

Chapter One

I flip the blinker in my Tahoe and turn into my parents' driveway. It's too long compared it to the size of the house. I pass what seems like a mile of overly manicured shrubbery and perfectly kept trees before I finally reach the end, parking in the circle in front of the door.

Sometimes it reminds me of some old movies I've seen, when they pan the camera out down an overly long drive and the scene opens up into some massive mansion. My parents' house isn't a bit like that. It's a nice house, don't get me wrong, but it's no plantation. Dark red brick, two story, five bedroom house. My childhood home.

My mom's red Camaro is parked in front of the brick steps that lead to a set of red French doors on the front of the house. Shutting off my engine, I sit and stare off into nothing, wishing I were anywhere but here. I spent all day yesterday working on this project. Now it sits in a manila envelope on the seat beside me mocking me.

Being in my last semester of college, this project isn't just about my grade. It also happens to be a stepping stone to proving to my parents, my mother in particular, that I can run the family restaurant I've been managing the restaurant my grandfather opened in nineteen-forty-three. *Sorrisi*, it means smile in Italian.

I wasted my whole Friday evening yesterday at my friend Micah's house. He's an engineer and a math whiz, so I figured using him to check my figures and polish my report would be wise. Now I get to present the idea to my parents.

Checking my appearance in the rearview mirror, a knot forms in my stomach. I don't get along with my mother. She makes me crazy. A common problem I understand. Lots and lots of people don't get along with their family, right?

Just wait until you meet mine.

I put makeup on, just so I don't have to hear her backhanded insults when I walk in with a bare face. God forbid I pass up the opportunity to paint my face in case Mr. Right comes along. My mass of black curls is pulled back into a puffy ponytail.

I can make my hair look great when I want to, but usually I just pull it up and walk around looking like a wild haired mess. Actually, I'm really good at things like makeup and hair, putting clothes together. Not that my mom would know. I swear she thinks I walk around looking homeless, unless she's up my ass yelling at me. It doesn't help my case that my older sister used to be a model.

Why can't you be like Ashley?

Why don't you make more of yourself like your sister?

The ninety five degree heat makes me regret the long sleeve purple shirt that I put on this morning. My mom hasn't ever seen the tattoo that's on my shoulder, and I'm not about to change that today.

Grabbing the folder, I get out of the car. The heat of the day hits me like a slap in the face and it's only ten in the morning.

You have to love Texas summers. Hahaha – no, you don't, they suck.

As soon as I walk in the door, I'm greeted by a *Gone with the Wind* type staircase, on a smaller scale, of course. It's in all white with black handrails and breathtakingly beautiful. Ignoring it, I take a left through the formal dining room, back to the kitchen where I'm sure to find my Mom sitting with a cup of coffee at this time of day.

Sure enough, she sits at the large oak kitchen table chatting on the phone. She smiles at me when I come in. My mom looks like an older version of me. Her black hair is straightened and shorter than mine. We have the same green eyes.

I slap the folder down on the table, help myself to a cup of coffee and wait for her to get off the phone.

Sitting with my creamy coffee, I stare at her across the table. She laughs at whatever the person on the other end of the line says. In patient silence I sit, as she ignores the fact that I'm waiting.

Yeah, just keep talking, that's fine. It isn't like this is important or anything. Glancing around, I wonder where my Dad is, he was supposed to be here too.

With the delicate touch of a red fingernail, she ends the phone call and takes a long sip of her coffee.

"Where's Dad? Isn't he coming?"

Her eyes drift slowly over me; her gaze settling on my hair and she makes a face as if there is a bad taste in her mouth. I glance down at myself.

"I'm sure you and I can handle it, Adrienne. You know, just because I'm your mother doesn't mean that you should not dress to make a presentation. Dress for success, I've told you this your entire life. I don't understand why you choose to ignore me and walk in here in this state."

"What is wrong with this? It isn't a board meeting, we're in the kitchen for God's sake." I grumble, my hand moving to my hair on its own accord.

"You just never learn. If you would put on slacks, get rid of those jeans. No one should ever see you in jeans. Your hair is always a mess. How can anyone ever take you seriously?"

I bite my lip, swallowing a dozen hateful words that would never be appropriate for me to toss back at my mom. Swallowing more coffee, I stifle the anger even while the question floats in the back of my mind.

Do I really look that bad?

"Dad is supposed to be here, where is he? Should I wait for him?"

I change the subject. If I don't all we will do is fight and may end up blowing this. If I can get her to sign my form for my professor, he'll give me extra credit for the real life application of my proposal.

"He has a previous engagement. He isn't going to make it, I'll look at it."

A previous engagement. She talks to me like I'm a business acquaintance and not his daughter. I let out a sigh.

"You mean he blew me off for tennis. Just say it, Mom." I sip my coffee, rolling my eyes.

"You know how much it means to him."

"More to him than meeting his daughter apparently," I mutter, knowing she hears me. "I'm running his business; you would think that he would show an interest."

In the business that is; I think I would have a heart attack if he actually paid any attention to me. Let's not be ridiculous now.

"He knows that you have his business sense. He isn't worried."

I'm past believing her, way past. I know he just couldn't be bothered. Frankly, I'm surprised she didn't have an urgent nail appointment or something to get to herself.

"Whatever."

My friends all tell me to just walk away, I can find another restaurant to run. Simple fact is, I love the place. *Sorrissi* is home to me and I'm willing to deal with my parents to stay. I'm bringing in money and it has freed them both up for semi-retirement, so it works for them too.

"Adrienne, why don't you let me take you to see my hairdresser? She can put a treatment on your hair to get that awful kink out."

Lovely. No, *Hi how are you?* Or maybe, *Adrienne, I'm proud of you for what you are doing with my restaurant.* Nope. Just, *you look like hell, let me fix that for you because you don't know how to dress yourself.*

"I like my hair, Mom." I meet my mother's eyes across the table with a huff.

"You could be so pretty if you would just--"

"I don't get any complaints from anyone but you."

"If you would put in an effort, I wouldn't have to deal with the embarrassment of explaining to everyone why you are alone and can't find a date for your cousin's wedding. What am I going to tell them?" She waves her hand at me as if my appearance makes its own excuse, and I'm going to die alone because I have curly hair.

Here we go with this again. I set down my cup with a bit too much enthusiasm, sloshing coffee all over the table.

"Damn it." I jump up to grab a paper towel. "A date for a week long wedding trip in Kentucky? Really, Mom?" I say, blotting up the coffee while my Mom makes no move to help me. She might break a nail you know. I'm trying not to glare, not to be a bitch, but I can feel myself getting more and more pissed off.

"What am I supposed to do? Ask some random stranger to go away with me for a week so you won't look bad?" I snap, throwing the wet towels at the trash can.

"Adrienne, if you would just make an effort you would have a boyfriend. Look at your sister..."

I let out a laugh. My sister is four years older than me at twenty five. She ran off to New York and became a model; now she has turned agent. Last I heard, she was talking about starting up her own agency.

"You mean Ashley, who sold her soul to the highest bidder? The sister we haven't seen in two years? Why would I want to be like her, Mother?" I don't know why I bother arguing with her. It's a waste of time.

"She just wanted to be successful, Adrienne. I don't see why you wouldn't want that for yourself."

I sit, glaring at my mother, itching to just walk out. This coffee cup sure would look nice smashed against the wall, with coffee everywhere. Seething, I cross my arms over my chest. I don't even want to do this damn project anymore.

They have no sense of family togetherness; it's all ambition, money. The funny thing is, my parents like to pretend they have millions. They don't. It's all a big joke. I don't know who she thinks she's fooling. Honestly, I think she's fooling herself more than anyone else.

Boyfriend. I almost let out an angry laugh at the thought. I don't date. My time is spent at work, at school or with my friends. I prefer to keep it that way. If I date, then all I have to do is worry about the day that I'll have to explain my ignorant family and the hateful way I'm treated.

"If you would just..." she starts again.

“Mom, I have a boyfriend.” The lie comes out before I can even think about it.

Her eyes light up.

What. The. Hell. What on earth just came out of my mouth?

“You do?”

“Yeah. For a while now. So get off my back.”

It seems that some unknown entity has taken over my body and is controlling my voice from behind a curtain somewhere. Is the Wizard of Oz here? Why did I just tell her that I have a boyfriend?

“For how long? He is coming to the wedding. I’ll let Melissa right now.” She immediately pulls out her phone and shoots off a text to my cousin before I can stop her. “Why did you give me such a hard time about dating when you had a boyfriend this whole time?” she adds.

Shit balls.

“Eight months. Mom, look—” Oh my God, there it is again. Maybe I’m possessed. I’ve never lied to my mom about something like this.

She doesn’t question me further about why I argued with her about a date. Since she’s smiling now, seems that she has accepted my news as truth. So I’m going to let the question go without answering it.

“Melissa is thrilled. I can’t wait to meet him. Tell me all about him. Why have you not told me about him sooner?”

“Mom, can we talk about this later? I have to get this done. You can meet him at the wedding.”

Yeah, probably not, since he is imaginary and everything.

“Fine, fine. Yes, let’s get down to business. Come here and tell me about this proposal you have for adding delivery service to the restaurant.” Mom pats the chair next to her, a warm look in her eyes as she grabs the folder and opens it.

I have three weeks to find a boyfriend. What the hell did I just do?

The gears in my brain are grinding as I pull into my friend’s driveway after my morning with my lovely mother. I see Chloe’s black Honda already parked here.

As I jump out of my SUV, the roar of the lawn mower sounds in my ears and the smell of freshly cut grass hits me. I take a deep breath as I cross the yard. Someone should find a way to bottle this smell.

The house is on at least an acre of land. I wonder who’s stuck mowing today as I go in without knocking. I march right through the living room and into the kitchen where I find Chloe and Clint sitting at the table grading papers. Being brother and sister, these two have been in my life since I can remember. She and I share an apartment now. My friends make up for the cluster fuck that is my family. I can’t imagine my life without them.

Clint is a high school biology teacher. The year just ended and he has his sister helping him grade finals so he can get grades submitted in time. The kitchen is still in the décor that Micah’s late aunt chose years ago, before she died and passed the house to him. Bright yellow floral wallpaper and stark white cabinets ache to be redecorated, but the boys don’t seem interested in home improvement. The modern glass table they sit at sticks out against the old style surroundings of the kitchen.

Chloe smiles up at me, sticking the end of her red pen in her mouth as I sit heavily in the chair beside her. Her long blonde hair is pulled back into a messy bun. She watches me with happy blue eyes.

“So how did it go with Mom?”

I blow out a breath and shake my head. “Ugh, what a mess.”

What am I going to do? All the way here I tried to think up a reason why I can’t go to the wedding that my mom would believe, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

“Didn’t she like the idea? You worked so hard on it. What about your dad?”

I glance over at Clint, who has yet to look up from the pile of test papers. His blond shaggy hair is covered with a backwards Turner High School baseball cap, as he makes furious red marks all over some poor tenth grader’s final exam. His hair is cut in such a way that, without the cap, it usually hangs in his face, framing stark blue eyes that always seem to see to the very core of me. I used to tease him about all the little high school girls being in love with the smoking hot Biology teacher. Until one day, he left his phone at my apartment. I met him at lunch time on the lawn. I swear to God, there was a cluster of girls whispering and giggling with little cartoon hearts popping over their heads.

“My dad didn’t show up. She spent most of the time I was there riding me about not being Ashley and not having a boyfriend.”

“She’ll get over it. If only she could be nice one time,” Chloe says, tapping the pen on the table.

“Yeah, well she’s all worked up over Melissa’s wedding. It’s going to end up being some sort of twisted family reunion, and she’ll have a stroke if I show up alone. This is the reason I don’t date.”

Chloe watches me with concern. I know she hates that I push men away. She wants to see me with someone, but she came from a happy home and she just doesn’t understand why I feel the way I do about it. It’s just too hard. I tell her that I’m happy the way I am, but she wants to see me fall in love. I tell her I’m only twenty-one, let’s not be crazy. Honestly, I just don’t see it happening anytime in the near future. Things are just easier this way. I can be my happy, crazy self and not have to worry about anyone.

Don’t get me wrong, I’ve dated. I’m not a virgin. The risk is too great for me to justify letting them in anymore.

I had a boyfriend in high school, I really liked that guy too. But my mom was too much for him. She was always pushing me and she would get in his business. He ended up dumping me. He told me he liked me but he couldn’t deal with my parents, said I should find him someday when I’m “all grown up.” I never told him that I knew what really happened. I kept those tidbits to myself. Although, I did damn near pull the hair out of my sister’s head when I found out that she had slept with him.

“She did like the delivery idea. She told me to try it for sixty days and evaluate the profits and we will decide on making it permanent. She warmed up after I told her I have a boyfriend,” I admit as casually as I can muster.

My friend’s eyes grow wide. She knows all too well that I don’t.

“You told her that?”

I wince, nodding. “Yeah, I didn’t even mean to. I was pissed. It just came out. I told her that I’ve been in a relationship for eight months just to shut her up. Problem is now she’s expecting my made-up boyfriend at the wedding with me. I do actually want to go. I haven’t seen Melissa since she moved away.” I brace myself for what I know is coming.

“Adrienne, what the hell? What are you going to do now? You’ll have to just come clean and deal with her. Now the whole wedding will be more miserable for you than it would have been if you had just left it alone.”

"I know, she's going to tell everyone I lied. She texted Melissa the minute it came out of my mouth. I didn't get a chance to take it back. Chloe, what am I going to do? I can't even think up a reason to skip it. Maybe I can get the flu or something." I groan in frustration, "She'll be horrible. She rides my ass about not being like Ashley, now she'll just be worse."

Clint looks up from his papers, his blue eyes settle on me.

"Straighten your hair, Adrienne, put on some make up, Adrienne." I mock her voice.

"I'll do it," he says matter of factly.

My eyes fly to him. He's watching me unsmiling as he sits back in the chair, crossing his muscled arms. Did I just hear him right?

"What?"

He holds my gaze and smiles at me across the table.

"I'll do it, I'll go with you for the wedding and pretend to be your boyfriend."

I could kiss his feet for this, but then a question presents itself.

"But my family knows you, they know we're friends."

He shrugs as if it's not a problem.

"So what? Friends fall in love all the time, that's easy to play off. I know you, it won't be hard to convince anyone."

"The wedding is in Kentucky, Clint. You would have to go with me." It's a long way to go. I wouldn't be upset if he changed his mind. I wouldn't have even asked him to do something like this for me.

"It's fine, I'll go with you. I'm off for the summer."

I let out a yelp and jump to my feet. Grabbing him by his broad shoulders, I shake him. He laughs at me.

"Are you sure that you don't have some woman you're seeing that's going to come rip my hair out when we get back?" I say, eyeing him with mock suspicion.

Clint is a ladies man, we all know it. Charming, handsome, and cocky. The last thing I need is some crazy woman coming after me.

"No, I'm free and clear right now. Nothing to worry about, I promise."

"Well, in that case, you just saved my life. Clint, how can I ever thank you?" I stand over him. He grins up at me lazily.

"It's not a problem. I don't want you to worry about your mom and dad. I'm here for you, sweetheart," he says, laughing again as I hug him.

I finally move to my seat when Micah walks in the back door. He is covered in grass clippings, his T-shirt is damp with sweat, dark hair stuck to his head. The fourth in our group.

"Next weekend it's your turn," he says to Clint, grabbing a water out of the fridge. "What's going on in here?" He drains the bottle, pulling off dark sunglasses.

"Clint is her boyfriend now." Chloe laughs. Micah grins down at us.

"Well, you made quick work of that, just the other day you were saying-"

"Shut up, man." Clint cuts him off. "It's just to get her mom off her back. I'm going with her to the wedding as her boyfriend."

Chloe giggles and Micah grins as I watch the exchange with suspicious eyes.

"What did you say?" I ask as Clint throws his pen at Micah and shakes his head.

"He is just messing with you." Clint glares at his sweaty friend.

Micah leans over and whispers something in Chloe's ear. They both glance in my direction and smile.

“I’m going to hurt one of you if you don’t tell me what’s so damn funny,” I say, unable to keep the smile off my face.

Micah grins as he heads for the door. “I’m sure you’ll find out. “

I watch Clint get up to retrieve his pen from the floor, his eyes fall on me as he stands up. He is six feet tall with a lean muscular build. Broad shoulders and bulging biceps, dark blue eyes. His T-shirt clings to him in all the right places. I bet he is going to look fantastic in a tuxedo.

These last two weeks have flown by. I leave in a couple of days for Kentucky, and I waited until yesterday to contact my professors about the week I’ll be missing.

Nice planning ahead on my part, huh?

I also had to bribe my assistant manager, Claire, with an extra paid day off to work all week for me. I haven’t had a vacation in three years.

After an hour on the phone with my cousin, it’s time to text my pretend boyfriend.

Hey, I have some info for you for the wedding. Hitting send, I open my laptop to see if my professor’s email has come through with my extra work.

I’m waiting, woman. I’m a busy man with no summer job, I can’t wait around for you all day. His sarcasm makes me smile.

You should love this. It’s 4 days, on day 4 is the wedding. We leave on Tuesday. It’s black tie. You have to go get a tux. I’ll have to think of a way to thank him for doing this for me.

Pardon me? A Tux? WTH, woman. Do you realize that it’s Wednesday?

I wince inwardly. I should have done this days ago. Now he has to run out and get a tux. I hope he can find one that fits him properly.

I know. I have to go buy two dresses. One for the rehearsal and one for the wedding. Pack a tie for the family dinner the first night, nice shirt and pants. The second day is more casual, but still around family all day long. I’ll make it up to you.

You love to shop, like you even need a reason to go buy a dress. So I guess my Borat style thong is out then, huh?

I bust out laughing, sitting cross-legged on the couch in the living room. Chloe looks up from her own laptop with a curious smile on her face.

“Texting Clint,” I explain. Returning to her work, she smiles at me.

That would almost be worth bleaching my eyes to see my Mom’s face.

Hey! I would rock that thing. I have buns of steel, baby.

Please put them in pants.

Hahaha!

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I toss my phone aside and eye my friend, who seems engrossed in whatever she’s looking at online.

“Chloe, I need some retail therapy.”

Her eyes meet mine over the top of her computer.

“You always do.”

This is no lie. “I need some wedding stuff. I have to get two new dresses. Let’s study later. I have a ton of crap to read tonight, my professor just sent my assignment list for the week I’m missing.” I groan.

“Okay, fine. But you are buying the Cinnabon this time.” She slaps her computer closed and stands up.

I clap my hands and squeal like a kid on Christmas morning. She laughs at me. I really do love shopping.

"Of course. We will study better after."

Jumping up, I grab our purses and drag her out the door.

The Friday before we leave the four of us are hanging out in a pool hall not too far from our house. I'm watching Chloe and Micah play pool. He beat Clint and she had dibs on winner, so he is sitting with me in the losers' circle.

He plops down beside me, tapping his beer with mine with a smile.

"To losers."

I grin at him. Micah beat me too.

"Hear-hear." I can't remember ever beating him when he is sober.

"So we leave Tuesday morning. I have a question." He takes a long pull off of his Bud Light.

"I'm waiting." I watch him shift in his seat, lazily laying his arm across the back of my chair.

"What about physical contact?"

I meet his stark blue eyes and raise an eyebrow at him.

"Pardon me?"

"Next week. What are we doing there? We're supposed to be together, for a while. I would assume would mean we've... ahem."

Oh, good Lord. I laugh at his smile and roll my eyes.

"Well I'm not having sex with you to make it believable, if that's where you're headed with this," I say, teasing him.

He has never been disrespectful to me, or flirted with me in any way that would ever be taken as inappropriate. I know this isn't what he means. I just can't resist teasing him.

"Okay, stupid," he laughs, poking me in the ribs. "Don't be a smartass. I mean, how comfortable are you with me touching you in front of them? It needs to be believable. I don't want to cross any lines, but at the same time, your hardass mom will need convincing."

"So you won't like honk my boob or motorboat me or anything, right?" I laugh when he chokes on his swig and almost spits it everywhere.

He draws the attention of Micah and Chloe. I pat him on the back and laugh as he struggles to gain composure and breathe again.

"Holy hell. Yeah, I won't do that, but thanks for almost choking me," he says, breathing deep and wiping his eyes where they teared up from his fit.

"I trust you. Do what you think is best. No dry humping though."

He eyes me sideways, still grinning. "Got it, and no boob action. You really know how to take the fun out of something, don't you?"

"You're a funny man."

"I try."

His smiling eyes meet mine, I tap his beer with mine in mock toast.

"Here's to true love."

"True love," he echoes, holding my eyes while he drains the rest.