walked with Kimmy out to her car after the final bell. We drove to her house mostly in silence, minus the radio. We walked into her house and immediately went to her room.

"Okay, spill," was the first thing she told me to do.

I took a deep breath and thought about how I would explain everything to her. "Promise to stay quiet until the very end?" She nodded. "Okay, so I'll start off with why I lied to you in the first place. I just didn't want to rely on you, or anyone. And I know that sounds dumb, Ace thought so too. But you've been my best friend for forever Kimmy. And I've let you and your family take me in whenever I needed a place to stay and I just- I just didn't want to do that anymore. I won't have you forever and I need to learn to rely on myself."

"Maybe my actions were selfish and unfair to you and to Ace, but I just couldn't tell you. I wanted to handle Harry on my own for once. I need to know that one day, when you leave and go off to college, that I'll be okay. I shouldn't have to rely on another person for a place to stay. Which is why I lied to Ace too."

Kimmy nodded throughout my speech and when I was done, she pulled me into a hug again. "I understand your reasoning Maddie. I forgive you. Just don't lie to me like that again. I worry about you and the thought of you living with your dad again scares the crap out of me. You finally got away from him and then to learn that you went crawling right back," she shook her head. "I wasn't really angry at you, I was mad that you felt like you had to resort to staying with that piece of shit again."

"I love you Kims. Thank you for being my best friend forever. I know that's cheesy, but I love you. Thanks for being there for me when no one else was. Sometimes I think I don't deserve you as my best friend," I admitted.

She smacked my arm lightly. "Shut up Maddie! If anything, you deserve more friends."

"It's so weird hearing you call me Maddie now. It's like I changed identities within the past few months," I told her.

She nodded. "Would you rather me call you Mad?"

"No," I shook my head. "That would be even weirder. You're basically the only person who calls me Maddie now. It's special, just for you."

She rolled her eyes. "Awe?"

We both laughed and then like the weirdos we are, started our homework. Sometime after we had started and then finished two assignments, I glanced up.

"Do you want to go on our date now?"

She looked up eagerly. "Hell yeah! Otherwise Ace is gonna start to get a little antsy."

"Shut up, he's fine! Can this be a casual date though? I didn't bring any formal wear to school today, for obvious reason."

She nodded quickly. "Let's go get chicken strips at Roller Diner!"

"Great minds think alike. Also, make sure you tell Ace that we got chicken strips for our date. He acts like I'm too old for them. He keeps calling them little kid names," I told her with a frown.

She raised her eyebrows. "You guys went to Roller together?"

"Yeah that was our, what he likes to call, first date."

She smirked. "Cute."

Kimmy and I went left her house to go on our friend date and ate chicken strips and milkshakes, even though Kimmy was lactose intolerant.

She forgives me!

I texted Ace while we waited for our check.

Good, so now you can come home

I rolled my eyes at his response.

Maybe. I might spend the night with Kimmy tonight.

He replied with,

:(I'm sad now.

I showed Kimmy his reaction and she laughed. "Tell him that I'm keeping you forever." So I did. He didn't react well, making Kimmy and I laugh for another twenty minutes.

I was lucky; I had the best two people in my life.

Chapter 29

At lunch on Friday, the day of the party, everyone was buzzing with excitement. Everyone was going to be at Peter Davidson's house in just a few hours. It seemed like the only people not jumping for joy were Ace and me; even Kimmy was excited for it.

"What are you gonna wear? I think i'm gonna wear my cute jeans I got from H&M and this cute crop top I got online from Brandy Melville! But I can't figure out what shoes to wear. Like, how fancy is this going to be? Do I need to wear heels, or am I okay wearing white vans? Do I need-"

I covered Kimmy's mouth with my hands. "Kim, stop stressing. Whatever you wear will be perfect."

She scowled at me. "This is important Madison Grey."

"It's really not," I concluded.

Kimmy turned to Ace. "What do girls normally wear at parties?"

"Close to nothing," he tells her and goes right back to eating.

"CLOSE TO NOTHING!?" Kimmy and I both shouted.

Ace's head whipped back up and he looked to me with wide eyes. "You can wear whatever you want, but most girls go for a more..... Undressed look."

"There is no way I can wear jeans now," Kimmy sighed and placed her head in her hands.

I gave the scared boy next to me a glare. He seemed to catch on. "I'll text Peter and ask what the dress code is, okay?" He looked back to me for approval. I nodded and he sighed, most likely glad this was over. But then he smirked and leaned over to me. "You know, Kimmy might want to wear her jeans, but you can still wear a short, little skirt if you wanted to."

"Stop being a perv," I told him with a laugh but when his smirk stayed planted on his perfect face, I lightly pushed him away from me and rolled my eyes.

By the end of lunch, Peter had answered Ace's text, telling him that girls could wear anything they wanted because it was an open dress code. That information didn't help Kimmy with her outfit stress at all. The whole table, minus Loki, spent an entire ten minutes trying to convince her that it was okay to wear jeans to a house party.

"You're coming back home with me right? You're not getting ready at Kimmy's?" Ace asked me when the bell rang.

I nodded. "Yeah, but she's coming over to get ready."

"Can I hang out with you guys?" He asked me with puppy-dog eyes.

I scrunched my eyebrows together. "Why would you want to?"

"Because I haven't had much Mad time. You're always doing homework or hanging out with Kimmy," he had a frown etched onto his face now.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, you can hang out with us, you big baby."

He beamed and then held my cheeks, giving me a loud smooch. "Yes! Thank you! I love you!"

"I love you too Ace."

Kimmy showed up to the Craige/Ross residence twenty minutes after Ace and I did. I pulled her up to the guest room and she gave me a weird look when she saw Ace already there, scrolling through his phone on my bed.

"Hey Kimmy," he told her without looking up.

"What are you doing here?" She squinted at him.

He looked up from his phone and tilted his head. "I live here?"

"In this room, specifically," she clarified.

He smiled. "Hanging out with my favorite girl and her favorite girl."

Kimmy turned to me with a frown, "Maddie?"

"I told him he could get ready with us," my eyes were wide and I bit my lip, a little upset she didn't want Ace to hang out with us.

She was silent for a few seconds. "But you hang out with your boyfriend everyday."

"She really doesn't. She's always doing her homework," Ace came back with.

I ignored him. "Kimmy, first, he's not my boyfriend. And second-"

"I'm not?" Ace asked, confused.

"What?" I questioned.

Kimmy looked between us and then set her things down, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I'm not your boyfriend anymore?"

"When were you?" Now, I was confused.

Ace shook his head. "What do you mean? The whole 'I love you' thing didn't settle it for you?"

"You said you didn't want to put labels on us yet. And besides, you never asked me to be your girlfriend," I tell him sternly.

Kimmy was still glancing between the two of us. "Should I wait out in the hall?"

"No," we both say.

"You really thought that you were my official boyfriend this whole time?" I asked Ace.

He nodded, "well, yeah. Should I ask you now?"

I shrugged, not knowing what to do in this kind of situation. Ace wants to be my boyfriend.

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to be my girlfriend Mad?" His smile dimpled.

I nodded enthusiastically. "Uh, yes!"

"Good. Now come over here and give me a kiss, girlfriend," Ace crooked a finger, beckoning me.

"Okay, I really think I should go outside," Kimmy's uncomfortable voice said, interrupting our little moment.

I turned toward her. "No! I'm sorry, we'll stop being gross."

"I never agreed to that," Ace chimed in.

I sat down beside my best friend. "Do you still want him to leave?" My voice sounded a little sad.

"Duh," he said, earning a glare from us both.

The party was in full swing when we arrived. It wasn't what I expected. There was nobody puking in the planters outside. There weren't so many people to the point where I couldn't walk anywhere. And there wasn't a DJ set up in the living room.

Instead, Peter's moderately sized house was filled with probably one hundred people, yet it wasn't crowded. There was a snack table in the kitchen. And there was no keg stand, like in the movies. There was alcohol, grinding teens and dancing though.

I clung to Ace like gum to a piece of hair; Kimmy clung onto me. We spotted Raze and Loki drinking out of red solo cups in the kitchen. Kimmy went straight to the snacks.

Raze and Loki looked like they were arguing over something but they stopped when we walked in. Raze gave Loki a sharp look before Loki tipped his head back and downed whatever was in his cup.

"Hi," I tried to get Loki's attention. He passed by me without saying anything or acknowledging that I had said anything at all. "....okay. Good talk," I called after him.

Ace's eyebrows furrowed and he turned to Raze. "What is with him? He's been such an asshole for the last few months."

"Why don't you talk to him about it, instead of me?" Raze told him harshly and then walked out too.

"What the hell?" Ace thought out loud.

My grip tightened on his hand. "Maybe you should go talk to him and see what's up."

"Maybe I should. I'll be right back sweetheart, okay?" He told me and then gave me a quick kiss. I joined Kimmy over at the snack table and we started munching.

After ten minutes and Ace still wasn't back, we decided to go venture into the living room to dance.

"Oh! There he is Maddie. He's over there talking to Loki still," Kimmy informed me.

I caught a glance of my boyfriend. Wow, boyfriend. And willed him in my mind to look at me. It was a little freaky when that was exactly what he did.

He sent a smile and a wink my way, making me blush. He ticked his head in his direction, calling me over. I made my way over to him and he turned back to Loki.

But before I could get over there, Farah stopped me. I could tell she was drunk from the way she walked. "You!"

"Me?" I questioned in a bored tone.

She nodded, almost stumbling into another person. "Why does Ace want to date you? You're so boring."

"Thank you Farah. Have a nice night!" I tried to duck out of her view but she shrieked and tugged my arm back.

"No! Don't leave! I want you to know how much I despise you!"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't need you to tell me what I already know. But just know that I feel the same way Farah," I patted her shoulder and went to keep walking.

"Madison Gre-" she went to say.

"WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM?!"

We both turned at the loud voice booming through the room. I knew that voice anywhere; it was Ace.

But why was he yelling?

Loki's eyes were burning with anger. "You aren't listening to me."

"I am listening to you Loki. And I already told you that it's okay. There's nothing wrong with that," Ace's voice calmed down tremendously.

Loki sighed and turned to look at me across the room. I had made my way closer and was almost to them. "I don't think you understand what I'm trying to say."

"Then why don't you tell me exactly what you mean?" Ace encouraged.

Loki's eyes frantically moved from Ace to me as I got closer. He looked completely panicked but then his sight settled on Ace and he took a deep breath.

And then Loki was kissing my boyfriend.

Chapter 30

Holy Cow?

I stopped in my tracks as Loki pulled Ace into a kiss. And then, I just stood there, unsure of what to do.

Ace pulled back almost immediately. He took a step back and didn't turn toward me; he just stared at Loki. Everyone was silent for a few seconds; everyone had seen it.

Loki had just kissed my boyfriend.

And oh boy, did that make me angry. It didn't matter that he was a guy, I would have felt just as angry if a girl had done it. I stormed over to them and stepped in between them.

"Hey! He's taken Loki!" I tried to make my voice sound mean, I really did. But I ended up sounding like I had been smoking a pack of cigarettes everyday for 40 years.

Ace set his hands on my shoulders and leaned toward me. "Baby, can I talk to Loki alone?"

"The last time you did that, he kissed you right in front of me so..."

Loki had a bright red blush on his cheeks and he looked like he wanted to be anywhere but that living room. I narrowed my eyes at him, daring him to try something on Ace again.

I sighed and pointed to Loki. "Try kissing my boyfriend one more time, you'll regret it." I kissed Ace's cheek, claiming him, and then walked over to Raze, who stood by Kimmy in the back.

"What the hell just happened?" Kimmy asked me with wide eyes.

I didn't answer her but I turned and looked at Raze. "You knew, didn't you?"

He looked a bit guilty but nodded. "Of course I did. He's my best friend."

"But Ace is your best friend too. Why didn't he know?" I asked.

"Loki has been very confused for the past few years. He didn't understand why he felt the way he did about guys in general. And then he was even more confused when he started feeling those things for Ace. Would you want to tell your best friend you're in love with them?"

I gasped. "LOKI IS IN LOVE WITH ACE?"

Kimmy choked on whatever she was drinking and started laughing. "What the heck is happening right now?"

Raze winced a little at how loud I had been. "Calm down little one."

"Call me little one again Raze, I dare you. I am not in the mood. Loki just kissed my boyfriend right in front of me and everyone. He didn't even have the decency to do it in private!" I exclaimed.

Raze turned me around by my shoulders and led me to the kitchen and Kimmy followed closely behind. "Listen Mad, Loki is most likely drunk as hell. He's going to regret what he said and did in the morning."

"That doesn't give him an excuse to kiss Ace. He knew I was right there; he looked right at me," I frowned.

He nodded. "Yeah, Loki can be a douche, I'll admit that. But try not to be a douche right back Mad. He kissed Ace right in front of you, yes. But he also just kissed his best friend who he knows is in love with you. And the kid isn't even out yet. That's gotta suck."

"I barely feel any sympathy for him right now Raze. I have always been so nice to him and he treats me like crap. I'm not going to feel bad for him because he's acting like a dick."

Kimmy stepped toward me and placed a hand on my arm. "Girly, you should be a little gentle in this situation."

For real? How many times do I have to say it? The guy kissed my boyfriend.

But I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. Maybe I should think about how Loki has been feeling. And that thought alone had me floored.

"I'm ready to go home," I told them both and promptly walked out of the room. I walked back into the living room and asked some people where Ace and Loki were.

"Patio," a group of girls told me.

I followed to where they were pointing and went out the sliding glass door. I found them talking in hushed voices by the pool and I made my way over.

"Ace, I'm going home. See ya there," I told him emotionlessly and flipped back around.

I felt a tug on my wrist. "Whoa whoa whoa. Wait. Let me take you."

"No need. You seem pretty busy," I eyed the dark eyed boy across from me. Ace said nothing so I pulled my wrist from his grip and kept walking.

"Mad, okay, stop. Just give me a minute. I'll be right inside," he tried to hold my cheek but I turned away.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not waiting for you Ace. I really don't want to be here anymore."

"Princess, he told you it would only be a minute," Loki finally said.

I stopped in my tracks and turned around. I walked right up to him and poked a finger into his hard chest. "You listen here asshole, I've been so fucking nice to you since I met you. Even when you were a jerk to me, I was still kind. Don't fucking patronize me Loki. I'm done being the nice girl to you." I turned to Ace. "Hate to be a bitch, but I'm leaving. I don't care if you follow me or not."

I heard a sigh behind me as I walked back to the door. "Loki, I'll text you tomorrow. You can come over and we'll talk, okay?"

"You're just gonna follow her like a love sick puppy?" He questioned back.

Ace groaned and I could hear the stress in his voice. "Dude, she's my girlfriend. Just- I'll talk to you tomorrow. I'm sorry."

I closed the sliding door behind me and kept walking until I was halfway down the block. I should have known, but Ace's car pulled up next to me.

He rolled down the window. "Get in the car Mad."

"Nah, I'm good."

He honked, scaring me to the point of almost tripping on my face. I gave in, opening the passenger side.

"Sorry it took so long, I had to let Raze and Kimmy know we were leaving," he told me like nothing was wrong.

I ignored him.

"So you're going to be like that tonight huh?" Ace practically spoke to himself. "Mad, I didn't ask him to do that. Why are you mad at me?"

"I'm not."

He chuckled. "Yeah, okay."

We were silent until we got to his house. And when we pulled in, I pushed my way out of the car and walked into the house and up to my room. Deciding to be petty and dramatic, I slammed the door for effect.

But then I remembered how late it was and I felt bad.

Ace didn't take very long to open the door and storm into my room. "You're acting like a child."

"Okay," I told him and crossed my arms, sitting on the bed.

Okay, so I could admit he was right. I was acting a little immature. But to be fair, I had just started my period; I was emotional.

Ace sighed and sat next to me on the bed. He stared at me for a few seconds, waiting for me to give him any sort of reaction. When I didn't, he lifted his hand and pushed back a strand of hair, tucking it behind my ear. I leaned into his touch slightly, needing it more than I thought.

"I'm sorry about tonight. It definitely didn't go as I had planned," he whispered, inching closer to my throat.

I didn't say anything; but when his lips brushed my neck, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "I'm sorry for being a brat. I'm just pissed off that someone else kissed you."

"I get that Mad. You might not think I do, but I get it. Just the thought of some other guy, or even girl kissing you makes me go crazy."

He said all of this with his lips brushing my skin and soon after, he pressed his lips on my fluttering pulse, making me sigh.

"Ace-" I started to say, but lost all thoughts when he moved his kisses down the length of my throat. I tipped my head back in anticipation, wanting more.

"I love you Madison. You know that right?" His breath hot on my skin.

My voice was shaky when I answered, "I think you've mentioned it a few times."

He kept on kissing my neck until he landed at my collarbone. He inched the material of my shirt aside to get better access.

"I love you too," I whispered when his breath hit the hollow of my neck.

Weirdly, I giggled when he bit down lightly on a certain spot, making him pull away. "Ticklish, are we?"

I paused, biting my lip. "Ace-"

He nipped me again, and I giggled, pulling away. But then he grasped my cheeks and pulled me into his lips. His lips framed my own and his hands moved to rest on top of my thighs. I ran my fingers through his hair and tugged, a growl-like sound emanated from the back of his throat.

The sound reverberated onto my lips and I let myself fall back onto the bed. Ace quickly hovered over me, our legs now intertwined. I felt his fingers at the hem of my shirt.

How far was I ready to take this?

Chapter 31

The shrill of Ace's phone interrupted my thoughts. I pulled away from the kiss and dropped my head onto the pillow, sighing.

"I know, I wouldn't want to stop kissing me either," Ace mocked, still hovering over me.

I rolled my eyes and pushed at his chest and pointed to where the sound was blaring from the other end of the bed. "Shut up and answer your phone."

He kissed my nose quickly and then scrambled over to his phone. He frowned slightly but still answered. "Raze?" I couldn't hear what he was saying but Ace stood up and walked out of my room, going into his.

Uh, okay?

I didn't know whether or not I should've followed him or stayed in bed. So I lingered by the door frame. He was trying to be quiet; trying not to wake his family, or hiding it from me? Flip a coin.

Finally, he hung up and made his way back to me. I stared up at him with a emotionless expression. "I know what you're thinking. Calm down, I'm telling you right now."

The anger slowly faded and I took his hand and sat us down on the bed. "What happened?"

"Loki was just freaking out, I guess. He wanted to storm over here and so Raze was warning me ahead of time. But they got him to calm down and go home," Ace looked equally sad and confused.

I leaned forward and dropped a kiss on his temple. "I'm sorry that this all happened tonight. And I'm sorry for getting mad again."

"You're fine sweetheart. I'm just worried about Loki and our friendship. Him having feelings for me, or other guys in general, is no big deal. I can live with him having feelings for me. But I'm not okay with him hurting you in the process."

I smiled sadly. "I'm okay Ace. Don't worry about me."

"But you're mad at him right? For kissing me?" He asked.

I nodded, "well, of course I am."

"That's what I mean. And trust me, tomorrow I'm gonna let him know how much I didn't appreciate him doing that in front of my girlfriend," he told me, smoothing his thumb across my cheek.

I smiled bashfully and leaned into him. "So is this your way of telling me that if I hadn't been there, you would have appreciated him kissing you?"

"You know what I meant," Ace told me, poking my sides before pulling me into his arms.

I nodded, looking up at him. "I know, but I like watching you get all flustered." For a moment, we just sat on my bed, tangled together in a tight embrace. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

"I want to, but if my mom comes in here..."

I gave him my best puppy dog eyes. "Please. All we'll be doing is sleeping anyway."

"She won't see it that way," he told me gently.

I frowned but nodded. "Okay. I'm gonna go to bed then."

"Right now?" he questioned, his voice going up an octave, still sounding sad.

I nodded, "yep, and you don't even want to stay with me." Ace then tilted my chin up and placed a kiss on my lips that said the exact opposite of that. He pulled away and I whined like a sad puppy.

"Nope, none of that. You're the one going to bed so early." I glanced at the clock that said otherwise and gave him a pointed look. "Okay, maybe it is pretty late. But still. You could have chosen to hang out with me more."

I dramatically yanked myself out of his arms, sighing, and then threw myself back on the bed, laying down on the pillow. Ace chuckled and leaned over, kissing my cheek. I closed my eyes quickly, pretending to go to sleep.

"Goodnight Mad," he whispered before standing up and walking across the room.

I wanted to say nothing and stay "asleep" but I couldn't help myself. "Goodnight Ace."

I woke up in a hot sweat, breathing hard. I hadn't gotten nightmares since I was a kid, but I hadn't forgotten how scary they could be. When you're a child, you dream about monsters and demons. Now, my nightmares were filled with the person who's supposed to comfort you from the monsters.

Harry.

I glanced at the clock on my phone, 3:12 am. Great. I got less than three hours of peaceful sleep. I was still breathing heavily and my heart was racing. Wordlessly, I got out of bed, suddenly too hot to be underneath the covers.

I quietly walked down the hall and opened Ace's bedroom door with a squeak. I cringed, hoping I didn't wake him. I planned to just crawl next to him and stay there until the weekend was over. But instead, as soon as I sat down on his bed, he stretched out, slowly waking up.

"Mad? What's wrong? Is everything okay?" He asked immediately, before even getting a good look at my tear stained cheeks. Yes, the nightmare was bad enough to make me cry.

I nodded but then shook my head. "Nightmare," I told him before crawling into his arms.

He wrapped his arms around my back, holding me firmly. He kissed my forehead and yawned.

"You're okay sweetheart. Just go back to sleep."

I nuzzled into his chest, the fabric of his shirt soft and warm against my cheek. Another tear fell, against my will and soaked into Ace's shirt.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked me after a minute of me sniffing.

Unable to find words right then, I settled for a shake of my head. "Just let me lay here with you."

"Like I would ever deny you anything," he whispered.

I giggled a little bit and looked up at his face to see his eyes already open. "You didn't stay with me tonight. I wanted that."

"Well sweetheart, looks like you got what you wanted in the end now, didn't you?" He pointed out, playfully, making me smile.

I shrugged.

"You've got me wrapped around your finger Madison Grey. You have got me so whipped that I don't even mind it."

The next morning, the exact thing happened that Ace was scared of. Anna opened his bedroom door, catching us sleeping together. On top of the blankets and started to yell at her son.

"ACE JAMES CRAIGE! WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT SLEEPING IN THE SAME BED AS YOUR GIRLFRIEND UNDER MY ROOF?"

We both startled awake and glanced at each other. Ace's expression said, oh shit.

"Mom-"

Anna silenced him with, "don't you 'mom' me mister! We have rules in this house and you are supposed to follow them. As much as I love you Mad, you knew better too."

"Mom! Chill, she came in here at like 3am after a nightmare. We weren't fooling around under your roof," he told her, sounding exasperated.

She just stared at us, seeing as my body was still wrapped around his. Yikes. I untangled myself and sat up. "I'm really sorry Anna. It's not Ace's fault, I swear. I just didn't want to sleep alone."

Anna sighed. "Alright. You aren't in trouble this time. But the rule still stands, okay?"

We both nodded and she gave us one last warning look before walking out. I groaned and flung myself on my stomach, my face smacking the pillow.

Ace rubbed my back. "It's okay, she isn't mad."

"That was embarrassing. I just embarrassed myself in front of your mother," I admitted, my voice muffled through the pillow.

He chuckled. "She loves you, you know."

I glanced up at him from the pillow. "Not after today."

"Shut up," Ace smiled and laid back down beside me.

I turned my body until we faced each other. I lifted my hand and cradled his cheek in my palm.

"What are you gonna do after we graduate?"

"Yikes, the after high school talk, huh?" He smirked. "I still don't really know. I know you want to go to Boston; maybe I'll just follow you there," he winked at me.

I rolled my eyes. "You would not."

"I would do a lot of things for you babe," he closed his eyes when I stroked his cheek.

I furrowed my brows. "You would really go to Boston with me?" But before he could answer, I kept talking. "I'm getting ahead of myself. I haven't even gotten into Emerson yet."

"Have you sent in the application?"

I nodded. "I did it as soon as they opened. I just have to wait until December to hear back."

"I'm serious, you know. I want to be with you, and I don't want long distance to be the only option for us," Ace admitted.

I blushed. "It's crazy that just a few months ago, I thought I had you pinned as this bad boy who couldn't give a fuck about anything. Yet, here you are, making plans to fly across the country just to be with me."

"I'd fly across the world Mad."

I smacked his arm and buried my face back into the pillow. "You're cheesy and it's making me feel all weird."

I couldn't see it, but I knew that Ace was smiling at me. He pushed back the strands of hair that covered my face and tucked them behind my ear.

"I think you did have me all figured out, Mad. Pretty sure before I met you, I didn't give a fuck about anything. You changed that," his voice was low.

"Liar. You totally cared about your family and friends before you met me."

He shrugged. "Well, I care more now." Ace rolled over onto his back and pulled me with him so I was half sprawled on top of him.

"I'm glad I miss judged you," I told him, wrapping my arm around his torso.

He laughed and I could feel my entire body move with his. "And why is that?"

"Because if I had thought you were sweet and were going to get me to fall in love with you, I would have stayed far away from you."

I felt his hand run through my hair, catching on a knot or two. "You didn't want to fall in love?"

I shook my head against his chest. "I'm not good with expressing myself, you know that. Plus, I didn't want to have to go through explaining Charlie with someone."

"Yeah, but you're getting better at expressing your emotions and thoughts to me," he reasoned.

"How was I supposed to know that would happen?"

He shrugged. "True." And for a while, we just laid there in silence.

"I just want everything to be okay. I wish I didn't have to worry about Harry. And I wish I could get out of high school already and spend the rest of my life with you," I whispered, my cheek still pressed against his chest.

Ace tightened his grip. "One day, baby. One day, you won't have to worry about anything, I promise."

Chapter 32

After falling back asleep for a little longer, Anna woke us both up to eat and to get us out of the bedroom, alone. Austin was at the table, cutting up Noah's breakfast into smaller pieces. Noah sat there, rolling his eyes, but with a huge grin.

"What, can't cut up your own waffles, kid?" Ace asked his brother, sitting down next to him.

Noah turned to Ace. "Why would I do it myself when dad wants to do it for me?"

The kid had a point.

Ace just ruffled his hair and pulled me to sit next to him on the bench.

"What are your plans for the day?" Anna asked us when she came back into the dining room with a plate full of fresh waffles.

I glanced at my boyfriend. Was he going to tell them about Loki?

"I don't know, we'll probably just go hang out with the guys," Ace answered for us, evading the truth a bit.

Austin nodded. "How are Raze and Loki? We haven't seen much of them around here in awhile."

Partly my fault.

"We hang out a lot more at school now, I guess," Ace shrugged, acting weirdly nonchalant. Right then, Ace's phone played a text tone. He glanced at it quickly and gave me a look.

It was Loki. It had to be.

"Speak of the devils, just got a text confirming our plans. Mad, you wanna come with me to Loki's house or would you rather stay here today?"

His voice begged me to join him. I had a slight feeling that Ace thought the conversation was going to get awkward and he wanted my support along with him. "I'll go with you, if that's okay."

"More than okay," he told me, placing his hand on my thigh, tracing small circles on my kneecap.

So after we ate, we went upstairs, to our separate rooms and got ready. I pulled on a pair of jeans, a light sweater and vans. I threw my hair up into a quick ponytail and looked in the mirror for anything else to fix.

Oh there was.

I stormed out of my room and knocked loudly on Ace's door. "Yeah?" I heard him answer.

I pushed open the door and found him lying on his bed, playing a game on his phone. "Ace!"

"What?" He looked up and then looked back down to his game.

I moved closer, my feet stomping on his floor. I grabbed his phone and narrowed my eyes when he whined. "You did this," I pointed to the purple bruise on my neck.

Ace chuckled, "awe, you look cute with a hickey."

"No! I can't go out with this thing here! Everyone will know that-"

Ace laughed. "What? That your boyfriend kisses you?"

"That you sucked on my neck like a vampire!"

He smirked, "I did no such thing."

"Ace! That means your parents and your little brother saw it," I frowned, my eyebrows scrunching together. He grabbed my hands and pulled me closer, and puckered his lips for a kiss. "You're hilarious if you think I'm gonna kiss you now."

Ace pulled me even closer and moved his hands up my arms. "I love you?" He told me as a replacement for an apology.

"Can't relate," I deadpanned.

Now his eyebrows scrunched adorably and he frowned. "I'm sorry. But can't you just cover it up with makeup?"

"I could, if I knew how to cover up a hickey."

He smiled. "I'll text Katie."

"No! I don't want your little cousin to know either!" I whined.

Ace stared at me. "Sooooo, what do you want me to do?"

"TO NOT GIVE ME HICKEYS ANYMORE," I yelled a little too loud and winced.

He smiled. "I can agree to try but I can't promise anything."

"You're impossible," I told him and then walked out. I heard him chuckle behind me and I ignored him, walking back into my room.

We left half an hour later. Ace drove us both to Loki's house and I adjusted my jacket for the tenth time to try and hide the purple bruising on my neck. When we got there, Ace grabbed my hand in an effort to control his nerves.

I squeezed his hand and he ran his free hand over my cheek in a loving caress. He knocked on the door and Loki answered, looking haggard.

"Hey man," Ace said and then cringed at how odd it sounded.

Loki said nothing but stepped aside to let us in. He glanced at me and didn't look pleased or angry that I had shown up too. I saw Raze leaning against the back of the couch, waiting for us.

"Hi," I broke the silence as I greeted Raze and Loki.

Raze smiled. "Hey there Mad. Nice hickey."

I gasped and cupped my hand over my neck, ready to yell at him for calling me out.

"Don't tease her," Ace told him with a smirk. "She's already mad at me for doing it in the first place."

Loki snorted and stepped over to the couch before sitting down. Raze glanced at him worriedly and bit his lip, anxiously. "So."

"So?" Ace egged.

"I'm gonna sit down," I told everyone to ease the tension but I ended up sounding awkward.

When was I not?

"Loki, would you like to start?" Raze nudged his friend.

He sighed and sat up a little taller. "Well I'm sure you can tell now, but I'm gay."

"Aaaaand?" Raze asked as if he were child.

Loki sucked on his teeth. "And I shouldn't have kissed you, Ace. I like you and I have for a while. I know it's no excuse, but I was drunk and stupid. I wasn't even planning on telling you anytime soon."

Ace nodded. "I forgive you Loki. But I'm not the only one you need to apologize to," he told him and squeezed my hand again.

I inched back into the couch, uncomfortable with all the eyes on me.

Loki took a deep breath. "You're right," he looked right at me. "I'm sorry Mad. I've been terrible to you and I know it. I've been jealous of you. Ace has never liked a girl like he liked you. And I wanted that. I'm sorry for acting like a jackass, and not just last night."

I nodded. "I forgive you too Loki. But on two conditions." He nodded me on. "No more being mean to me and no more kissing Ace," I told him with a smirk.

"I think I can handle that," he replied with a small smirk.

"So I got an email today," Ace told me, gaining my attention.

I looked up from my government homework and bit the eraser end of my pencil in concentration. "Yeah? What about?"

"Some college," he answered nonchalantly.

I perked up. "That's awesome, Ace! What did it say?"

"Just that I should check out the programs they have on their website. It's not like they sent it directly to me, they probably sent it to a bunch of kids," he started to make it sound less than what it probably was.

I set my pencil down and leaned closer to Ace, taking his hands in mine, lacing our fingers together. "I think you should check it out. Where is it?"

"Here in California; Sacramento to be exact," he murmured.

I tilted my head to the side. "Why aren't you more excited?"

"Because I promised I would go to Boston with you when you got into Emerson." His face showed signs of guilt and it made me feel queasy.

I shook my head. "Don't ever put my future above yours. Don't do that to yourself and don't do it to me. I don't want you to resent me one day because I was the reason you didn't go to college."

"I could go to college in Boston; a community college," he attempted to make me feel better.

"It's not the same if you don't want that," I reminded him. "Please look into it Ace. This could be really good for you."

When the time came for me to send in my college applications, Ace was still barely considering applying to Sacramento State. He was next to me when I hit send on my Emerson application and he gave me a long and lingering kiss after.

He had told me he was proud of me.

I never realized how badly and how often I needed to hear those words from somebody until Ace said them to me. Every time I got a good grade on a test, every time I sent in another college app, and even when I woke up on time in the morning. And I did it back. Because I was proud of Ace. I was proud when he did anything.

But maybe that was the love talking.

Loki was a lot more friendly around me now. When I sat down at our lunch table and smile at him, he returned it. If I waved to him in the hallway, he rolled his eyes playfully and his lips would twitch up a little. It was progress I never thought would happen like it did.

Ace and I were better than ever. I was pretty sure we were deep in the honeymoon stage of our relationship. Kimmy told me almost daily how gross we were with all the hand holding and cheek kisses before every class.

But I couldn't help myself when I was around him. I never wanted to be away from him and I wanted to be touching his skin all the time. Whether it was holding his hand, running my fingers through his hair or kissing him between classes, I wanted to be close to him.

And it wasn't like Ace minded. He was the same as me. It was rare that he wasn't looking at me when we were in the same vicinity. The amount of times he reminded me that he loved me was probably unhealthy.

Once again, not like I minded.

The only time we fought was when we talked about college. Ace was adamant on coming with me to Boston, if I even got in. But I felt it somewhere deep down that he wanted to apply to Sac state. But he hadn't yet admitted it to himself.

And that's when we would fight. Then again, our arguments weren't screaming matches or physical in any way. We would just get so incredibly frustrated with each other that there would be no kiss goodnight. And the next day, it would be like nothing happened.

"Wake up beautiful," I heard whispering in my ear.

I rolled over in my bed and snuggled deeper into my covers.

"Maddie Bear, wake up!" I heard again.

I stretched and then curled myself into a ball under my many blankets.

"Sugar pie. Baby. Boo boo bear. Honey bunch. Darling. Sweetie. Angel cakes. Princess. Babe," the voice spoke louder this time.

"Please don't call me any of those things," I muttered, my voice muffled by my pillow. And then I thought about it some more. "Except baby. You can call me that."

I heard a chuckle and I opened one eye, spying Ace standing in his pajamas next to my bed. "Alright baby, get up."

"Time and place Ace. There's a time and there's a place for you to call me baby, trying to wake me from a peaceful slumber, is not one of them," I scolded.

"Get up Madison," he told me with a monotone voice.

I scoffed. "Well since you asked so nicely... no."

"Why not?" He frowned.

I opened my other eye and rolled over onto my back. "What time is it?"

"Eight," Ace replied.

I groaned. "It's Sunday. Why did you wake me up at eight o'clock on a Sunday?"

He hopped onto the bed, well really more onto me. I yelped when he accidentally elbowed my boob.

"Ow!" I shoved his elbow off of me and placed a hand over my now sore breast.

Ace cringed. "I'm sorry! That wasn't how I planned it, I promise."

"You elbowed my boob!" I emphasized for him.

"I'm sorry!" He whisper-yelled. His panicked face turned into a smirk. "I can make it better."

My eyes widened at his innuendo. "Oh no you don't, mister!" I smacked his hand away when it came closer to my chest. "Hands off the precious cargo!"

"That's why I want my hands on," his smirk grew.

"Go away! You woke me up early and then you jumped on me like some MMA fighter. I don't like you right now."

Ace frowned again. "I wanted to cuddle."

"Well I wanted my boob not to hurt this morning. I guess we can't all get what we want," I whined.

Ace readjusted himself so he wasn't lying directly on top of me. He wrapped his arm around my torso, his hand resting on the side of my hip. "I'm sorry, baby," he hit me with the strongest puppy dog eyes I've ever seen.

"See, like I told you. Time and place, this is definitely a good use of that nickname," I snuggled into him, closing my eyes again.

Ace held me a little tighter. "Do you wanna go on a date today?"

I brighten again, opening my eyes wide. "Yes! Where?"

"I can either take you out for lunch today and then we can hit up a movie, or we can get dinner and then we can both have dessert," he insinuated.

I pushed him playfully and rolled my eyes. "What is with you today?"

"I just want to kiss my beautiful girlfriend," he pleaded, his eyes glimmering in want.

I scoffed and cuddle into his body again. "Pretty sure you want more than to kiss me."

"I won't deny it," he shrugged.

"I'm just not ready, Ace," my voice changed, becoming serious.

He tucked my hair back behind my ear. "That's okay. I'll wait until you're comfortable. No matter how long it takes you."

"Even if we wait until we're married?" I tested.

His eyes opened. "Married?!"

"I'm kidding, but you failed the test," I pouted.

Ace kissed my neck and sighed. "Yes, I would wait for you even if it took marrying the shit out of you to get there."

"Do you think we'll get married one day?" I changed the subject completely.

He kissed my cheek. "I hope so. I can't imagine marrying anyone else."

"Good, you're all mine."

"Ace!" I yelled, running through the hallway. His door was shut so without knocking, I burst through. He was still asleep, shirtless, and lying on his stomach, the sheets wrapped around his waist.

I jumped on the bed, landing on his body, effectively waking him up. "Baby, wake up!"

"I'm up, I'm up, geez. What's wrong? Who died?" Ace questioned, his voice husky from sleep.

I settled over him, until I was practically straddling him. I waited until his eyes were on me and he wasn't half asleep to answer him. "I did it. I got in."

His eyes immediately widened and then he sat up, my body moving with his. I fell backwards, sliding off of his lap. I yelped a little and then laughed when Ace cursed and started apologizing.

He lifted me back up, settling me in his lap again. And then he pulled me into his chest into a tight embrace. "You got into Emerson?" I nodded into his chest. "I told you you would!"

"I know, but I didn't want you to jinx it," I told him as I pulled back.

Ace wrapped his arms loosely around my waist and smiled. "I'm so proud of you." There were those words again, the sentence I would never grow tired of hearing, right alongside "I love you."

"I would kiss you, but you haven't brushed your teeth," I whispered, teasing him a little.

He pouted. "That wouldn't stop me, sweetheart." I started to climb off of him to let him brush his teeth if he wanted a kiss so bad. "Where do you think you're going, college girl?"

"Let go of me and brush your teeth so I can kiss you," I batted his hands away and hopped off the bed.

I saw a flirtatious look in his eyes as he rolled off the bed and practically jogged into his bathroom with just a pair of boxers on.

I replaced his spot in bed, climbing under the covers and melting into his sheets. I wasn't expecting it when Ace came back into the room a few minutes later and threw himself on top of me. He kissed me suddenly; his lips sliding over mine roughly. A hand latched onto my side, squeezing my hip, making me squirm.

When I felt his tongue against my teeth, I had to hold back the weird sound that wanted to escape my mouth. I slid my hand from his arm, over to his bare chest. We had made out before, but never both of us without a shirt; granted I was still wearing one. But at this point, I wouldn't be soon. I let my hand wander even further down, feeling the indentations on his abdomen.

Ace's mouth moved from my lips to my neck, kissing all the way down the column of my throat. I let out a shuddering breath, which was slightly embarrassing for me. But Ace didn't comment on it; he just kept laying little kisses on my skin. His hands moved, settling under my shirt, on my waist. He slowly inched the material up, exposing a little skin.

He looked up at me, asking if the movement was okay. I nodded feverishly and he hitched it up higher. I gasped when I felt cold air on my stomach, knowing my shirt was lifted halfway off my body. I sat up and removed it completely, getting less nervous and more bold.

Ace eyed my face before glancing down at my body. His eyes roamed as if my sports bra was the most intricate thing he had ever seen. And then his hands did the same thing. Neither of us were surprised when a content sigh left my lips.

"What about your parents?" I suddenly asked, knowing this wasn't going to lead to nothing.

He glanced back up at me, his hands still on my skin. "They took Noah to go look at christmas trees and then to the zoo. They won't be back for awhile, I promise."

"I love you." It burst out quickly and randomly. It had nothing to do with the conversation but everything to do with our actions. Ace leaned forward again, capturing my lips with his before repeating the words back to me.

And his lips had kept moving.

The amount of times a day Ace said the words, "my girlfriend got into college," was getting a bit unhealthy. He told teachers, his family and people we weren't even friends with. I got it, he was the most supportive boyfriend to ever exist, as he liked to put it.

But what Ace hadn't told many people was that he had gotten into college too. And not only that, but he had also gotten a small scholarship too. But he didn't want to go. Scratch that; he wanted to go. He just didn't want to go somewhere where I wasn't.

But slowly, I was trying to convince him to do what he felt was right, not for me, but for him. He owed it to himself to get what he wanted. And it wasn't like we were going to break up just because we would be across the country from each other.

"Commit," I whispered into Ace's ear from behind him as he sits on his bed. He was staring at the Sacramento State website on his computer.

He smacked the air beside my head and laughed. "Shut up and let me think."

I sat in silence for a few seconds. "Are you don't yet?"

He turned to me and landed a quick kiss on my mouth. "I love you, but you're annoying me."

"I'm sorry. I'll shut up," I promised without actually meaning it. Because a minute or so later, I said, "commit."

"You must really want to get rid of me since you want me to attend a school across the country from you," He pointed out.

I shook my head. "I don't want that. I wish you had applied to a school close to me in Boston. But you didn't want that, so it was okay with me. I know you want to go to Sacramento, Ace. And it's okay."

"I don't want to be away from you."

I sighed. "I feel like we've had this conversation so many times, I've lost count of the words I've said in my head and the ones I've said out loud."

"I know, we have. This is hard for me. I've never had to choose between The girl and the school before," he frowned.

"Well I would hope not," I joked, even though it wasn't the time.

He shut the computer and turned to faced me, pulling me in for a kiss. "So you're telling me that you are 100% okay with me going to a school across the country from you?"

"Well not 100%, more like 78%. But if that's what you want, of course I'd be okay with it," I told him, kissing him again.

He sighed and I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his torso. "I'm gonna do it," he whispered and then twisted in my grasp but not enough to make me let go.

He opened the laptop again and then, Ace was registered as a student at Sacramento State.

Chapter 33

On my eighteenth birthday, I was legally free of Harry. It wasn't as if he had tried to get me back in the first place, but this felt official. I almost wanted to change my last name to make it a done deal. But Ace assured me that he would do it for me one day.

Even though I was no longer his daughter in my head, I guess the police didn't see it that way. Because a few weeks after I turned eighteen, they still called me to tell me that my father had tried to kill himself.

I suppose I wasn't supposed to feel bad for him or feel scared, but I did.

I all but ran to my car to drive to the hospital, where Harry was hanging onto his life by a thread. Ace has been asleep and I didn't want to wake him, so instead, I settled for sending him a text when I arrived at the hospital.

I sat in the parking lot for fifteen minutes before I could drag myself out of the car and into the automatic doors.

When I finally made it in, I told the lady at the front desk who I was there for with shaky breathing. She gave me the room number and I headed down the hall. I couldn't stop the shaking in my hands or my knees.

His room was silent as I stood outside of it. There was no bustle of doctors, no nurses running in and out. It led me to believe he was alright. And I didn't know what scared me most; the fact that he was okay, or the fact that he had attempted to take his own life.

But when I walked in the room, it was empty. No doctors, no nurses, no patient. I furrowed my brows and glanced around the room one more time; still-

Nothing.

My shaking legs took me to the nurses station and the look they gave me was full of pity. "Yes dear?" One asked me.

"The front desk told me that Harry Grey was staying in room A206, but no one is in there. Did he get moved to another room?" I asked her quietly.

She smiled at me but glanced at her hands quickly. "Let me check," she began typing on her computer and scanned the results of her search. She was quiet. "I'm sorry sweetie, it seems like you were just a little late. He passed away almost half an hour ago."

"What do you mean, passed away?" I asked hollowly.

Her smile was made out of brittle. "Would you like to speak to his doctor? I don't know the specifics."

I must have nodded because the next thing I know, I was sitting in one of the many Doctor offices, in a beige, plain room. I sat with my hands together, my lips tight with confusion and shock.

"Ms. Grey?"

I glanced up to see a woman with dark hair and dark skin, smiling at me. Her smile was kind and without pity. "That's me."

"I'm Doctor Hannanburg. I was the one assigned to your father's case," she spoke with authority and intelligence.

I nodded at her and stared at my hands resting in my lap. She began to explain to me exactly what landed Harry in the emergency room in the first place. He had taken a handful of sleeping pills and overdosed. His neighbor, my old neighbor, had walked by and the front door had been cracked.

He tried to call out to Harry but found him lying on the couch, in the middle of a seizure. The paramedics had come and got him stabilized enough to take him to the emergency room. Once admitted into a room, they had believed he was going to be okay. They pumped his stomach of the pills. But he had another seizure an hour later and none of the doctors or nurses could get him stabilized again.

His heart stopped beating and even with three rounds with the external defibrillator, his heart wouldn't restart.

I nodded as if I understood, but while the information was easy to understand, there was something that wasn't. Why would Harry try to kill himself? The doctor told me he had no alcohol in his system, only sleeping pills.

I sat out in the waiting room after my meeting with Dr. Hannanburg, not knowing where else to go. I didn't think I was steady enough to drive myself back home; so I sat there for who knows how long.

"Mad!" I heard shouted down the hall. I looked to my left and saw Ace frantically making his way toward me. I didn't move to get closer, I just sat there. He knelt down in front of me, tilted my chin up. "Did he-"

"Harry's dead," I told him with no emotion in my voice. No sadness, not relieved, not anything.

Ace shook his head. "What- what happened?"

"He killed himself. He swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills, the bastard," I spoke bitterly.

He pulled me up until I stood in front of him and then he wrapped me in his embrace. "Are you okay?"

"My father just killed himself and you're asking if I'm okay?" I chuckled a little. "That's just like you," I told him, but not without affection.

He gave me a tight smile after pulling back a little. "I'm worried about you, Mad. Not your father."

"Maybe I should have been worried about him. Then maybe he wouldn't have taken his own life. How selfish of him, not having to live with the guilt of abusing his daughter."

Ace squeezed me tighter and kissed the crown of my head. "It's not fair sweetheart, I know. I'm sorry."

He held me for awhile. It could have been ten minutes or an hour. It could have been no time at all, or forever. But he was exactly what I needed, like always.

Just as I was finally ready to ready to leave, Ace pulling me up from the seat we had both eventually sat down in, I looked over his shoulder and saw a figure approaching the nurses' station.

I pulled away from Ace and squinted to get a better look. "Mom?"

"Madison," Samantha sighed from the nurse's station. She didn't sound surprised to see me whatsoever.

She started walking toward me but I took a step back, still confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Your father-"

"I know. But you don't even live here anymore. How did you know he was here?" My eyebrows furrowed.

She glanced at the boy next to me and gave him a tight smile. I imagined he did the same back, but I couldn't move my gaze from her. "I guess I'm still an emergency contact on the records."

"And you came back for him, but not for me?" My voice cracked.

Ace latched onto my hand.

"Melon, I couldn't come back while he was-"

Tears threatened to leak at the mention of her old nickname for me. "What? Still alive?" She didn't say anything. "You left me here with him."

"Can we talk somewhere more private?" She bit her lip nervously.

I swallowed harshly and squeezed Ace's hand in anger. "Why? Too embarrassed of your daughter calling you out?"

Samantha looked emotional, as if she deserved to be holding back tears. The woman left me when I was fourteen and only had the audacity to call me on my birthday; which she hadn't even done a few weeks ago. "I wasn't happy in that house Madison. You know that."

"And you think I was?" I kept my voice low and angry. "He treated us both like shit and you got out of it."

He glanced around the hospital and started biting her thumbnail. It was a habit she obviously hadn't broken. She had always done it when Harry walked in the room. "I needed to start over and I couldn't afford to take you with me. I had always planned to come back when I had enough money, but I never got to where I wanted melon."

I scoffed. "You never planned on coming back for me Samantha. You don't have to lie to me."

"I really did angel, I promise. I had a whole plan. I would go back to school, get my degree and get a good job. And I would come back and get you and we would live together in a big house," she spoke as if she were reminiscing on memories instead of a dream.

I looked up at Ace and he brought my hand up to his lips to kiss it. I turned back to my mother. "Did you go back to school?"

She shook her head solemnly. "No, I couldn't once I got a job waitressing at a restaurant. I worked so many hours just to get enough money for rent. I can still barely afford my one bedroom apartment."

"It still doesn't excuse you from leaving me with an abuser, Samantha," I shook my head.

She did the same. "He wouldn't touch a hair on your head, Melon. He was all talk with you."

"Then why did he hit her a few months ago?" Ace asked her, jaw clenched tight.

Samantha eyed my boyfriend and squinted her eyes, as if she were thinking very hard. And then she turned back to me. "He hit you?"

All I could do was nod.

"But- he promised..."

I exchanged a glance with Ace. "Promised what?"

She looked up guiltily. "He knew I was leaving. He knew I had been planning it for awhile. He told me that he would only let me leave if you stayed. But he promised to never hurt you like he did me."

"But you just told me you had a plan to get me back. Was that a lie too?"

"No, Madison. I always had that plan. But I didn't want him to find out that I planned to take you with me. At least I was going knowing that you would be okay," Samantha frowned.

I took a deep breath, looking down. "Well, I wasn't."

"I'm sorry melon," she whispered. When I looked back up, there were tears in her eyes.

I toyed with the necklace she had given me a few years after she left through the mail. She glanced down at it with a sad smile.

"I'm surprised you actually wear that thing."

I looked down at it. "It's beautiful and it reminded me how much I missed you," I sniffled. Ace pressed a kiss on temple and wrapped his arms across the front of my chest, standing behind me.

"I sent it to show you how much I missed you," my mother told me, eyes still shining with tears.

And even though I wasn't sure if I would ever fully forgive her, I pulled out of Ace's arms and crept over to my mother. Her arms automatically opened when she saw me come closer and I stepped into them with caution. She wrapped me up tight and I could hear her heart beating and her breathing heavy. She still smelled the same as she did before she left; like cotton candy ice cream.

When we finally pulled away from each other, I went back to Ace who was standing awkwardly a few feet away. "Mom," I paused, letting the name familiarize itself again. "This is my boyfriend, Ace."

She glanced over at him with a bright smile. "I'm glad my melon has someone to look over her. I'm Samantha, it's very nice to meet you."

Ace held out his hand and she shook it, but ended up pulling him into a hug too. "It's nice to meet you too, Samantha."

All three of us ended up at Harry's apartment. I honestly had no idea what I was supposed to do with all the furniture and with the apartment itself. My mom told me that she would have it all figured out so I didn't have to worry about it while finishing senior year. I was weirdly grateful she was here now.

After taking some things for myself, we left the apartment and went out for lunch together at the diner Ace had taken me to before we were dating for real, the Roller Diner. I ordered the chicken strips again and Ace stared at me judgmentally. But this time, I just leaned up and kissed his cheek and he quickly got over it.

"You two are adorable together," Samantha sighed, glancing at Ace and me and the nonexistent distance between us.

Ace landed his hand on my thigh under the table. "That's all her."

"You just don't like being called adorable, do you macho man?" I intertwined my fingers with his on my leg.

He turned to me and smiled cheekily. "Maybe."

And even though I didn't want to think about it, the thought of me leaving him in a few months came to my mind. I wished there was a way to slow down time, and just stay in this moment right now. I wasn't sure how a long distance relationship was supposed to work. And that terrified me more than the thought of leaving.

Epilogue

"I don't want you to leave me," the voice beside me murmured before throwing an arm around my waist, snuggling into me. Ace had been extra clingy the last few weeks, knowing he wouldn't be able to stop the inevitable; the two of us being separated and going off to our different schools.

I was leaving first, a whole two weeks before Ace would go off to Sacramento State. And as much as he wanted to go with me, to help me move in and get situated, I wouldn't let him. I wanted to just be able to say goodbye to him and try to forget that I wouldn't be seeing him until Christmas.

So Ace probably wasn't the only one who had been extraordinarily clingy.

When I felt Ace's head lay against my chest, I kissed the top of his head and wrapped my arms around him as much as I could. "I don't want to leave you. But i've heard a college education is kind of important."

"More important than me?" I could almost feel the puppy dog eyes he was sporting. He wasn't even facing me and I could still see the frown he was sure to be wearing.

I chuckled a little and ran my hand through his hair, calming him a little. I felt his shoulders melt from their stiff state. "Nothing is more important to me than you and Kimmy. But you don't see Kimmy holding me down on her bed, clinging to me like a baby monkey."

"Kimmy isn't in love with you," he concluded.

I gasped. "She isn't?"

Ace snorted and sat up a little, only to lay his head back down where it was, facing me. "Kimmy calls you every hour and comes over here every single day. Don't try and tell me she isn't acting clingy too."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. And it's not like I mind all the attention. It's more than i've gotten in my entire life," I sighed.

Ace brought one hand up to cup my cheek and he smiled, bringing my body warmth. "You deserve all the attention in the world. And I bet you at Emerson, you're going to get it," his voice turned playful. "It better not be from any guys."

My heart swelled at the affection clouding his voice. I needed to change the subject before I turned into a puddle. "Your mother is going to kill us, again."

He swatted a hand as if brushing off a fly. "We're adults, she can't do anything."

"So what was two days ago?" I saw him blush a little after Anna walked into his room, claiming to need his dirty laundry, when she caught us heavily making out. But I told myself we were lucky it was only that.

"It wasn't that bad," Ace rolled his eyes.

I gave him the girlfriend look, the one that told him to shut up. "We were banned from seeing each other for twenty-four hours, Ace. We live in the same house. She might as well have locked us both in our separate rooms for a whole day."

"Okay, so maybe she can still get us in trouble. But we're only cuddling. What is she going to get mad about?"

I looked down at our bodies that were covered in the bedsheets.

Only the bedsheets.

"Alright, then get your cute ass up and get ready for the day without me then," Ace moped.

I tried to wiggle out of his grasp but he wasn't exactly helping me get to my feet. "You gonna move, or am I supposed to just shove you off the bed?"

"You can get up if you move me, sweetheart," his smile was charming, supposed to keep me from leaving the bed. But I truly didn't want to go through another lecture about birth control with Ace's mother.

"I have my ways baby," I warned him.

His smile twisted, into the mischievous smirk that made my insides pool with heat. "Do your worst, beautiful."

I moved my hand down his chest and down, and down, and down. Ace's features immediately softened and his face contorted in pleasure. His eyes closed. And I-

Shoved him off the bed.

"Ah!" Ace squeaked, laying on his back on the floor.

"That's a good look for you, sweetcheeks. But you might want to put on some clothes before your mom comes in," I told him and then got up from the other side of the bed, stretching and looking around for my clothes. When I found them crumpled on the ground across the room, in various places, I sighed and went to Ace's closet.

Ace still hadn't moved. "What are you doing?"

"Borrowing your hoodie," I told him, pulling one off a hanger. I walked over to the multiple piles of clothes and sifted through them, pulling out the necessities. I lifted the hoodie over me until it billowed out around my thighs.

Ace finally stood up and started dressing too, the two of us in comfortable silence getting ready for the day. One day I hoped this would be our everyday.

I decided that I hated the airport. I hated the airport because it was the place that would be taking me away from my life for the next four years, starting now.

I had only twenty-three minutes before I was due to board my flight to Boston. So I spend the majority of them making out with my boyfriend while my mom awkwardly sat across from us. It wasn't my smartest moment, I'll admit. But I wasn't going to see Ace for three and a half months.

She understood. But I also understood that I wouldn't be seeing her either for three and a half months. And I had just started getting used to having her around again.

I had stayed at Ace's house even though she was here again. She couldn't afford a place for the both of us quite yet. But she was working toward better things. She was currently working two jobs, one for her rent and bills and the other went toward her savings.

She was adamant on putting me through college.

After making out with Ace for a good half an hour, I chatted on the phone with Kimmy since she was unable to come to the airport since she had left for school three days ago.

When there was ten minutes till boarding, we all stood up and they walked me to the line I was supposed to be in. Ace held tightly onto my hand and I did the same. My mom walked on my other side, her hand brushing back my hair a few times.

The gate was just ahead of us when I heard Ace's breath stutter a little bit. I stopped and turned toward him, taking both his hands in mine. "I love you," I told him, looking up into his sad eyes.

"I love you more, sweetheart," he whispered and pulled me into a tight hug. I could feel the tears well up in my eyes but I refused to cry. It wasn't like I wouldn't see him ever again.

After we let go of each other, albeit reluctantly, I turned to my mom who I had quickly been able to forgive and love wholeheartedly again. Unlike me, she didn't hold back the tears. A few ran freely down her cheeks, but she bore a smile.

"I'm proud of you angel. I'm going to miss you so much," she whispered, barely getting the words out.

I practically ran into her arms and squeezed with everything I had. "I'm going to miss you too mom."

"I love you Melon."

And I loved her too.

And although I told myself I wouldn't cry, as soon as I got on the plane, my sob couldn't be held back.

And I was gone.

I no longer hated airports; because they no longer took me away from everyone I loved. I didn't have to leave every January or August. I just got to be home.

And by home, I meant the place Ace and I had rented together. I hadn't seen it in person yet, but I knew that since Ace's parents approved of it, it would be great.

I hadn't seen him since early January and I was practically bouncing in my seat as the airplane took off. I had officially graduated from Emerson with a bachelor's in creative writing and I was on the way to publishing my first novel.

Ace would graduate, in two weeks, from Sacramento State with a bachelor's in business since he still barely knew what he truly wanted to do. We had done it.

We made it through four years of long distance, minus the small breakup we had halfway through our Junior year. We had gotten into a fight in February and by the time June rolled around, all I had to do was see him in person and our break was history.

I would be coming home two weeks before he did, so I would move in our stuff and get situated before he got here. And then, I would attend his graduation, as a surprise.

When I landed in LAX, my mom was waiting with open arms. I ran over to her as fast as I could with two suitcases. Her grip was tight and I may have heard her snuffle a little bit. Next to her was her new husband, Matt. They had started dating three years ago and got engaged after eight months of dating. They had gotten married when I was home for Christmas break.

She was finally on her own two feet. Matt had moved into her two bedroom home after they got engaged. Matt had two children himself, Miley, who was twenty-three and Samuel who was nineteen.

"Hey Matt!" I greeted, pulling him into a hug as well.

"Hey Kiddo," he chuckled, hugging me back.

I turned to my mom as we started toward the exit. "Have you seen the house yet?"

She nodded with a smile. "Ace had us over during his spring break. He seems so excited for you guys."

"We're both excited. Finally, after four years, we get to wake up next to each other every single day, in our own house," I spouted giddily.

We had made it to the car and I was putting my suitcases in the trunk when my mom hugged me again. "I'm happy for you Melon."

"Thanks mom. I can't wait to see him. It's so hard keeping this a secret. I wish I could tell him I get to see him graduate," I sighed, pulling away from her embrace.

We got into the car and she started it up before turning to me. "I think the fact that it's a surprise will make him even happier when you're there."

I nodded in agreement and texted Ace to let him know I had landed and was on the way to our new home.

It was a two story, contemporary type of home. It had three bedroom and two and a half bathrooms. Ace had explained it to me as the perfect place for us. When I had asked him why, he had told me it was perfect for starting a family.

At the time, I had choked on my breath at the thought of having children at twenty-two. But after seeing the house in person, I could see why he had said it in the first place, It was sort of like his parents' house, all white picket fence vibes. I never thought I would live in a house like this. And it immediately made me want to have babies and raise them here.

I walked inside with both of my suitcases and saw boxes already sitting in the hallway. I knew they must have been some of the things Ace and I had ordered online for the house. I set everything down and started going through the boxes.

Some of them were plates and bowls and kitchen things, others were for various rooms like the living room and our bedroom. The large sectional couch was already set in the living room so I sat there and started unpacking as much as I could. Most of the big pieces of furniture were already put together in their correct spots.

Before unpacking though, I gave myself a tour. Our bedroom was, obviously, the biggest and most elaborate. We had an ensuite bathroom and a walk in closet, a luxury I had never had before. I already knew which room would be the first room we used for a baby eventually.

After a long night of facetimeing Ace in our new home and the start of the unpacking process, I went to bed, alone, in our large bed.

Two weeks later, Ace's family and I were headed up to Sacramento for the graduation. I sat in the audience as Anna, Austin and the now twelve year old Noah were greeting Ace. Originally, I

supposed to go over there with them, but then figured it would be even more surprising if he found out I was there as he walked the stage.

Eventually, the graduation began and I shifted in my seat nervously. Luckily, Ace's name was called early in the graduation with the last name Craige. I stood up with his family and whistled and yelled loud praises. But louder than them, I screamed, "that's my boyfriend!" I saw him whip his head toward the audience.

When his eyes settled on me, his smile widened so much I was worried it would get stuck there. He almost tripped over his gown so he accepted his diploma quickly and made it off the stage. He wasn't allowed to leave the area until after everyone was called so he sat back down in his seat; but he kept turning back to look at me every few minutes, smiling at me like I was the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

After the entire ordeal was over, the graduates made their way out to their family and friends. I spotted Ace looking around for us and called him over. "Ace!"

He broke into a run until he crashed into me, wrapping his arms tight around me. I squeezed him right back, closing my eyes. After a long embrace, he pulled back and placed a kiss on my lips and then pressed little kisses all over my face. I giggled and pulled his lips back to mine for a few seconds.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at home, unpacking," he murmured, kissing me again.

I shook my head. "I've been doing that for two weeks. This is more important to me."

"Well now I feel bad. You got to see me graduate, I didn't get to go to yours," Ace frowned sadly.

I smiled. "You had finals. It's not like you could fly across the country for one day and then come back for your finals."

"I know, but I wish I could have. Anyway, I'm so happy you're here," he squeezed me into his arms again.

We all went out to dinner at Ace's favorite restaurant and had dinner before we headed to the hotel. I had rented a room for me but Ace insisted that I come stay at his apartment for the night. So Noah got to sleep in his own hotel room for the night.

Ace shared his apartment with his friend, Kayden but apparently he was staying with his girlfriend in her apartment since her roommate moved out. We would have the whole apartment to ourselves, thank god.

I hadn't so much as kissed him since January, let alone anything else. We quickly made our way to his place and immediately started taking off our clothes. As soon as I was only in my lace bra and underwear set, Ace stopped us.

"You're seriously going to make me wait?" I breathed heavily.

He chuckled and stood from his couch, where we had ended up; poor couch. He was shirtless as he walked into the hallway, leaving me alone to stare at his disappearing back. I lifted my eyebrows in confusion when he walked back in, hands behind his back.

"What are you up to?" I asked him, quizzingly.

He rocked back on his heels in front of me. "Nothing." He sat down next to me and pushed back my wild hair. "I love you."

"I love you too. Now what's going on?"

"I wasn't going to do this until we were both home, but considering you are my home, I think it's appropriate," he paused, taking a deep breath.

Oh my god.

"I'm in love with you and I've been in love with you for four years. We handled long distance for most of our relationship, so I know we can get through anything. I'm going to spend the rest of my life falling more in love with you Madison Grey. I promised you once that I would change your name, would you let me?"

I stared at him in disbelief. Was he proposing to me? I mean, there was no ring and he hadn't actually said the words yet. Maybe he was just-

"Mad?"

"Yeah," I whispered.

He pulled out a small, velvet box from behind him.

Oh my god.

"I'm asking you to marry me, sweetheart," he explained, a knowing smile on his face.

"Oh my god," I whispered, staring at the ring. It wasn't huge, knowing it wasn't my style. It was a single oval diamond with a gold band; it was gorgeous. "Yes! Of course!"

Ace smiled and slid the ring onto my finger. I squealed and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling him in. He chuckled and embraced me, letting me have my freak out. "Can we go back to making out?" He asked me, holding me out in front of him.

"Shut up!" I yelled, making him laugh and kiss me. I let him.

"Have you seen a tall man, light brown hair, green eyes, ye tall?" I shouted, going on my tiptoes to try and demonstrate my husband's height. The random stranger looked at me as if I had grown my brain outside of my body and shook his head. "Nevermind," I sighed.

"What?!" They shouted back.

I shook my head and yelled, "Nothing!" They gave me one last weird look before they scattered away, probably off to tell their friends about the weird girl that tried to talk to them.

Me. That weird girl would be me.

I shrugged and started looking around again, trying to locate Ace who had left me standing with my best friend over half an hour ago to get us both drinks, even though I didn't really want one. And after Kimmy started making out with Raze, a funky combination those two were together, I know, I got curious as to the whereabouts of my husband.

I went into the foreign kitchen of a stranger's home, where most of the alcohol was placed but he wasn't there. I had knocked on bathroom doors and had been met with a few very awkward first greetings, but no Ace. I wasn't exactly worried about anything in particular, I was just lonely and now, thanks to him leaving me, bored.

My best friend was my favorite person to be around, when she wasn't making out with my husband's best friend. And it seemed like that was all that they did this winter since they came home for Christmas.

Imagine going over to your best friend's family home to welcome her back, only to find her half naked with the man you had seen throw up an entire box worth of pizza rolls, on top of her. I had shrieked, literally; but not in disgust or anger, with happiness.

I had been trying to get those two together since the summer before we left for college. Kimmy had claimed that she didn't want to start anything right before moving across the country to New York and Raze had told Ace that he didn't want a "strings attached" relationship. Now, over five years later, my plan was finally in the works.

They claimed that they were only friends with no strings type of deal, but that was complete bologna. Kimmy Ford and Raze Park were going to be together by the time Kimmy went back home in New York in mid January. I would make sure of it.

But in order for that to happen, I needed to give the two of them alone time, to get to know each other again. That meant, I was alone on New Years Eve, looking through a large crowd for my

disappearing act of a husband, ten minutes before the metaphorical ball dropped and all the kissing started.

I was not going to miss out on the chance to kiss Ace, even if I had done just that every single day for the past year and a half. I had this entire plan for the night; leave Lilli and Ryder alone so they could do what all new couples did, participate in an extensive amount of PDA: check.

And then go off somewhere quiet with my husband and kiss him at midnight and then tell him some news that would rock the start of the new year.

I was beginning to get frustrated when I realized I had been going in circles for almost twenty minutes, trying to find Ace. I took a seat on a couch and watched as people danced and drank and kissed their dates, or strangers. I checked my phone to see if I had missed any calls or texts, nada.

Where the fuck was my husband?

I made my way back over to Kimmy and Raze and waited until they pulled their mouths away from each others. "Are you okay Maddie?" Kimmy asked me, out of breath and lipstick smeared across her check, and Raze's.

"I can't find Ace. I've been looking for over twenty minutes. He told me he was getting us drinks almost an hour ago," I frowned, trying not to cry of frustration.

Raze squinted and me and shook his head. "What are you talking about? He told me he was gonna go get some fresh air and sit by the lake?"

"You're kidding..." I deadpanned, glancing over at Kimmy, who shrugged. "Ugh, I can't believe I married that," I groaned, already walking away from the two of them to go down the lake. We were at some lake house Raze's friend owned and we had all been invited to stay the weekend.

Of course he would be down by the lake, of all the places I looked, he was in the one place I didn't think to look. Typical Ace Craige move.

I stormed my way down to the lake, which wasn't far from the house at all. I could still hear the party raging inside. By the time I saw him, everyone in the house was counting down from 10. But I couldn't care less at that moment because all I wanted to do was yell at my husband for making me worried and angry, two emotions I hadn't felt until 20 seconds before this.

He saw me coming toward me and he smiled, standing up from the side of the lake and met me in the middle. "Ace James Craige you have no idea how angry I am at-"

Everyone screamed, "Happy New Year!"

And Ace took my face in his hands and kissed me.

I melted into his touch and kissed him back, obviously. I smiled into the kiss and ran my hands through his hair, as I often did when he kissed me like that. When we finally pulled away from each other, Ace smoothed his hands down my hair, which had most likely been messed up from his hands in the first place.

"So, what's your new year's resolution?" I asked, coming back to my plan.

He stared at me and smiled sweetly, "keeping my wife happy."

I rolled my eyes, "kiss ass."

"Can I change my resolution to that?"

"No."

He snapped, "dang it."

I giggled and reached down, grabbing his hands in mine, hoping he would ask me the same question as I had asked him. He got the hint. "What about you, sweetheart? What's your goal for the new year?"

"To push out a baby," I answered quietly, watching as his face went from confused to complete shock.

His eyes widened considerably and his mouth hung open awkwardly. "What are you saying? What baby?"

I pointed down at my flat stomach. "This one."

"No way," he sounded in disbelief. "When did that happen?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You know what you did," I answered, my voice going up an octave.

He smirked. "Yeah." Then he glanced down at my belly and knelt down on the ground. He turned me by my hips, so he could see my stomach from a side view. He ran his hand over my shirt covered belly and smiled. "There's a baby in there?"

"There is," I nodded. "By this time next year, we'll have a baby in our arms."

"Holy shit! Best New Years party ever!" Ace stood up and kissed me on the lips once again, warming me from the inside, out.

"No way in hell am I naming my kid that," my husband told me for the tenth time that day.

I scowled. "Why not? Daisy is an adorable name."

"I'm not naming my kid after a flower," Ace shook his head.

I raised an eyebrow. "Your wife is named Madison,"

"And your name is beautiful. But I'm not changing my mind," Ace confirmed.

I frowned, but I wasn't really upset. I was only throwing out names that I had written down as possible choices. There were plenty others on my list. He had to at least love one of them.

"Then how about you throw out some names if you're so picky," I laid back on our bed, propped up on a bunch of pillows.

Ace reaches out and took my hand and then kissed my knuckles. "Alright. How about Danielle?"

"It's cute but I don't know. I can't see myself calling her that," I admitted.

He nodded. "Emma?"

"Too popular. I don't want 5 other Emma's in her classes with her." Okay. Maybe we were both pretty picky.

Ace sighed and plopped back on our bed. "Baaaaby, we've been going at this for weeks. And we're nowhere near close to finding her a name."

"I'm sorry! It's just one of the most important parts of this. I can't name her something I'm not 100% in love with," I sat up, with a little difficulty, being seven months pregnant.

Ace sat up with me and placed his hand on my belly. "What do you say, kid? What do you think your name should be?"

"Daisy!" I piped quietly, pretending to be the voice of the baby.

He shot me a glare. "Excuse me, I was talking to my daughter."

"She's in my stomach. She's talking through me," I smiled, knowing I wasn't convincing him of anything.

He squinted. "Not sure that's how it works, sweetheart. It would be cool though."

"You dork," I lightly smacked his arm, giggling. "Okay, what about Luna?"

He smiled. "I like Luna. I had a dog named Luna growing up."

"Nevermind then. I don't want you to look at our baby and think of a dog," I basically shuddered at the thought.

He rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't think that."

"Well we obviously aren't going to come up with a name right now. How about we go get dinner?" I suggested.

Ace laughed. "Baby names or food. That's all you think about, huh?"

"I will always be thinking about food. It's not my fault; I can't help it!" I pointed to my bump, blaming the baby.

He leaned forward and kissed my cheek before getting up. He held out his hand for me and helped me stand up, even though I could do it on my own. "Where did you want to eat?"

"Anywhere honestly. Chick Fil A sounds so good right now though," I gave my husband puppy dog eyes.

Ace sighed. "That's a twenty-five minute drive."

"I'm carrying your baby for 9 months, the least you could do is drive us to Chick Fil A when we crave it," I smiled, knowing I would win this battle.

He glared at me but the edges of his lips curled up. "Alright, you're coming with me though, right? None of this "I'm too tired to sit in a car for an hour"" stuff."

I laughed a little. "Yes, I will go with you. Otherwise I have to wait an hour to eat and I just can't do that."

"That's the only reason? Not to be in a small, confined space with your sexy husband?" Ace winked at me.

I rolled my eyes and moved over to our closet, trying to find a change of clothes that weren't sweatpants and a baggy shirt. "Oh no, you've found me out. That's been my plan this whole time," I told him sarcastically.

"Just keep your hands to yourself this time, okay? We don't need a repeat of last weekend," he was only half kidding.

I shrugged, settling on a pair of maternity leggings and another tee-shirt, but with a tighter fit. "It's not my fault you can't pay attention to the road at the same time."

"You know, I'm pretty sure it's against the law to-"

I turned around and cut him off with a quick kiss. "Don't tempt me to do it again," I warned him.

When we had successfully made it back home from Chick Fil A, I was stuffed. That being said, I still could totally scarf down another carton of their waffle fries. They were amazing.

"Chick Fil A was a good suggestion. I think I would die for Chick Fil A sauce," Ace joked. I hoped.

I nodded, agreeing with him. "And now that we've had our food, we can go back to baby names!"

"Ughhhhh," Ace whined.

I scowled at him. "Rude! I just wanna have something to call her other than baby."

"I know, I do too. Alright, I have one! What about Ava?" He suggested.

I smiled. "I like that one! It's cute! I'll add it to the maybe list."

"Macey? We could call her mace," he smirked.

I tilted my head. "Kimmy suggested that. Because Mace is our ship name."

"She would be named after the both of us," Ace nodded.

I shook my head. "No way."

"damn," he sighed under his breath.

"Can we just go online and do a random generator with baby names? Maybe that will help with good suggestions," I offered.

Ace walked over to our desk and grabbed his laptop, opening it up. "Let's let google do its magic."

The first name that popped up was Gertrude. I don't know who in their right mind decided to do that to us, but it was plain wrong.

The next name was Stacey. It reminded me too much of the song.

We continued on, clicking through random names and I was beginning to lose hope in naming our daughter anything at all. Nothing that popped up even remotely sounded like a good name for her.

In a fit of anger I reached over and slapped my hand over the keys, trying to stop Ace from continually clicking the next button. In my attempt, I had been the one to click next.

Ace looked over at me, confused by my sudden anger. But my anger disappeared quickly when I glanced at his screen. The name was staring at me right in the eyes and I couldn't look away.

I nudged my husband and pointed at his computer, needing him to see what I was seeing, hoping his reaction was similar to mine. When he did see it, his eyes widened and his lips parted just a little bit.

That's how I was able to tell that we had found our name.

Ella.