



SUITS

♥ and

SPARK
PLUGS

ASPEN HADLEY

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CHAPTER ONE

Scientifically speaking, the human mind is a beautiful and mysterious machine. Take, for example, its ability to multitask. It came in very handy on days like today, when my body needed to work but my brain wanted to obsess over much more interesting facts. Jake's Diner—my home away from home—was in full swing with dishes clanking, silverware tinkling across plates, orders being called out, and conversations happening all around me. I darted around refilling drinks, taking orders, clearing plates, and cheerfully conversing with customers. But the entire time my mind was chugging happily over the unexpected twist my life had taken. I, Liv Phelps, was dating someone.

His name was Blaine. Blaine Harris. Even his name oozed class. My love life had always been like a car on cinder blocks, and I'd preferred it that way. My neighbors and friends saw it as an eyesore, but I had zero plans to fix it up. However, Blaine had walked into Jake's Diner a few weeks ago, and for the first time I'd decided to put the key in the ignition and see if the old junk pile had a chance of running.

I'd been wiping down the bar countertop when he bypassed the hostess station and came straight to sit on a stool directly in front of me. My head had popped up in surprise, my hazel eyes had met his ice-baby blues, and something inside me had taken notice. It would have been hard not to. I'd lived my entire twenty-four years in the small mountain town of Oak Hills, and I knew all the guys there were to know. This guy was definitely not from around here.

"What do you recommend?" he'd asked. His voice was smooth and somehow cultured, as though he'd been specifically taught how to speak correctly. It set him worlds apart from the usual stool sitters.

"Meatloaf," I'd finally stammered right as one of my troublesome black curls fell from my forehead and across my line of sight.

His eyebrows had dropped, and his head had tilted to the side. "Your recommendation is meatloaf?"

I'd blinked a few times, flicked the curl back into place, and slid over a step to start wiping the bar top again, my eyes fixated on imaginary crumbs as I pulled my thoughts

back into order. Just because he was the first guy I'd noticed in a while didn't mean I was prepared to have a conversation. I didn't know the first thing about being flirty or graceful. "Uh, no, not really. Not unless you enjoy taking chances."

"Not usually, no. However, today might be a good day to be daring."

I could hear the smile in his voice, and when I'd looked up I had felt that smile tickle my stomach. "How about a club sandwich?"

He had ordered the club, with a side of my phone number, and I had happily served up both.

Blaine lived thirty minutes down the mountain in the bustling city of Springfield, known for its fast-paced and cut-throat corporate life. To be honest, I hadn't really expected to hear from him. He wasn't the first guy to make a pass at one of the waitresses of Jake's Diner. But he'd called, and even scarier, I'd said yes.

After a slightly awkward first date—okay, three incredibly awkward dates—he'd continued to call. Blaine was the first person to actively pursue me. I was equal parts terrified and excited as I tried to understand the intricacies of a dating relationship when I'd never had a chance to experience it before. Sure, I'd watched my best friend, Kelly, date around, so I knew a few things about pick-up lines and over-the-top reactions, but I'd never wanted that type of drama in my life.

Blaine's cool confidence and assertive air drew me to him. Everything about him screamed dependable and decisive. I lived with a teenager sister who was an emotional wrecking ball, and a mother who seemed to have checked out of life. So to me, he was a breath of much needed fresh air. His habit of wearing pressed suits in varying shades of blue added to his mystique. I'd never encountered a man like him and felt like I was constantly playing catchup, but I was enjoying the game, a lot.

I knew very little about his personal life in Springfield, but I got the impression I was as far out of left field for him, as he was for me. I often wondered what it was about me that he'd found interesting enough to ask out and then keep asking out. I was driven and independent, yes, but I wasn't nearly as polished as he was. In fact, if we'd written a list of our attributes down on paper, we'd have been a mismatch for sure. Yet here we were, starting into our second month of sporadic dates and still plugging along. We were too new to have spent any of the holidays together, but he'd surprised me by calling from his party on New Year's Eve and celebrating the ball drop with me over the phone.

Today was January first, and the memories of the previous night were making it hard to concentrate. This, of course, was a detail my fellow waitress and previously mentioned lifelong best friend, Kelly, had noticed.

"Did he call you, or did he throw you down a flight of stairs?" Kelly asked as she brushed past me on her way to the kitchen. The scent of lavender trailed after her,

bringing me back to reality.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I responded, following her to pick up an order of my own.

She flashed her blue eyes in my direction, letting me know that she knew that I knew exactly what she was trying to say. “I swear every customer in this place has been asking me if you’re okay. Your neighbor, Mr. Matthews, used to be a doctor and says you’re showing warning signs of a stroke.”

I looked out to the dining area to see that all eyes did seem to be trained on me. I dropped my eyes quickly and mumbled, “They’re only looking because you talk so loud.”

Kelly pierced me with a look as she picked up the heavy tray and slid past me. “I’m not that bad.”

She tossed her long, curly, bright red ponytail behind her, barely missing whipping me across the face as she walked away with it swinging behind her. I looked to the kitchen window to see the owner, Jake, and two of the cooks looking at me also. I threw my hands up.

“What?” I asked.

“Didn’t think I’d ever hear about you dating somebody. You finally changed your mind?”

Neither of us said anything while he lazily moved a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other, as though it was easier to speak that way. Then he wiggled his nose while he sniffed. It was very mafia, although that little toothpick move was the only thing even remotely cool about the fifty-six-year-old, gray-haired, heavysset, and frumpy-dressing man I called my boss. “Yes, but you didn’t need to add the *finally* part,” I replied tight-lipped.

“Good for you. Your order’s up.” He slid three plates heaped with food toward me and turned away.

Kelly was back before I was done loading my tray, and she gave me yet another look as she zipped past me. “I swear I said nothing to Jake about you dating.”

“Stop reading my face,” I retorted, annoyed for the zillionth time with her ability to always know what was on my mind. She called it the Best Buddies Broadcasting System, BBBS for short. I called it irritating and refused to use that ridiculous acronym.

“Then stop broadcasting your thoughts,” she replied, also for the zillionth time.

I lifted my tray onto my arm. “Remember last month when you were dating that Tyler kid?”

“Not relevant.”

“Completely relevant.” I pressed past her and looked over my shoulder as I turned the bar corner. “I didn’t bug you about it, and I’ll thank you to do the same.”

Nothing more was said for a while as we went about our duties, which was fine by me. It gave me more time to daydream about Blaine's glacier blue eyes and how much I enjoyed looking into them. He was only a few inches taller than my five feet, four inches, which made it so much easier to soak up the beauty of his eyes.

While I took more orders I imagined what oil paint colors I'd need to mix on my pallet to get just the right blend of blue and gray to match his eyes. It would be tricky because I'd noticed some almost white flecks when I'd seen him last.

When I returned to the drink station, Kelly was there too. "I'm in a dry spell, Liv," she said to me. "I need a man."

I pulled a face. Kelly had been searching for a man with the same amount of effort that you'd put into plucking unwanted chin hairs. Although I'd known her since we were in elementary school, I'd never fully understood her desperation to be in a relationship. Kelly came from a solid family, had a quick-witted intelligence that had been our bonding force, and was attractive. But there seemed to be a loneliness in her that she couldn't quite fill. I hated that she thought she needed a man to plug into that place.

I repeated the same thing I'd been saying since we'd graduated high school six years ago. "Your life is fine without a man." Then, in case she tried to accuse me of not validating her feelings, I added this helpful tidbit. "Statistically speaking, something like sixty-three percent of adults have never been married. They seem to be getting along just fine."

"Says the girl with a boyfriend." Kelly hip bumped me.

"I'm not sure I'd call him my boyfriend," I replied.

"I'll bet a solid eighty percent of your statistical people wish they could find love."

I shook my head. "I doubt that. Choosing to stay single can be very fulfilling."

"Your science is bunk," Kelly replied as she lifted her drink tray and walked away.

"He's definitely not my boyfriend yet," I called as softly as I could manage. The wiggle of her head told me she heard.

Like I said, Kelly had been in love with the idea of love for as long as I'd known her. She'd never listened to me when I'd told her she should pour that energy and focus into something more productive. She simply liked men too much and was holding on until she found "the one."

As for me, I hadn't been looking at all. I'll admit that for one brief moment, years ago, I'd gotten starry-eyed over someone, but I'd quickly learned that he wasn't worth my time. After that, well, time had flown, and now I was busy enough working at the diner full-time, going to school online, and doing the bulk of caring for my family's needs. I'd gone from not interested to having no time for romance. Obviously that's when it had come calling.

Kelly returned with her empty drink tray at the same time I was passing an order

through to the kitchen. “Maybe the guy destined for me is eating in the dining room right now.” She made an overly cheery face while clapping her hands silently under her chin.

“Doubtful.”

“Ah, there’s the glass-half-full Liv I love so well.”

I grinned. “You’ve already dated all the decent options, and flirted with the rest. But, as your best friend, I’ll do a subtle sweep while I take these orders out. Maybe someone new has wandered in.”

I did a quick perusal while hefting orders, hoping I could point someone out to Kelly and get her to stop analyzing my new situation. No dice. It was all the regulars today, which meant Kelly truly had already dated any of them who were under forty.

“Sorry, pal, no fresh meat today,” I said to Kelly when we were back together, filling drinks. “Maybe you should consider an older man. Scientifically speaking, men live shorter lives than women, so you could at least get some rich widow time out of the deal.”

“How dare you. I’m in my prime and I’m not settling for anything less.” She playfully pouted. “More important, no one in this town is rich.” We shoulder bumped, which was what we did when we couldn’t laugh out loud but wanted to. After a second of amusement, she stopped and chewed her lip while her eyes went dreamy. The minute she glazed out on me I braced myself for what I knew she would say. She didn’t disappoint. “I haven’t dated Connor, and he’s here, in the corner booth.”

I filled a cup with ice and started some cola running into it. “You do not want to date Connor Hunt.” I said the same thing every time.

“Yes, I do.”

“Kelly, you do not. You know exactly why. He’s got a terrible reputation. Breaking hearts, flirting, toying with people. Who knows what else he does that no one sees?” I placed the filled cup on a tray and started another.

“All while twisting his waxed mustache and watching old ladies try to cross the road alone. I know, I know.” Kelly slid in next to me and got a mug to fill. My lip raised slightly on the side she couldn’t see. I really did love her comebacks.

“You joke, but we’ve been hearing about the awful things he does for years,” I stated.

“I know, Liv. I’m the one who told you half of the gossip. Still, he’s actually good-looking and has a steady job. I’m not picky.”

“Those two things may be true, but they don’t undo all the other stuff. Be pickier.”

“I’ve been flirting my socks off for at least two months, and I think he’s finally ready for me to play my cards.”

I scoffed as I filled the final cup and picked up the tray. “You’ve been flirting with him ever since we graduated from high school.”

“True, but these past two months I’ve really stepped it up. Did you notice he’s been coming in almost every day since Halloween?”

“I can honestly say I haven’t.”

I took my drinks to the waiting customers, cleared a few tables, and totally stole a glance at Connor out of the corner of my eye as I made my deliveries. A few years older than Kelly and me, and admittedly good-looking, his unusually colored auburn hair and way of moving had caught our attention on the first day of our freshman year of high school. It had definitely helped that he was a senior and seemed impossibly grown up. We’d learned all about him as fast as we could, and none of it was good. He had his uses as a mechanic, and that was about all I had to say about him. I’d steered clear for years and wasn’t about to let my best friend get herself attached to that runaway train.

When our shift was over, Kelly and I met up in the employee lounge. It felt good to untie my apron and kick off my sensible work shoes. Kelly stood next to me, shaking her hair out of its ponytail and rubbing her scalp.

“Maybe Blaine has a cousin, or a college buddy, or a co-worker or something?” I said as I bent to retrieve my snow boots from my locker.

“Don’t take offense, Liv, but I don’t think anyone in Blaine’s world would be interested in dating me.” I gave her a startled look, which made her laugh. “I know what you’re thinking, and I’m so lucky to have a friend who thinks I’m awesome. The truth is that I’m a small town girl working in a diner. I’m not going to school and looking to the future like you are. I don’t want to leave this town the way you do.”

“You never know, Kelly. There might be something bigger and better out there.”

“There might be, yes. Or, I might have everything I need here.” She closed her locker and gave me a pat on the shoulder. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yep. Early shift.”

The drive home was so short that my car didn’t have a chance to heat up before I pulled into the cracked driveway. In the soft twilight glow the house looked warm and inviting, and rather than rush right in I turned off the car and sat for a moment, my artist eye catching the variations of whites and yellows glowing out of the front window. In this light the normally rough-looking exterior could hide its faults and appeared less run down, more how it had looked before Dad had . . . well . . . just before.

The cold eventually stole the moment and forced me to hustle across the crunchy snow and into the heat of the entryway. From there I could see into the front room, which looked the way it usually did when I returned from a shift.

Sadie, my seventeen-year-old sister, was sitting on the brown couch with the TV blaring, painting her fingernails a shocking lime green color. A few yellow and orange candy wrappers were scattered on the cushion next to her, but her face was hidden behind

the waterfall of black hair draped over her shoulder.

For a moment I was struck by how much she'd grown up in the past year. We were seven years apart in age, which often meant I still struggled to see Sadie as the young woman she was. I wondered if I'd ever think of her as anything other than my baby sister.

My eyes took her in, thinking about how often people were surprised to find out we were sisters and not cousins. We had enough similar features to mark us as family but not quite enough to be sister-level related. Our hair was the same midnight black color, our eyes were the same hazel, and our noses were an exact match. That's about where it ended, though. Sadie's hair cascaded in perfect beach waves down her back. I, on the other hand, had chin-length ringlets that dashed all around my head like Medusa's snakes. When I'd turned eighteen I'd decided to stop fighting the curls and let them be. Since then I'd grown to love my funky style, even if my side of the bathroom had double the hair products of Sadie's. Curls are nothing if not finicky.

Sadie was also a full four inches taller than me, standing at five-foot-eight, which she liked to remind me of often. I definitely took after our mom's side of the family, with less height and more curves. Sadie was a dead ringer for our father. Sometimes I could see a flash of him in her expression or the way she moved through a room, and it pinched a little. I tried my hardest to not let it affect the way I treated her, but I knew I failed on occasion.

"Hey, what's for dinner?" Sadie asked when she spotted me.

"Never a, 'Hi, Liv, how was work?'" I teased as I took off my coat and set my things on the front entrance table.

"Hi, Liv. Anyone choke to death today?" Sadie turned back to her nails.

"Nice." I pursed my lips, instantly annoyed. "Did you do any cleaning or cooking today?"

"I'm on winter break," she replied, just another in a long line of excuses about her unwillingness to pitch in. I made a noise as I headed into the kitchen, which had her look up to me again. "Even if I wanted to, I don't know how to cook."

I said nothing in return, just entered the kitchen, which was separate from the front room living area. Sadly, it was probably true that Sadie didn't know how to cook. Sadie and I were being raised by the same mother but in two very different ways. A couple of years ago, Dad had left his job in Oak Hills and gone to work for an oil operation in North Dakota. It was supposed to be a big opportunity for our family, but instead it had become a big opportunity for him to start a new life.

The abandonment hadn't been immediate, but over time he came home less, sent less money home, and called less and less. Mom eventually ended up taking a second job on nights and weekends to make ends meet. Gone was the home with two parents who'd

been home every evening, working together, cooking, cleaning, talking, and supporting their daughters. It had been about six months now since I'd actually spoken to my father. I doubted Mom had spoken to him either in that time. It wasn't something we talked about.

"Have you seen Mom?" I called to Sadie from the kitchen.

"She popped in about an hour ago, but she had to leave. She ate a sandwich, I think."

I nodded even though Sadie couldn't see me. Of course, Sadie had opted to wait for me to come home and cook her something rather than eating a sandwich with Mom.

I whipped up a salad and spaghetti, which we ate silently while watching *Jeopardy*—the curse of people who had to rely on antenna TV and reruns. Afterward I made my way up to my room. Entering my bedroom was my favorite part of the day. It was my own private oasis. I'd decorated it in whites and creams and then accented it with colors. It always felt peaceful and inviting, a place of refuge in my crazy life. I went upstairs with the intention to study, but the sight of a fresh canvas waiting for me near the window proved to be more of a pull than I could resist.

I'd discovered oil painting in middle school, and it was my secret passion. I walked across the room to where the canvas was sitting to the side of my north facing window and ran light fingertips over it, allowing my mind to run free, pondering what I could bring to life with brushes and a free spot of time.

When I'd been picking up groceries a few days before, I'd noticed the way icicles were hanging from the light pole out front. It had captured my imagination, and I'd taken a photo on my phone. Now I reached into my back pocket, intent on looking at the picture, but my shoulders drooped in defeat when I unlocked it and saw the time. Already after 8:00 PM. The painting would have to wait. It was study time.

As my family had begun to show the cracks, I'd resolved to make a brighter future for myself and had started online schooling to work toward a nursing degree. Nursing, I believed, would provide some flexibility as a career. I'd be able to work just about anywhere and would make enough money that I would never need to depend on another person for my well-being. I was determined that my life would never look like my mother's.

Painting dreams took a back seat to textbooks, and the hours rushed by as I read the assignments and planned out my week in scrupulous detail. There was no room for failure if I stuck to the plan, no matter how rigid.

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