Patting my truck, I drop my arm around Ann’s shoulders and head toward school. We only have ten minutes until the bell. “So why is Kelly on your case about Prom?”

She rolls her eyes, but the tiny flinch in the expression gives away how much whatever her witch of a step-sister said bothers her. “According to her, I’ll never get a date, especially not in time to win the custom outfits from the fundraiser raffle, and if I *do* find someone desperate enough to go with me I’ll have to do it knowing they’re probably only settling because everyone else was taken.”

I stop short, jaw hanging open. “She said *what*?”

The shrug Ann gives me is just as unconvincing as her eye-roll was a moment ago. “And fair warning, Brando? She’s on the prowl for a date and you made her shortlist.”

“Why?” Damn, that almost came out as a whine. But seriously! This girl’s persistence is practically the definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over again and somehow expecting different results. “How in hell can I make it *any* clearer that I want nothing to do with her?”

“She thinks you’re playing hard to get.” Ann tilts her head back to look up at me, her expression a little hard to read.

“For twelve years?” I’ve known Kelly longer than I’ve known Ann—she grew up on the island with me where Ann didn’t show up until fifth grade—but even when she wasn’t the obsessive vamp she’s become in the last few years, I still didn’t like her. She had a mean streak that got a thousand times worse when her dad left her mom.

“Yep.” Ann crosses her arms. “It’s not just her, though. Apparently you are officially the number one most eligible and sought after prize on the Prom market at the moment.”

Groaning, I run my hand over my short hair. “That is the stupidest—I mean, I have rules! Everyone knows my rules!” I count them off on my fingers as I go. “No holidays, no family occasions, no school functions! There are only three of them! They’re not that hard to remember.”

“Yeah, hun, but it’s *Prom*. I think at least half of your old girlfriends are hoping you’re going to break your three little rules just this once.” She grins and this time it’s the smile of someone who’s known me well past long enough to take immense pleasure in my current suffering. “I think someone started a betting pool to see who finally breaks you down.”

“You didn’t.” Her smile doesn’t change. My blood runs cold. “Annaliese Maria Devalo, I will hereforth and forever disown you if you have placed a wager on this witch hunt.”

She laughs, the evil thing. “I love it when you go all misusing words. ‘Henceforth,’ Brando. ‘Henceforth.’”

“Well here, hence, or whatever! Tell me you didn’t.”

“I didn’t. But it is happening. There are at least fifteen girls in the running.

“Fifteen?” When did my voice get that squeaky?

Oh, dammit, dammit, *dammit*. Yesterday, this would have been funny. This would have been freaking *hilarious*. Now, after my promise to Momma, this ain’t so funny anymore. Because I *am* going to have to ask *someone* and if there’s already this much furor over that potential decision it’s only going to get worse when I pick one from the horde.

They’re going to expect drama and romance because it’s *Prom* and whether I’m going or not, drama and romance are not going to be part of the equation.

“It’s starting already,” Ann stage whispers. “The deadline for the Win Your Dream Dress contest is Friday. You ready for the hunt, Brando?”

I meet her eyes and follow their gaze as she nods toward the front of the school. Pippa and Jen are watching me with a laughing gleam in their eyes I don’t like. Ann turns slightly, looking toward the picnic tables near the bluff. Fiona is sitting there with her long legs crossed and her head tilted at an angle that shows off the curve of her neck and the dip of her V-neck top. She waves when she notices me looking.

Maybe this is what it feels like to be a hunted deer. I don’t like it.

This has always been a game and everyone I’ve played it with knows that. This stupid contest has made the girls forget my relationship guidelines. Yes, the rules have changed but I was supposed to be the only one who got the update.

“Why does Brandon look like he’s going to puke?” Chance pops up in front of me, concern on her cherubic face.

“I told him about the bets.” Ann doesn’t sound quite as amused anymore

Chance laughs, some of her concern wiped away. “It’s up to twenty names now. A few more signed up this morning.”

“How do all of you know this? And why am I just finding out *now*?”

“Didn’t think you’d care, man.” Dare, Chance’s boyfriend, shrugs. “Figured you’d like the attention and do what you always do, say no.”

“Dammit!” A string of *much* more forceful words flows through my head, but I learned a long time ago to keep them silent. Cursing stresses Momma out something wicked.

“Why is Brandon trying to pull out hair he barely has?” My eyes are on the pavement, so all I see of Kody are his flip-flopped feet.

“He found out about the betting pool,” Dare explains.

“Huh. Not the reaction I expected.”

“I’m so glad you guys find my life so damn amusing.” I run my hand over my face, rubbing my mouth and trying to think. I need this to *not* turn into a disaster and no matter what way I turn the problem it still looks like it’s going to turn into a *massive* disaster.

“Hey. Brandon? What’s going on?” Ann tugs on my ear like she’s done for ages whenever she’s trying to cheer me up. “If I thought you’d care this much I would’ve said something last week.”

“You do not look good,” Kody said. “Green around the gills, definitely.”

“I don’t get it. Girls wanting to be the one to break your rules isn’t a new thing, is it?” Dare glances at Chance and then his twin sister Verity. Chance shakes her head; Verity shrugs. “I’ve only been around for a few months, but even I know that.”

Yes, true, but now I’m actually going to do it. I’m going to break those rules and whoever I end up taking is *so* going to get the wrong idea because if I tell them about my promise to Momma to help them understand, they’re probably going to want to meet her and . . . just no.

“Brando, seriously.” Ann’s nose wrinkles and she grabs my wrist, pulling my hand away from my face. Crap! I always forget how disproportionately strong this girl is until she does something like this. “I’m starting to get worried. What’s wrong?”

Chance’s face pops up over Ann’s shoulder. “Do you need to go to the nurse?”

If only that would help. Hello, Ms. Nurse Lady, I’m sorry to bother you, but I promised my mom I would ask a girl to Prom and now that I’m faced with my options I’m kind of freaking out and do you have anything to cure fear, commitment phobia, and—apparently—overactive sweat glands? No? Yeah, I didn’t think so.

Better get this over with.

Deep breath. “Last night I promised my mom I was going to ask someone to Prom.”

After a beat of absolutely dead shock, Kody and Dare crack almost simultaneously, busting a gut so hard they both fold over.

“Oh man that is *priceless* timing,” Kody gasps.

“I’m sorry, B.” Ann’s starting to smile again, but she knows enough about me and about what it means when I promise something that she’s not nearly as amused as the others. “But it won’t be that bad. At least *you* have appealing options.”

“Like you don’t?” Is she *kidding*? “Please, don’t tell me you’re taking Kelly at her word about the whole Prom date thing.”

“What Prom date thing?” Chance asks.

“Kelly’s trying to get under Ann’s skin again. Told her she wouldn’t be able to find a date.”

Chance and Kody start to protest, but Ann shakes her head and cuts them off. “It doesn’t matter because I’m going solo anyway. I just want to spend time with you guys, so I’m not worried about it.”

Sure, she wants to spend time with us, but that’s not the only reason she’s going solo. It’s also because she doesn’t want to risk a repeat of what happened on Homecoming when her evil step-sister waltzed off with Ann’s date Trevor and was caught practically climbing him like a tree in one of the bathrooms.

Even getting to be the one who knocked Trevor’s ass out that night didn’t make me feel any better about that mess.

But now Ann doesn’t want to take the risk. Which means she’s going solo. And I need a date. And . . .

Holy crap, I think this is what a lightbulb moment feels like.

“You’re definitely planning on going to Prom?” I ask Ann. I need to make sure I have my facts straight.

“Yes.”

“And you’re *definitely* not interested in asking *anyone* or in absolutely *anyone* asking you, yeah?”

“Yes.” Ann draws the word out this time, suspicion clouding her eyes. “I don’t think I like the look on your face right now.”

“And we’re friends, right?”

Ann gives me a cautious nod. “I feel like that’s a trick question.”

“You aren’t romantically interested in me, right?”

“Uh, I love you, but no. You’re too pretty and promiscuous for me.”

“Exactly. So Annaliese—dearest Annaliese—will you please save my life and go to Prom with me?”