

## Chapter One

### Indy

“You’re coming out tonight,” my cousin Claire demands, glancing at me in the reflection of her bedroom mirror. A mascara wand hovers in her hand and her tongue peeks out between her lips as she applies a second coat.

I flop back against her bed, staring at the glow stars that decorate her ceiling. We placed them there one summer, over a decade ago, and she’s never taken them down. “I can’t. I have work to catch up on.”

“Too bad. You’re too young and too hot to never get laid.”

I snort, dropping my hand over my face. “I get laid.” My voice is defensive, and as soon as Claire starts laughing, I join in.

I turn my head to meet her eyes in the reflection of the mirror. We’re both sporting goofy grins. She jabs her mascara wand at me in the reflection. “Yeah? When was the last time you did it?”

I groan, yanking my gaze back to the ceiling. At least the glow stars aren’t judgey. I don’t answer Claire’s question aloud but mentally, I tally up the months. There have been seven of them. Seven months since I had sex. It wasn’t even good sex. More comfortable, one last hurrah before I relocate to Boston, see-ya-when-I-see-ya sex with Chris, the guy who conveniently lived down the street and was usually around for a casual hook-up. My closest childhood friend, Aiden, choked on his beer when I told him about my fling with Chris. He still hasn’t stopped teasing me about it.

I wrinkle my nose. Meh, thinking of Chris as my last sexual partner is depressing on several levels.

Six months ago, when I landed in Boston for a new job, as an assistant professor at Brighton University, I swore to myself I’d turn over a new leaf. Now that I am on the tenure-track, I reasoned, I can stop being a self-isolated workaholic. My plan was to embrace the city, meet new people, and not keep myself locked in the library, researching, writing, and publishing. My plan failed.

The bed dips beside me. Claire’s deep blue eyes peer into mine, determined, with just a hint of compassion. “I know you’re working your ass off because you’re intimidated.”

“I’m the youngest assistant professor Brighton’s ever hired.”

“But you’re qualified and competent. You’re prepared for this job, Indy.”

I shrug, not voicing how unprepared I feel. I’ve worked hard to secure this position but now that I have it, I feel a pressure to work even harder to prove that I can keep it. To show the administration that I was the right choice, that even though I’m only twenty-seven, I’m committed to academia.

Claire rolls her eyes. “You may be a prim and proper professor now but—”

“I’m not *that* prim and proper.”

Her lips quiver with laughter. “Indiana, you are my favorite girl cousin.”

“I’m your only girl cousin.”

Claire ignores me. “I can’t let you wallow away into nothing. Besides, I *need* a wing woman. Ever since Savannah abandoned me by gallivanting off to New York—”

“Mike got traded.” I point out that my cousin Savannah, Claire’s older sister, didn’t move by choice. Her husband was traded by the Boston Hawks to the New York Sharks halfway through last hockey season.

Claire dismisses my logic and ticks on her fingers. “And Rielle is too busy working to have a life—”

“She’s up for a promotion,” I cut in, sticking up for Claire’s best friend who has been working around the clock lately. Impressively, even more than me.

Claire glares at me. “My point is, *everyone* is ditching me and you have the shittiest excuse. The academic year started like, five seconds ago—”

“Three weeks.”

“You’re coming out tonight and we’re celebrating,” she concludes, hopping from the bed and striding to her closet. Claire pulls out a short, tight, black dress I would never wear and waves it around. “Put this on.”

I laugh, pulling myself into a seated position, and play along. “What exactly are we celebrating?”

“Your new life. I love you, Indiana, but real talk, workaholic, stressed-out, type-A you is not a good look. You have a real job, which is more than I can say, and you’re in a new city. You need to put yourself out there and mingle a little. Maybe you’ll even meet someone.” She eyes me hopefully, making the dress dance on the hanger.

I offer my cousin a half smile and weigh her words. She got me with the “real job” bit, which I’m sure she did on purpose, knowing my compassionate side would kick in. Since her college graduation in May, Claire’s been freelancing but the work hasn’t been steady. In fact, it’s been so unreliable that she moved back home with my aunt and uncle, which pains her on a cellular level.

She widens her baby blues at me and I groan, dragging myself to stand. But inside, a thrill shoots down my spine. It’s been ages since I’ve had a proper girls’ night with Claire. My cousin is fun, outgoing, and the life of the party. She’s also right. I do need to put myself out there and make some new friends, meet some new people, and socialize like a normal twenty-something.

For the past eight years, school was my entire life. Every semester, I stacked my course load. I spent my summers completing summer sessions on campus and my winter and spring breaks contributing to research projects abroad. Graduating with my PhD in political science in January was my greatest accomplishment until I secured an assistant professor position at Brighton and moved to Boston in April. Since then, I’ve been preparing for this next chapter and now, it’s here. As Claire kindly pointed out, I’m boring and predictable. My social life revolves around my family members and a trusty planner.

If it weren’t for weekly dinners with my family and Claire’s obligatory weekly retail therapy, I probably wouldn’t have gone out at all over the summer. A smile spreads across my face. I deserve a night out, don’t I? Besides, next week, I’ll be back in the classroom and focused on a research trip I’m planning for a handful of students over winter break. I can take this weekend to have a little fun. After all, didn’t I tell my freshman *Intro to Political Theory* the same thing? “Okay.”

Surprise flares in Claire’s eyes. She thrusts the hanger toward me, and when I take it, she lets out a loud whoop. Laughing, I drop the dress on the bed and duck into the bathroom. I study my limp, brown hair, dull green eyes, and plain face. While I’m not unfortunate-looking, I haven’t put much effort into my appearance for a long time and it shows. Jesus, are my eyebrows touching? Cringe. Flipping on the faucet, I scrub my face clean and help myself to Claire’s products, tweezers included. Then, I waltz into Claire’s room and plop down.

“Make me over,” I demand.

Her eyes widen and dazzle, deep blue like sapphires. “Indy, are you sure?”

I nod.

She squeals, “Oh my God. Tonight is going to be the best!”

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Dad and Uncle Joe frown when Claire and I bound down the stairs, but Mom and Aunt Mary smile. The kitchen is already spotless from our weekly family dinner and our parents hold a drink in hand, talking and relaxing the way they have since Mom and Dad followed me to Boston over the summer.

“You look beautiful, Indy,” Mom compliments as Dad scowls at my dress.

Aunt Mary’s grin softens. “Absolutely gorgeous, girls. Where are you headed?”

“The Hawks are having a team kick-off at Firefly,” Claire answers, filling up a glass of water and taking a long sip. “Austin said we could come.”

“Oh, good.” Dad breathes a sigh of relief that Austin, Claire’s brother and the captain of the NHL team the Boston Hawks, will be present at the club tonight.

“Austin will keep an eye on them,” Uncle Joe says, although I think he’s trying to convince himself more than Dad.

I roll my eyes, stashing my driver’s license and a debit card into the small purse Claire lent me. “You realize we’re adults, right? I’m going to be twenty-eight in a few months.”

“And I’m moving out as soon as I can afford it,” Claire announces.

Dad chuckles. “But you’ll always be my little girl, Indy.”

Claire snickers.

“Besides, I know hockey players.” His tone turns hard, no doubt remembering all the wild escapades of his long career in the NHL. Dad, a hall of fame inductee and lead scorer for the Tampa Reds, can recount a staggering number of failed marriages and relationships gone wrong from his years in the league. His and Mom’s enduring thirty-plus-year marriage is somewhat of an anomaly.

“No worries there,” I scoff.

Aunt Mary stands, brushing her fingers through my hair. “Have fun tonight, Indy. You’ve been working so hard. You deserve a night out.”

Mom lifts her wine glass in agreement. “Be safe, girls. If you need a ride—”

“Our Lyft is here,” Claire interrupts, clutching my forearm and leading me toward the door. “If we need anything, we’ll call,” she reassures our parents, who still treat us like kids, probably

because Claire is a wild card and I'm an only child. "I'm sleeping at Indy's tonight," she hollers over her shoulder as we slip outside.

Once we're settled in the Lyft and heading toward downtown Boston, Claire grins at me. "Wait 'til you see some of the Hawks' players." She fans herself.

I roll my eyes. "You know I'm not into hockey players. Not anymore." My first love, first heartbreak, first everything is now a defenseman on the Vancouver Eagles. After our very painful and public breakup two years ago, I swore off hockey players for good. Since then, I haven't been tempted once and I doubt tonight will be any different. If there's anything I've learned from being Dad's daughter and then dating Jace, it's that the stable and reliable lifestyle I crave doesn't mix with the NHL.

"Jace was a dick. Not all hockey players are like him."

I ignore her statement. "You can have your pick, Claire."

Her eyes dim and she turns to look out the window.

Uh-oh. For years, Claire has secretly pined over Austin's best friend and Hawks left winger Easton Scotch. Easton and his brother Noah have been fixtures at my aunt and uncle's home since bunking with Austin at hockey camp when we were all teenagers. Every summer, during our family trip to Boston, the Scotch brothers were present. Crushing on your brother's best friend is never easy, but with Easton's trip to rehab last year, Claire's complicated feelings became even messier.

I elbow her in the ribs until she turns toward me. "How's he doing?"

She sighs, knowing I'm asking about Easton. Other than me, Rielle, and Savannah, no one knows that Claire has been hung up on East for all these years. "Fuck if I know. He's barely spoken to me over the past year. Not since he came home from rehab."

"Have you seen him since the season ended?"

She shakes her head, her expression guarded.

Sensing she doesn't want to talk about Easton when we're about to embark on a night out, I ask, "Are you sure Austin doesn't mind that we're coming tonight?"

Claire laughs. "Oh, he's going to be pissed."

"What? You said—"

"Yeah, so our dads wouldn't worry. There's no way Austin wants us at Firefly tonight. Not when the team is getting together for the first time since the off-season. They're going to be

partying hard and the puck bunnies are going to be swarming.” She grins mischievously, shrugging one shoulder. “But once we’re there, he’s not going to turn us away.”

I shake my head at my cousin, impressed. “You’re evil.”

“I’m resourceful. We’re out for the night, we’re going to have fun, and if we’re lucky, we’re going to *get* lucky.”

Tossing my head back, I laugh. Claire doesn’t join in.

“Wait, you’re serious?”

She smirks in response.