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USA Today bestselling author

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Blurred Lines

Lauren Layne



Loveswept
New York

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Chapter 1

Parker

My sophomore year of high school, I had a short-lived friendship with this girl named Korie Hamilton.

She was nice enough.

A little too much purple eyeliner, a few too many *likes* sprinkled throughout her constant chatter, but we had every class together our first semester, so we kind of became friends by default.

Anyway, Korie was forever yammering on and on about how her best friend on the entire planet was Stephen Daniels, a boy she'd known for all of four weeks before promoting him to BFF status.

Apparently it was, *like, ohmigod, like, the best thing ever* to have a guy she could talk to without complicating things with romantic entanglements.

Please.

Real best friends can generally go more than a couple hours without mentioning each other's name, but Korie found a way to fit Stephen's name into every other sentence.

Just friends my ass.

I guess *technically* they were platonic for a while. Stephen had a girlfriend named Libby Tittles, or something unfortunate like that, and Korie had this on-again-off-again thing with her junior high boyfriend.

But anyone who's ever seen a movie, or watched TV, or just had basic awareness of human interaction saw exactly where Korie and Stephen were heading: Humpville.

Even though Korie swore up and down that she didn't like him like *that*, both of their significant others were long gone by Thanksgiving of sophomore year.

By Christmas vacation, Korie wasn't uttering quite so many *likes*. Why? Because Stephen's tongue was in her mouth before school, after school, and every freaking weekend.

But we all know how this ends, right? Just a few short months later, not only were Korie and Stephen no longer dating, they sure as hell weren't *best friends*.

Their short-lived romance and ensuing breakup barely even registered a blip on the gossip chain, but I'd like to think it taught some of us high school girls a valuable lesson:

Guys and girls can't be just friends. Or not *best* friends, anyway.

Shit gets too complicated.

But let's fast-forward a few years, shall we?

I'm now twenty-four, and I have a public service announcement to make: I was wrong.

Guys and girls really *can* be best friends.

It is possible to have a platonic relationship with a guy where there are no romantic inklings, no sexual fantasies, and no naïve proclamations of *I don't like him like that* in a torturous attempt to hide an agonizing unrequited love.

How do I know this? How do I know that a guy and a girl can be best friends without romantic entanglements?

Well, let's see, I've been on the female end of one such platonic relationship for six years now.

Six. *Years*.

!

True story:

Ben Olsen and I met the summer before our first year at University of Oregon during freshman orientation. We were assigned to the same group in one of those terrible ice-breaking activities where you have to put a sticky note on your head and guess what kind of safari animal you are, or something, and we just...

Clicked?

I don't know why we clicked in the *Hey, you're cool but I have no interest in boning you* kind of way, but we did.

Maybe it was because I was in stupid insta-love with another guy in our group. Or maybe because my ovaries were hyperaware that Ben's ridiculous good looks would lead to heartbreak. But whatever the reason, we did the implausible.

We became best friends.

And, yes, every single one of my female friends has given me the exact same warnings I gave Korie Hamilton way back when: *It won't work*.

My friends are split down the middle on how it will actually go down, but they're all convinced that it *will* go down.

Half think that Ben and I are soulmates who are just biding our time until marriage and babies.

The other half think that we're going to have too much to drink one night, have awful sex, and never speak again.

Ben and I proved them wrong when freshman year ended and our friendship was still intact. Sophomore year? Repeat.

Junior year, we really upped our game. Not only were we closer than ever, but we became *roommates*. It happened sort of by accident when one of his

housemates backed out at the last minute, and I belatedly realized I couldn't bear one more year of dorm food, so I moved in. And it *worked*. So we did it again senior year.

Here we are, two years after graduation, still living together, although we've upgraded from crappy off-campus housing in Eugene to a slightly less crappy two-bedroom house in the Northwest neighborhood of Portland.

And yes. Still platonic as ever, with not so much as a *hint* of change in the air. I'm crazy in love with Lance Myers, my boyfriend of five years, and Ben...

Well, Ben's on a rather awe-inspiring mission to seduce the entire female population in western Oregon.

"Do you guys have any milk?"

Ah, here we go...case in point. I glance up to see a tall, thin blonde standing in the doorway of my kitchen.

"Milk?" she asks again.

I take another bite of cereal, and it takes all of my self-control not to look pointedly at the bowl of *cereal* I'm eating. Of course we have freaking milk.

"In the fridge," I say with a friendly smile. She smiles back and she's got deep dimples in each cheek. Cute. I can see why Ben likes this one.

She walks past the table to the fridge, and I cringe when I see the fact that she has airhead monogrammed on the butt of her baby blue sweatpants. Really? *Really?*

Airhead has apparently forgotten that she wanted milk and instead pulls out one of the cans of Starbucks iced coffee that I keep stocked for Monday mornings when I need an extra pick-me-up, which is *every* Monday, because, well, Mondays are just the worst, aren't they?

Airhead pops the tab and takes a sip without asking, which I guess is kind of annoying, but I've never really

been one of those girls who likes to waste energy getting bitchy about stupid things, so I let it go.

“Hey, so I’m Parker,” I say.

“I’m Liz. Are you dating Ben’s roommate?”

Considering I know for a fact that Liz is the latest in a rather impressive streak of one-night stands, *dating* seems sort of a presumptuous word choice, because how does she know I’m not just a onetime sleepover guest like her?

This, too, I let pass without comment.

I mean, what else is the girl supposed to ask: *Did you get drunk and sleep with a guy you barely know, like I just did?*

Plus, I have a fun surprise for her.

“I *am* the roommate,” I say, keeping my smile friendly. I’m wearing my oldest pajamas and haven’t even pretended to have tried to take off last night’s mascara, which is now all over my face. I’m pretty sure I don’t look threatening.

But I’d be wrong.

Liz pauses halfway in, drinking my precious iced-coffee beverage, and her previously curious expression turns wary.

I mentally shrug. Ben tends to use my unisex name to full advantage by avoiding female pronouns when referring to his roommate while a booty call is in progress. He picked up this approach after several hookups that failed due to the fact that some girls still subscribe to the old girls-and-guys-can’t-be-just-friends axiom.

Amateurs.

Ben ambles into the kitchen, his sweatpants matching the style of his girl toy’s, although his are dark UO green,

and instead of a tacky phrase on the back, they just have the Oregon Duck, our old college mascot. We graduated a couple years ago, so the frat-boy attire's a *little* sad, but I can't judge him too harshly since my entire workout wardrobe consists of old college shirts.

He yawns and smiles. "Morning. Have you girls met? Liz, Parker, Parker, Liz."

Ben's either unaware of the fact that Liz is giving him a dark look or he no longer cares now that he's gotten laid.

Here's the other reason I don't exactly get my rocks off thinking about Ben in a romantic light: He's kind of a player. As a friend, I can love him for it, but on the romantic front? Never. Ever. Not even with every possible STD test.

"Hey, what happened to the must-wear-shirts-in-the-kitchen rule?" I ask, shoveling another bite of increasingly soggy Wheat Chex into my mouth.

"No such rule exists," he says, with a wink for Liz-slash-Airhead. Her expression softens lightly, and I resist the urge to slap a little sense into the poor girl. I want to tell her that his winks are a dime a dozen, but what's the point? She has airhead printed on her sweatpants for God's sake.

"There is *too* a rule about shirts in the kitchen," I insist. "House rule number fourteen. Speaking of which, where *are* my house rules?"

"Hard to say," he says, opening the fridge and glancing at its meager offerings before pouring a cup of coffee instead. "But I *may* have used them to mop up OJ the other day. Or maybe as a coaster for my beer." He snapped his fingers. "Oh wait, no, I remember. I just plain threw them out the old-fashioned way."

I point to the doorway. "Shirt. Now."

He glances at Liz. "She can't concentrate when my abs are on display. We have to give her anti-swoon pills."

Liz giggles even as she shoots me a searching look, as though she's trying to determine whether I really will swoon over Ben's admittedly impressive upper body. The guy's like a machine. He misses workouts only on the worst of his hangover days.

"Do you wanna grab some breakfast?" Liz asks Ben.

Aww, poor Airhead. She doesn't know the name of the game.

Ben's face is immediately regretful. "I wish I could, but I promised Parker I'd take her to IKEA to get a new bookshelf for her doll collection."

I've just taken an enormous bite of cereal, which prevents me from speaking, so I settle for my best glare. He's breaking another house rule: No using Parker to blow off your girl toys.

I believe I even recently added a footnote: "And especially not about IKEA." I hate IKEA.

"Doesn't she have a boyfriend that can go with her?" Liz asked.

Ooh, badly played, Airhead. Too obvious in your attempt to determine whether I'm competition.

"She does. But he's quite frail," Ben says in a loud whisper. "Very petite hands."

Annd another rule broken: Don't bash Lance so that you can use Parker to blow off your girl toys.

Lance isn't frail. I mean, maybe my boyfriend's not as much of a *gym rat* as Ben, but he's lean and fit and he sure as hell doesn't have small hands.

Still, arguing at this point would probably mean extending Liz's stay, and I'm more than ready to see Airhead on her way back to her dorm room.

I scoop up the last bite of cereal from my bowl as I stand. "We should probably get going," I say, still

chewing. “IKEA gets crazy on Saturdays, and I don’t want to risk them being out of stock on the extra-large shelves.”

“You have that many dolls?” Liz asks, looking torn between being creeped out and feeling completely sorry for me.

“Fifty-seven and counting,” I say, straight-faced. “And actually, Ben, if you’re going to be a while, I might just run upstairs and brush their hair? I noticed last night Polly was starting to develop a tangle.”

Ben drains his coffee, pushes back from the counter, and shakes his head at me. “You poor, sick weirdo.”

Then he turns to Liz, putting his hands on her skinny waist and pulling her forward with an apologetic smile. “You mind if I take a raincheck on breakfast?”

I barely hide the snort. In Ben’s world, *raincheck* is a synonym for *I’m going to intentionally lose your phone number*.

In under a minute, Ben is nudging Liz out onto the front porch, and, impressively, she doesn’t even look pissed. I follow them out, just to be annoying, watching as he whispers something in her ear. Her eyes go wide and sympathetic and she gives me an *It’s gonna be okay, little buddy* smile. She heads toward the sidewalk with a wave.

“What did you just tell her?” I ask, taking a sip of my coffee as we watch her leave.

“I told her you were an abandoned orphan and that the only thing your birth mother left you with was a doll named Polly. Hence the sad obsession.”

I shake my head. “You know I’m going to have to rewrite the house rules. And *No dolls* will so be going on there.”

Liz turns back and gives one last wave. Both Ben and I wave back, and I can't help myself. "Enjoy your walk of shame!" I call after her, my voice sweet as sugar.

Liz's head snaps back as though trying to determine if she heard me correctly, but Ben puts a hand over my face and shoves me back into the house before closing the front door.

He absently rubs a hand over his abs as he looks me up and down.

"You should change. You can't wear your ratty booty shorts and that ugly T-shirt to IKEA."

"First of all, you can *absolutely* wear your rattiest and ugliest T-shirts to IKEA. That's pretty much the IKEA dress code. And second, we're not going to IKEA. Really, are you getting so comfortable with your lies that they become fact in your mind?"

"We *are* going to IKEA," he says, running both hands through his short brown hair before heading toward the stairs.

"For what?" I ask.

"I need a new dresser."

"What's wrong with your old dresser?"

"It broke."

I wrinkle my nose. "How the hell do you break a dresser?"

He shoots me a look over his shoulder and wiggles his eyebrows.

It takes me only seconds before I put the pieces together. "Airhead?" I hitch a thumb over my shoulder at the departed female. "You banged her against the dresser?"

"Hey, she was unusually tall, which gave me the unusual opportunity and prime angle to—"

I slap my hands over my ears and start singing Billy Joel's "Piano Man," my default protective gesture whenever Ben gets a little too colorful with descriptions of his sexual antics.

Another house rule: Parker absolutely does not want to know what happens in Ben's bedroom.

"Hey, do you and Lance have plans today?" he asks.

"Maybe you should have asked that *before* you mandated an IKEA trip. But no, he's got an all-day study group."

Lance is getting his MBA from the University of Portland.

"Cool. Let's grab lunch after." He heads into his bedroom without looking at me.

Lunch, huh?

I narrow my eyes and sprint up the stairs after him, pushing open his door before he can shut it in my face.

Sure enough, his dresser is definitely leaning unhealthily to one side, and I count two, no make that *three*, condom wrappers.

He pulls a green polo from the tiny closet in the corner and looks around his messy floor until he finds his jeans.

I wait expectantly.

"What?" he asks.

"Lunch?" I lift my brows. And wait for the explanation.

Ben scratches idly at his slightly stubbled chin. Sharing a bathroom with the guy, I know he shaves every morning, but the stubble seems to be perpetual.

"Well, you know that girl I dated a couple weeks ago? Kim?" he asks. "She wanted me to go to her sister's engagement brunch, and I told her I was busy all day. But she's just crazy enough to stop by and see if I'm

actually out of the house, so I thought we should be elsewhere....”

I hold up a hand. “Fine. I’ll be your alibi. But I get to pick the restaurant, and you’re buying. Oh, and you have to put the toilet seat down every day for an entire week.”

He raises his hand as though wanting to say something in class. “I’d like to add a house rule: Parker isn’t allowed to tell Ben how to pee.”

“*You* don’t make the house rules. I do. And I didn’t tell you *how* to pee,” I say exasperatedly as he wrenches open a dresser drawer and pulls out a pair of boxers. “I’m trying to do your future wife a favor by teaching you how not to be a pig.”

He inches by me into the hallway. “Another house rule: Parker shalt not say profanities as *future wife* to a dedicated bachelor.”

“You’re not a dedicated bachelor. You’re just a typical horny twenty-four-year-old dude, and, again, you don’t make the house rules—hey!”

He shuts the door to our shared bathroom in my face, and too late I realize that I’d missed all the classic signs of a skilled Ben Olsen diversion. He’d just wanted to beat me into the bathroom.

“Don’t use all the hot water!” I shout, pounding my palm on the door.

The door opens just enough for me to see one blue eye blinking back at me. “Didn’t you say Polly had a tangle? You better go get on that.”

The door shuts again, and I pound a second time. “Remember, the green towel is mine. The white one is yours.”

I wait for confirmation, but there’s only silence.

“Ben, I know you can hear me! Don’t ‘accidentally’ use mine just because yours smells funny.”

More silence.

Damn it. He is so planning to use my towel.

So, yeah, my best friend is a guy. Doesn't mean I have to like it *all* the time.

Chapter 2

Ben

Most of the time, having a girl for a best friend is awesome.

Among the highlights:

(1) My color-blind self never has to worry about going out the door looking like a sad clown.

(2) The Brita water filter is always replaced on time.

(3) Parker actually likes doing laundry for *fun*, and she only complains when I sneak my stuff in with hers about 30 percent of the time.

Oh, and as this morning's adventure displayed, she's an *excellent* excuse when a person needs to rid himself of clingy one-night stands.

But then there are the not-so-great parts. Like when she's spent thirty-five minutes looking at *lamps*.

"Just get that one," I say, lifting my arm to point at a random floor lamp as the noisy, child-filled scariness that is IKEA threatens to choke me.

She barely glances at the one I've selected. "It looks like a uterus."

"What the fuck does a uterus look like?"

"Like that lamp. And honestly, for as much time as you spend rummaging around in women's panties, you really should get familiar with their parts."

"Isn't the uterus the—" I break off, looking for the right word to describe the random memories from eighth-grade sex-ed class.

Parker lifts her eyebrows. "The baby cave?"

Like any normal guy would, I wince. “Christ. Why would I need to know about that? I use a condom.”

“Several of them, judging from the state of your bedroom,” she says, tilting her head to study the lime green lamp shade in her hands. “Do you think this would clash with my bedspread?”

“You’re asking the color-blind guy? Like I have any clue what color your bedspread is.”

“Seriously? Don’t act like you’ve never seen it. Two nights ago you flopped onto my bed in your sweaty gym clothes and it took me two washes to remove the man stank.”

I shake my head. “Poor Lance. Do you make him wear a plastic bag when you guys hook up so he doesn’t get his *man stank* on your sheets?”

“Lance doesn’t have man stank.”

I frown. “Hold up. If *I* have man stank, Lance has man stank.”

“No.”

I open my mouth to argue, but instead I shrug. That’s another thing you learn having a girl best friend. You pick your battles.

“You have two more minutes to pick your lamp,” I say. “I’m starving.”

Parker adjusts her purse strap on her shoulder. “Oh, I’m not buying a lamp. I was just browsing.”

I inhale deeply to rein in my *women suck* rampage when I catch her smirk.

“Oh, I get it,” I say as we move toward the end of the store where we’ll pick up my dresser. “This is payback. You’re mad because I made up that story about you having a creepy doll collection.”

“Actually, it was more punishment for destroying the house rules. I’m totally laminating them next time.”

“Or you could just create an online version and keep them in the cloud like normal people born after 1980.”

I see a little lightbulb go on in her head and almost regret giving her the idea. Not that it matters much. I’ve never really followed her fussy rules anyway, although for the most part I try to not be too much of a dick. The towel incident this morning notwithstanding, it’s like I said, Parker *loves* laundry. I knew she had extra clean ones stashed away.

“Seriously, don’t get that color finish,” she says, shaking her head at the dresser box I’m about to pull off the shelf.

“Wood is wood,” I say with a shrug, starting to maneuver the huge box onto our flat cart.

“No, there’s old-man wood and there’s modern wood.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Old-man wood, huh? You and your kinky fetishes. Do you make the dolls watch?”

She ignores me, and uses her hip to push the box I’d started to move back onto its shelf. “That one.” She points.

“Espresso?” I ask, reading the label.

But Parker is now typing away on her phone. I shrug, pushing her out of the way so I can get at the box she indicated.

“How about tacos?” she asks, glancing up briefly from her phone.

“I just had Mexican last night,” I say through a grunt as I move the box into position.

“You said I could pick.” She gives me a challenging look, her goldish brown eyes practically daring me to argue with her.

“If it was a unilateral decision, why’d you even ask?”

“*Unilateral*. Good word. And it was a test. You passed,” she says, trotting to catch up with me as she replaces her phone in her purse. “So how did you and Airhead meet? The Beta Phi party last night? She looked like she was eighteen.”

“Airhead?” I ask.

“It was written on her pants. Literally.”

“Oh, right. Those weren’t her pants. Lindsay left them last week.”

She makes a disgusted face as she pulls her long dark hair into a messy bun. I don’t notice most things about Parker as a girl, because, ya know, it’s just Parker, but she does have some damn good hair. It’s all Victoria’s Secret model--like, long and dark with lightish streaks running through it.

The rest of her is kind of Victoria’s Secret-ish, too, but other than an initial moment of *whoa* when we first met, there’s never really been anything between us. I guess you could say I like her too much.

That and she’s dating Lance, and I like the guy. I mean, we’re not best friends or anything, but it’s impossible to live with Parker and not have some sort of friendship with her significant other.

Lance and I stop short of braiding each other’s hair, but we watch games together on occasion. I’d never make a move on his girl—even if I wanted Parker.

Which I don’t.

“So let me get this straight,” she says, as I swipe my credit card through the self-checkout machine. “One of your booty calls leaves her *pants*, which is weird, by the way, and then a week later, an underclassman sorority girl willingly puts them on?”

I shrug and give her a look out of the corner of my eye. “What’s wrong with that?”

Parker closes her eyes and sort of scratches at her eyebrow. “You don’t tell your mother any of this, do you?”

“Sure, we actually have a family blog, and I list my sexual activity for the week every Sunday. Is that weird?”

She ignores me, pulling out her phone again.

“Everything okay?” I ask curiously, as we head toward the garage.

“What do you mean?”

I glance at the phone in her hand. “You’re always riding my ass about being glued to my phone, but you’ve been on that thing all morning.”

“Sorry,” she says, glancing up and looking genuinely contrite. “Just going back and forth with Lance. He might have to cancel our date tonight.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t really pay much attention to Parker’s love life. I mean, I like Lance well enough. He’s cool, and I appreciate that he’s never been a jealous dick about the fact that his girlfriend lives with another guy.

But now that I think about it, seems like I haven’t seen him around much recently. Granted, they go over to Lance’s place more often than he comes to ours, seeing as he’s Mr. Fancy-Pants and doesn’t have a roommate, which means his place gives them more privacy to do... whatever.

But in the past he’d be over at least once a week or so, his books spread all over the kitchen table, his overpriced beer stocked in the fridge.

I try to remember the last time I saw him....It’s been days. Weeks, maybe.

And I'm pretty sure this is the third time in a week that Parker has mentioned he's had to cancel on her.

"He's crazy busy now with a bunch of group projects," she says, even though I didn't ask.

That, too, is strange. Parker is the most secure, comfortable-in-her-relationship girl that I know. She never gets defensive or makes excuses.

Still, I don't bug her about it. That's one house rule of hers that I happily get behind.

Each of us is there if the other needs to talk—always—but no prying.

We're both social, but deep down we're kind of private. I think that's why we get along so well. We can be social butterflies all day long with other people, but when it's just the two of us, we respect the quiet.

At lunch, Parker doesn't mention Lance again, and she's her usual cheerful self.

She's not acting like a girl with guy troubles, and I figure she's probably right about him being busy. I mean, dude's a freaking genius. He had a triple major from UO and then just recently was accepted to some fancy MBA program where he learns to crunch numbers like a boss.

I wouldn't be at all surprised if he jacks off to an Excel spreadsheet.

When we were in college, Lance made me feel like the worst kind of underachiever. He and I didn't hang out much back then—we ran in different circles. But he came over often enough to see Parker, and when he did... *always* with the damn books.

Parker, too, for that matter. She's not all *savant* like her boyfriend, but she was a bit more studious than me.

And by *a bit more studious*, I mean the only reason I ever went to the library was because she was always

dragging me along with her like there was a secret party I didn't know about.

Parker used to claim she brought me because she didn't want to wander alone around a huge college campus late at night.

Probably true.

But I suspect she also knew that without her interference, I would have defaulted to watching sports rather than putting in the extra effort to bring my work from B quality to the A level.

Because the truth is, I had to work my *ass* off to get good grades. I didn't struggle with school or anything, but let's just say that I've been out of college for two years, and hindsight has done nothing to change my perception that college's *real* benefits don't come just from the classroom.

I was more into the extracurriculars. Sports. Beer. Girls.

In other words, I was a regular dude. Still am.

I mean, I work for a sporting goods store, for God's sake. Technically, I work at the *headquarters* of a sporting goods store, and I'm on their e-commerce team, so it's not like I'm handling footballs on a daily basis or anything. But still. Sports.

And as for the women in my postcollege career? Plentiful. Despite everyone warning that it only gets harder to meet girls after college, I can't say it's been much of a problem. I just meet them at bars more often than at frat parties. Same game, different arena.

So, basically, not much has changed since college. Sports. Beer. Girls.

Sometimes I wish I cared a little more about bigger things, like work, or my future, the way that Lance and Parker do.

But despite my mom checking my homework every night growing up, and my dad and stepmom paying me for every A I got in high school, the academic bug never really bit me. I did just enough to get to the next step: private high school, respectable college, and then on to a prestigious law school like my older brother. *And* my sister.

It was the Olsen family path.

And one I didn't take.

I'd made it as far as applying. Was even accepted to a couple JD programs, although nowhere particularly impressive like the sibs.

And then was hit upside the head with the unpleasant surprise that I had absolutely zero interest in being a lawyer.

Two years later, Dad's finally getting over it. Mom's not.

Oh well.

I pay for our lunch as agreed, and back at the house, I keep my fingers crossed that Parker will be in one of her laundry moods, because I'm wearing my last pair of clean boxers.

Even though I'm far from a neat freak, I draw the line at doing underwear repeats. Especially when I'm planning on having female company. And since it's Saturday night, I *definitely* plan on having female company.

But Parker is in her room with the door closed, not prancing around the washing machine with her fancy detergent that she keeps hidden somewhere, so I'm on my own with the off-brand detergent.

An hour later, I'm halfway through "folding" some of my T-shirts when Parker comes into the kitchen and shoots an appalled look at my laundry basket.

Wordlessly she dumps the entire basket onto the table and begins refolding my shirts.

“Thanks, Mom.” I start to back toward the fridge for a beer, but she makes a buzzing noise and points at the pile. “I’ll *help*. Not do all of it.”

“Isn’t this, like, a step back in the women’s movement?” I ask, trying a little extra hard to line up some of the edges on my folding now that I have Laundry Nazi watching my every move. “You doing my laundry?”

“Totally. And if you tell anyone, I’ll de-ball you. But I find it kind of soothing. And I love the smell of clean clothes.” She lifts a shirt and sniffs.

I pause. “Well, that’s not *disturbing* at all. You and your doll Polly stay away from my new dresser. No sniffing the goods inside.”

“Trust me, once these clothes enter the smelly pigsty that is your bedroom, I’m steering clear. But fresh out of the dryer, before you’ve had a chance to sweat all over them? I love the smell of clean cotton.”

“You are such a weirdo,” I say. And then, on a whim, “Hey, Parks, you should come with me tonight.”

Parker doesn’t pause in folding as she meets my eyes. “Could you be more specific? I don’t have my calendar where I keep track of your every move handy.”

“There are a couple of parties happening. Thought I might hit up both, see which one is better.”

She clutches a T-shirt to her chest excitedly, her eyes wide and girlish. “You mean it? I get to tag along and watch you put the moves on eighteen-year-olds?”

“Hey, you were eighteen once, and I didn’t put the moves on you,” I say.

I don’t add that for the life of me, I still don’t know *why* I didn’t put the moves on her. Because sometimes when I look back at all those years, I’ll have a split

second of regret that I didn't act fast—that I didn't snatch up the best girl I've ever met when I had the chance. Because I can't *now*. She's someone else's girl. That, and I'm too afraid I'd mess up the best thing that ever happened to me.

“Good thing, too,” she replies. “If we were dating, I wouldn't be caught dead folding your shirts.”

“You don't help Lance do his laundry?”

I'd meant it as an off-the-cuff comment, but her fingers falter a little, and I wonder if I've inadvertently struck a nerve. Maybe I *should* ask if everything's okay with them.

But she recovers.

“Nah,” she says, with an easy smile. “He's almost as good a folder as me. It's part of why I love him.”

I fan myself. “What, he's a fantastic folder? Shit, you better put a ring on it, Parks!”

She makes a face and flings the last T-shirt at me. “That one should go. It has holes.”

“It's comfortable,” I say, glancing down at the faded Boston Red Sox shirt. I can't even remember where I got it; I'm a Chicago White Sox guy.

“It's a *rag*,” she says, snatching it out of my hands and tossing it into a bucket under the sink where we keep the cleaning stuff.

“Do I get to do that *It's a rag* routine with your underwear next time you do laundry?” I ask. “Because I've seen some of your panties. You may as well stitch death to boner across the front.”

She takes a sip of her water. “New house rule: No talking about Parker's panties. Actually, no using the word *panties* at all.”

I'm actually pretty sure that's not a *new* house rule. It sounds familiar, but I'm not about to remind her of this.

"Oh, come on," I argue. "You help my color-blind self pick out shirts, so why not let me return the favor by telling you which panties are going to depress the hell out of Lance?"

"Pass."

I tell her anyway. "Those big bunched ones that are light brown."

"Those are my PMS panties. They stay."

I point a finger at her. "House rule infraction. We're not allowed to say *panties*."

She rolls her eyes and heads toward the stairs. "I need to go finish that presentation for Monday's meeting."

I forget if I've mentioned it already, but Parks is a total workaholic.

"Fine," I call after her. "Go nerd it up, but at least *think* about the party."

Parker pauses. "You know I have girlfriends, right? I'm not so pathetic that when Lance cancels on me I'm going to be stuck home alone?"

"Yeah, I know, I just thought...I dunno. You looked bummed earlier today. Wanted to make sure you weren't going to stay home tonight listening to Bonnie Tyler."

She fluttered her eyelashes. "You worried about me, Olsen?"

"Nah. Just wary of coming home to you on the couch with Häagen-Dazs all over your face while reeking of estrogen."

She's already moving up the stairs. "Suddenly that D you got in biology is making total sense. You apparently missed the entire section on how hormones work."

“It just so happens that biology is a specialty of mine,”
I call up the stairs.

“Earlier today, you didn’t know what the uterus was,”
she calls back.

“I knew,” I mutter.

Mostly.

Chapter 3

Parker

Lance and I met when we were both sophomores, and if I'm being totally honest, it wasn't one of those tumbling-into-love scenarios. No sparks the first time our eyes met, no butterflies when his fingers brushed mine.

It was more like we recognized that we were, well, right for each other.

It started when we ended up in the same study group in the econ class that kicked my butt. Despite paying careful attention in class, despite my constant studying, the homework was harder for me than for everyone else. I'd still be struggling to decipher the question when the rest of my study group had already scribbled their answer. After a while, I got sick of holding the group up, so I'd just sort of pretend that I got it, only to have to muddle through on my own back in my dorm.

Then one night, when I was feeling particularly frustrated, on the verge of tears because I wasn't understanding anything and everyone else was understanding *everything*, Lance spoke up from the other side of the library table and asked almost the exact same question that I was too embarrassed to ask.

The same thing happened on the next question.

And the next.

It wasn't until the fifth time of Lance playing dumb that I realized he hadn't written a single word as the rest of the group patiently explained the answer to him. He wasn't even looking at his homework, which I later learned had been done hours earlier.

He was looking at *me*.

When I tilted my head in silent questioning, he winked.

And that, my friends, is how you win over Parker Blanton. Homework help followed by a subtle, flirtatious wink.

I fell. I fell hard.

And it should be noted that when Lance was going out of his mind trying to understand symbolism in British literature our junior year, it was me doling out the homework help, thank you very much.

I know it doesn't sound sexy, but like I said...it's *right*.

Or, at least, it was.

Confession time. I'm twenty-four, probably in my physical prime, with a gorgeous, serious boyfriend...

And my sex life seriously sucks.

It hasn't always. I lost Lady V my freshman year of college to a sexy baseball player who lived down the hall in our coed dorms. We dated for a couple months before learning the age-old lesson that sometimes being compatible in bed isn't enough to make a relationship work. After one too many meals filled with awkward silences, we split with no hard feelings.

I hooked up with one of Ben's friends later in freshman year, but that was more of a too-much-beer, too-little-sense kinda night, and it turned into a big fat nothing.

And then...Lance.

Our physical relationship progressed slowly. I don't think either of us wanted to mess up a good thing by rushing it. And when the sex did happen, it was good. Really good. Well, *pretty* good.

But at least it was frequent.

And then, a couple months ago, it just...stopped. I mean, I guess I *kind* of get why. Work's been crazy busy for me, and he has school and work.

But it's been two months.

As far as dry spells go, it's not horrible...

If you're *single*.

But when you're in a committed relationship, where there's been casual, hypothetical *marriage* talk? Two months is a long-ass time.

And it's not like there hasn't been opportunity. I have my own bedroom in the shared house with Ben, and Lance has his own apartment.

So how is it that we're having less sex now than when we were living in the dorms and had to tie dental floss on the doorknob to warn our respective roommates not to come a-knockin'?

Well, whatever. Tonight that changes.

I've spent extra time on my makeup, and I'll admit...I look awesome. The tight black tank top and jeans aren't anything special, but they're not meant to be.

It's what's *underneath* that is the real treat: a brand-new lingerie set that blows my shopping budget for, like, the next six months, but it's worth it.

It's red, lacy, and doing rather fantastic push-up things to my boobs, if I do say so myself.

I'm about to head out the door when I get a text from my friend Casey.

Bachelor in an hour? I've got popcorn....

For a half second, I'm tempted, because...*The Bachelor*.

But no. *No*. This is exactly how Lance and I got ourselves into this sexless mess...by not prioritizing our

relationship. And it's worth making time for, it really is.

I text her back. *Headed over to Lance's, but don't you dare tell me who gets a rose. I'm watching later.*

Her response is immediate. *U sure? I have prosecco.*

Damn. She knows I'm a sucker for sparkling wine.

I push through. *Spent triple digits on lingerie. Gotta go blow someone's mind.*

Casey responds. *Blow his mind, or blow his...*

I respond only with a "..."

Because...*maybe*. It has been two months, after all.

I stop by Ben's door and knock softly. Based on all his babbling about parties tonight, he's probably taking a nap to gear up for...well, whatever he does at parties.

Still, I knock anyway, because I know he'll want to know that I'm heading out. He's kind of a stickler about me telling him when I'll be gone all night, so he doesn't have to worry about coming after me with a shotgun to defend my honor.

He's cute.

"You there?" I whisper loudly.

Silence.

We each have a whiteboard on our doors for just these types of occasions (college-y, I know), and I scribble a note that I'll be spending the night at Lance's, and not to *do it* on my bed.

As an afterthought, I go back to my room, rummaging through my underwear drawer until I find the oversized beige PMS panties we'd discussed last week. I loop them over the corner of his whiteboard, knowing he'll correctly interpret it as *I mean it, seriously stay out of my bedroom.*

Lance lives in the Pearl, a trendy district that's a doable walk from my place, but considering my shoes—which, quite frankly, are awesome—I opt to drive over there, even though it's very un-Oregonian to drive when I can walk.

I was born and raised in the Portland area, and I'm barely exaggerating when I say that my first words were *cookie, Mama, and carbon emissions*. Recycling isn't so much an *if you think of it* so much as *do-or-die*, and the worst thing you can do in this city is honk at a bicyclist, because they're saving the planet as you slowly kill it with your evil car. Or something.

Still, I feel only a *twinge* of guilt at my unnecessary drive to Lance's. I have a Prius, thank you very much, and it's like I said...my shoes are really rather fabulous. Leopard print ankle boots with just enough heel to be completely sexy.

Parking in the Pearl generally sucks, but I'm lucky, and a car—another Prius, natch—is pulling away from a prime spot just across from Lance's apartment.

Lance is a studying machine by night, but by day, he has a cushy job as an accountant at a local investment firm, and it pays *way* better than my entry-level marketing gig, so he lives in a newish high-rise apartment building, complete with a doorman.

The broad-shouldered blond guy behind the reception desk gives me a wide smile when he sees me come in. "Ms. Blanton. It's been a while."

You're telling me.

"Hey, Erik. How's the wedding planning coming?"

"Oh, you know. Lots of education on the various shades of pink. The latest discussion is whether or not she wants to have a bustle on her dress. Do you have any idea what a bustle is?"

“Unfortunately I do. My cousin got married last summer, and it took four of us bridesmaids to figure it out.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t even want to know.”

“You absolutely don’t,” I say with a laugh, as I proceed to the elevators. “You mind letting me up?”

He hesitates for only the briefest of moments, and I feel a little stab of unease. While Erik’s job is making sure that no guests show up at a resident’s place unannounced, I’ve been on Lance’s approved guest list since he moved in. Usually Erik just buzzes me up.

For a terrible second, I wonder if Lance has taken me off the approved list, but then Erik does his thing and calls the elevator for me, so I figure I just imagined the whole thing. Hopefully.

“Wish me luck,” I mutter to nobody, as the elevator doors close.

Lance’s apartment is on the twelfth floor, and I make my way to his front door like I have a million times before. But *unlike* a million times before, I hesitate before knocking.

I shake off the weird sense of foreboding and give a determinedly perky knock.

My shoulders relax the second he opens the door. His reading glasses are perched on his nose, the way they always are when he’s deep in studying.

He looks the way he always does.

Although usually his expression is a little more *happy* and a little less *surprised*.

He shoves his phone in his back pocket and shakes his head, almost as though to orient himself to my presence. Only then does he smile. “Hey!”

There's the tiniest wiggle of warning still clinging on in the back of my mind, but then he smiles wider and gives me a long hug.

It's okay. We're fine. He's just been busy.

I tilt my head toward him, lowering my eyelashes just a little to look at his mouth in a way that I know from experience drives him crazy, but he's already pulling back.

No kiss.

Wha?

He hasn't seen me in a week, and no kiss?

Just like that, the wiggle of warning is back.

"I didn't know you were coming over!" he says.

Is it just me, or is his voice a little too cheerful? Like in the fake kind of way. I study him carefully as I step into his apartment, shutting the door behind me.

"Sorry, I should have texted," I say.

I expect him to tell me that it doesn't matter, that he's just happy to see me, but instead he sort of shrugs. At least he starts putting away some of the stuff on his kitchen counter, where he's obviously been deep in the books. I tell myself that it's a good sign, but I'm all too apprehensive that something may be even more wrong than I first suspected.

Nothing about this is the typical reaction of a boyfriend happy to see his long-lost girlfriend.

I start to sit on one of his counter stools, a part of me still hoping that the tension's all in my head, but at the last minute I stand back up instead of sitting.

"Hey, Lance?"

"Huh."

"What's going on?"

He looks up from where he's closing a spiral notebook.
"What do you mean?"

I just gaze at him with a look that says *Please don't play that game.*

To his credit, he doesn't. His shoulders slump just the tiniest bit as he lowers himself to a chair, his hands braced on his knees as he looks at the floor.

Oh...my...*shit.*

Shit.

I know that look.

That's a *dumper* look.

Maybe I should sit down after all.

I sit beside him, although I leave a chair between us. So much for coming over for a little booty call.

"I should have told you earlier." His voice is quiet.

"Tell me what, exactly?"

"I just...I'm not really feeling it, Parker." And then I have to give him credit, because he does the brave thing and actually makes eye contact with me as he breaks my heart. "I haven't been feeling it for a while."

No air. There is no air in this apartment.

"Okay. Okay," I say again, because damn it, there's a lump in my throat. "So you, like, don't want to do this anymore?"

Don't want to do *us*?

He reaches out for my hand, his fingertips brushing mine. "It just hit me toward the end of summer. We're so young, you know? You're my first serious girlfriend. How do we know that this is it?"

Because you just know, I want to scream.

But...do *I* even know? I mean, hypothetically, if I'd shown up tonight and Lance had had a ring, would I have felt anything beyond panic?

"Is there someone else?" I ask quietly. I hate myself for asking, but I wouldn't be human—or female—if I didn't want to know.

"No," he says quickly. "I mean, there is this teacher's aide, and...I mean, I noticed her, but I didn't cheat. I'd *never* ever cheat, Parker, you know that."

I know I should be focusing on the no-cheating part, but all I really heard was the "I noticed her."

He's been noticing other girls? No, worse than that. A girl. Singular.

I mean, yeah, nothing had happened. But he'd *noticed* her.

It feels like there's a big kitchen knife in my chest.

He squeezes my fingers. "I'm not ready to say goodbye to you forever. I just think we should take a step back."

I blink furiously to bat away the tears, and his face kind of crumples in regret, but I stand and back away from him. "A step back? So, what, you can go play the field, and then come back to me if you decide I'm what you want?"

He meets my eyes, and I see that they're a little bit shiny, too, and when he speaks, his voice is hoarse. "I feel like an ass, Parker."

"Well, you *are* an ass," I hear myself say as I stand and march toward his front door, fumbling at the doorknob. *Good response, Parker. Super mature.*

But my verbal vomit continues. "Don't expect me to just be sitting around waiting," I choke out.

Great. The soap opera script in my head is still unreeling.

“I won’t,” he says, a little desperately as he comes after me. “I want you to be happy, I just don’t think I’m the guy to—”

I slam the door on his sentence and it feels *fantastic*.

I wobble on my high heels toward the elevator, stabbing at the *down* button frantically. I keep an ear open in case Lance comes chasing after me, telling me how wrong he was, that he doesn’t want to end it after all.

But the elevator door opens, and Lance’s door stays shut.

I hiccup out a sob and step inside.

I’m pretty sure that this is no *break*.

This is *over*.

I can’t run through the lobby, partially because of the damn shoes, partially because Erik is giving me a worried, confused look.

“Ms. Blanton?”

I wave and give him a big smile as I sail past. A smile that I’m sure looks entirely clownish, given that I’m dying inside.

Erik smiles sympathetically in response. I’m sure the guy’s done enough people watching to know when a girl is fleeing after a fight with her boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend.

Oh God.

I’ve just been dumped.

Solidly dumped, too. It hadn’t been a big blowup fight; it had just been a quiet *I don’t love you anymore*, and that’s worse. So much worse than if I’d committed some transgression that had gotten me kicked to the curb.

I make it back to my car, and by now, the state of the ozone layer is the last thing on my mind. I drop my head to the wheel and debate my next move.

I should put my shoulders back. Sniffle back the snot, and drive home.

I lift my head. I should—

I suck in a hiccupping breath, but no tears come. It's as though I *want* to cry, but can't, because my body's too confused about how just an hour ago I was putting on Victoria's Secret's finest, and now I'm single and alone in a car on a Saturday night.

I'm twenty-four and dressed up, and have nowhere to go.

I see a grungy-looking dude carrying a skateboard under his arm checking me out as he passes my car and I squeeze my eyes shut, only to have them fly open again when my cellphone buzzes.

It's from Lance.

I'm sorry.

That's it. No *I take it back*. No *I didn't mean it*.

Screw him.

I delete the text with a hiss and lift my hands to the steering wheel only to realize that they're shaking wildly.

I drop them back to my lap, and a little surge of panic settles in, because I know I'm in no state to drive, even though it's only a couple minutes to home.

With a shaking hand, I reach for my cellphone again. Generally speaking, I'm more of a texter than a phone talker, but there are times when you need to hear someone's voice. When you need to connect with someone who *cares*.

This is one of those times.

Ben's name is in my FAVORITES list, and I hit DIAL.

He answers on the second ring. "Parks."

And then, for some weird reason, *that's* when the tears come. All at once, they flood my eyes and are running down my cheeks as I make an ugly blubbering noise.

"Parker?" Ben's voice is sharper now.

I try to take a deep breath and it sounds like a honk.
"Can you come get me?"

"Anywhere. Always."

Chapter 4

Ben

I've seen Parker cry a bunch of times.

When her grandfather died. When her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Anytime we've ever watched a movie where an animal's in distress. That time she slept through her world geography final sophomore year.

Once she had too much wine and said that the *rain* made her cry.

And no matter how legit the reasons (see: sad movie, mom getting cancer) or how absurd (the rain), I always do the same thing.

I hold her. I pet her hair. I let her soak my T-shirt with her tears, and supply her with ample tissues to cry into. (She's not a dainty crier, this one.)

Whatever the cause, the tears always rip at me a little bit, like there's this pressure on my chest that I don't know how to relieve. I mean, all girls' tears do that.

But Parker's especially. She's *my* girl.

And that weird feeling in my chest is definitely there this time. But it's accompanied by something else, too.

Anger.

All the other times, her tears were out of my control. I couldn't stop her grandfather dying, or her weird reaction to the rain.

But this time I have options.

One of which is beating the shit out of Lance Myers.

And right now, I want to.

I'm not a violent guy, strictly speaking.

But from the second I saw her trying futilely to hold back tears as she sat behind the wheel of her car, looking lost and devastated, to the moment I took her home and held her in my lap on the couch, I've thought about nothing except how good it would feel to plant my fist into Myers's preppy face.

He's a friend of mine, sure. I like the guy. I might even be a little bummed when my anger fades and I realize we won't be hanging out anymore.

But this isn't about Lance. It's about Parker.

And he hurt her.

But...

I'm pissed at myself, too.

Wasn't I *just* thinking this afternoon that something was off between them?

Could I have spared her this?

I could have. Or at least, I could have warned her.

Fuck.

Her tears seem to have eased up slightly, and mostly she's just curled in a ball with her head under my chin as she hiccups into a Kleenex. I pull back slightly, but I stop when her fingers clench my shirt.

I put my hand over hers, rubbing my thumb against her palm. I want to tell her that the jackass isn't worth the tears. *No* relationship is, but that's not what she needs to hear right now.

Still, I squeeze her hand, and start to set her aside again.

"You're leaving?" she asks.

"Just for a few minutes." I plant a spontaneous kiss on the side of her head.

She watches me with swollen, bloodshot eyes. “I’m ruining your night. You should go out.”

I squeeze her knee. “Don’t make me make a house rule about you not being an idiot.”

“I make the house rules. Not you.” She gives me a weepy smile.

I smile back. *There’s my girl.*

“Give me ten minutes,” I say, squeezing her knee again.

I grab my wallet off the counter before dashing to my car. I make it back in an impressive eight minutes, armed with supplies.

A quick peek in the living room shows she’s still on the couch, although she’s curled up on her side now.

I rummage around in our cupboards, but I can’t find any champagne flutes. I swear we used to have, like, ten, but then, this is a twenty-something house. Fine stemware doesn’t last long. I settle for a clunky wineglass-type thing and, after popping the cork, fill the glass nearly to the brim.

I return to the living room where Parker’s pulled herself into a sitting position. “Sorry I was lame,” she says, looking embarrassed.

“Aw, Parks. I’ve known you for six years. I love your lame.”

I hand her the glass, noting the way her eyes light up at the sight of the contents.

“Champagne?” she asks.

“Cheap prosecco. I had to make do with the corner store since it was close.”

“Worried I’d slit my wrists if you left me any longer?” she calls after me as I go to the kitchen to get myself a beer.

“More like worried you’d be singing Celine Dion while eating mayo out of the jar.”

“The night is young!” she calls back.

I smile, because she’s sounding more like her usual self, and as I pop the top off my beer, I pull out my phone and send a quick text message to Andie, the girl I’d hooked up with last weekend. I’d been hoping for a repeat, but...

Hey babe, can’t make it out tonight. Next weekend?

I start to put the phone back in my pocket when it buzzes. Andie is a fast texter.

Did u just blow me off?

I wince at the slightly proprietary tone of the text, but I still respond. *My roommate needs me.*

Sure. I bet. I’ve seen your “roommate.”

“Whatever,” I mutter. I shove the phone into the back pocket of my jeans even as it buzzes again. Andie just showed her hand, and it was a bad one. I don’t care how gorgeous a girl is, there’s one thing she can’t be:

Jealous.

I wouldn’t say I’m the type of guy prone to pet peeves, but I’ve developed a definite annoyance for people’s dull-witted assumption that just because Parker and I get along, enjoy each other’s company, and are compatible housemates means we’re supposed to be fuck buddies on the side.

Everyone acts like we’re giving the middle finger to nature or something. So, in turn, I give the middle finger to anyone who implies we’re anything other than what we are:

Friends who happen to have different chromosomes.

Get over it, world.

Also, note to self, remind Parker that you do too know something of biology.

I'm about to rejoin Parker on the couch, wondering if she'll be able to hold it together long enough to tell me what exactly went down with Lance, when there's a knock at the door.

It's John Harris, one of my good buddies. "'Sup," he says, letting himself in like he has a million times. "Wanted to see if you want to grab a beer at O'Perry's before the party."

John skids to a halt when he sees the red-nosed Parker on the couch, holding her enormous glass of bubbly between her two hands.

"Sweetheart," he says to her. "Who do I need to beat up?"

Parker and John have always gotten along, and she smiles, even though it looks a little forced. "I find I'm unexpectedly single," she says.

"That fuckwit." He opens his arms. "Hug?"

She hesitates for just the briefest of seconds, and, instinctively knowing she wants space, I thwop John on the shoulder. "Dude. Don't be that guy."

"What? I said *hug*, not *cop a feel*," he says as he drops his arms. "So I take it no party tonight, huh? You girls gonna stay in, eat ice cream, and bash men?"

"Popcorn, actually," I say, pointing to the table where I'd placed the microwave popcorn I'd picked up along with Parker's wine.

John lifts his eyebrows. "Two boxes? Aren't there three bags per box? Are you starting your own movie theater?"

"We always burn at least one bag. Our microwave is older than God."

“We should give the burnt popcorn to God!” Parker bursts out, before busting up laughing.

John looks at me out of the corner of his eye, and I mime a quick back and forth drinking motion. Parker’s oversized pour of prosecco is nearly empty already. Seems we’re headed toward a drown-your-sorrows kind of evening.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” he says, heading back toward the front door. “If she passes out early and you want to come out, text me?”

“Sure.”

I nod goodbye to John before detouring to the fridge for the prosecco bottle. Might as well leave it on the coffee table for easy access. At this rate, she won’t even register when it starts to get warm.

I plop on the couch next to her, top off her glass with a smaller pour this time, and pull her legs over mine.

“Talk or mute?” I ask.

It’s a game we play whenever the other person has something on their mind. You can either spill your guts, which is the *talk* option. Or keep it to yourself, *mute*, no judgment made, no offense taken.

“Talk,” she says surprising me. Then again, alcohol always brings out chatty Parker.

“He dumped me,” she says bluntly.

I already knew this, but I rub my palm over her shin. “He’s an idiot.”

“Yeah.” Her head flops against the couch cushion. “But so am I. I feel stupid for being blindsided, though. All the signs were there.”

This surprises me a little. I thought she’d been perfectly happy. Hell, I thought *she* thought she was

going to marry the guy. She'd always seemed so... content.

"Well." She takes a big swallow of wine before swinging her legs so her feet are on the floor before pouring a little more prosecco. She takes another big gulp. "We hadn't had sex in *this* long," she says, turning unsteadily toward me, hands held wide apart, index fingers extended. She nearly takes out my eye.

I gently catch her hand before she can blind me. "Oh, yeah?" I ask casually as I debate whether I can make a successful grab of her wineglass.

"*Yeah.*" It's only one word, but she manages to slur it. Was she always such a lightweight?

"Two days, huh?" I ask.

I lean forward to take the glass from her hand, but she pulls it away with a snort. "Only in your world would two *days* without sex be a long time."

"Two weeks? Are you fucking kidding me?" I ask, incredulous. I try to grab for the wine again, but her drunken reflexes are better than I expected, and she pulls it away again.

The look she gives me is half amused, half-horrified. "What are you, some sort of sex hound? Two weeks is nothing."

"Hey, I'm in my prime," I say. I start to make another grab for her wineglass, before I register what she's trying to tell me. If not two days, and not two weeks...

"Wait," I say. "*Wait.* You haven't had sex with Myers in two *months*?"

She tries to tap her nose as if to say *bingo*, but misses and taps her cheek instead.

I forget all about confiscating her wine. Hell, if she hasn't had sex in two months, she needs it. "And you thought that was normal?"

“No, Olsen, I didn’t think it was *normal*,” she says with a bit of an edge. “But he was busy, and I was busy...”

“Two months,” I say again.

“I was going to fix it,” she says, setting her wineglass down too hard on the coffee table. Luckily the ugly glass is bulky and sturdy as shit, so it doesn’t break. Actually, now that I think about it, it might be plastic. *Good call, Ben.*

I take another sip of my beer as I process the information. Lance hadn’t touched Parker for two months? Maybe I’m more sexually prolific than most, but that just seems...

My thoughts scatter as I realize that Parker’s wiggling out of her shirt. *What the—?* “Keep your clothes on, Blanton!”

Her shirt hits me in the chest, and she’s on her feet standing to face me, flinging her arms unsteadily to the side.

“*Look.*”

My vision seems to go blurry for a moment, and I want to glance down to see if I’ve drunk more than half my beer without realizing it, because I’m downright light-headed.

But I *can’t* glance at my beer, because I’m looking at Parker in a knockout red bra. And I mean to look away because it’s *Parker*, but she’s...stunning.

There is no other word for it. Parker Blanton without a shirt is stunning.

I’ve seen her in bikinis before. On spontaneous weekend trips to the coast with the gang, or spring break in Cabo. But she’d always been with Lance, and I generally had a flavor of the month, and although I registered Parker as having a good body—a *great* one, even—it had been in a sort of detached kind of way.

But I don't feel detached now, when she's so close to me, all golden creamy curves and slim waist and full, round breasts. And *damn*, that low-cut bra displays them to fucking perfection.

I chuck her shirt back at her. "Put this on. Now."

"I was trying to fix the no-sex thing," she says again, ignoring the shirt as it falls to the floor. "I bought this for Lance." She gestures up and down her body and I take a deep breath.

"But I didn't even get to show him." Her voice is glum. "*And* the panties match."

Her fingers move to her jeans button and I all but fly off the couch, heading for the kitchen to get another beer, or a glass of water, or maybe just a handful of ice to stuff down my pants.

She follows me, still rambling, and I pull another beer out of the fridge, tempted to rub it against my face in an effort to cool down. "You better have that shirt back on, Parks."

I turn around, but no. No shirt. I lock my eyes on a spot above her head, even as I feel the distinct stirring of my cock. I'm only human, after all. Objectively, I know she's *Parker*, best friend and platonic roommate.

But another part of me—the part currently swelling in my jeans—only knows her body is a fucking *ten*.

She opens her mouth, but I hold up a hand to stop her. "House rule. Shirts in the kitchen. Remember? That's *your* rule."

"One you break *all the time*," she says, making no effort to go retrieve her shirt.

"Fuck it," I mutter, and, setting my beer on the table, I quickly pull off my own T-shirt. I'm wearing a navy one layered over a white one, and I leave the bottom layer on, so we're not exchanging one shirtless disaster for

another. I move toward her and unceremoniously yank my free shirt over her head.

She obediently puts her arms through the armholes, apparently still unaware of the effect her half-naked body is having on mine. “Your shirt smells nice. Not like man stank,” she says happily.

“Wonderful.” I take a long pull of my beer. Then another.

“So anyway. I spent, like, a hundred dollars on slutty red lingerie that nobody will ever see,” she says, sounding adorably put out about it.

“Aw, Parks,” I say, my good-friend humor restored now that I don’t have perfect tits distracting me. “You’re acting like you’ll never have sex again. You can wear the slutty red stuff for some other guy.”

I expect her to continue her pity party, but instead her expression turns thoughtful. “You’re right.”

I narrow my eyes at her. I know that tone. That tone is dangerous.

She breaks out into a wide smile. “I’m going to be a girl version of Ben!”

My beer halts halfway to my lips as I try to follow. “What?”

She moves toward me. “I like sex, Ben. I miss it.”

Oh dear God, please don’t talk to me about sex after I just saw your tits.

“But you’re so right,” she continues. “I don’t have to wait for stupid Lance to come to his senses, or do the whole wretched-relationship thing again. I can do sex like you do sex. Whenever with whomever.”

“Okay, now hold on, Parks—”

She wags a finger in my face. “Be very careful what you say here, Ben Olsen. You wouldn’t be tempted to walk

into a double standard, now, would you? You know, take the stance that a guy who sleeps around is just a boys-will-be-boys player while the female equivalent is a slut.”

“No!” I’m annoyed by the accusation, but that doesn’t mean I like what Parker is suggesting with this wherever-whoever thing. I mean casual sex, *fine*. But going out of her way to seek it just doesn’t seem like her.

“I was just going to say that I think you should sleep on it,” I say. “You’ve been single all of two hours, and you chugged a bottle of wine in about a quarter of that time.”

I’m expecting her to rail at me for being a lecturing, sanctimonious ass, but to my surprise, she drops the scolding diva finger and purses her lips. “You’re right. I’ll wait until tomorrow to think things through.”

Thank God.

I feel a little tickle near my hairline and lift a hand to my temple where I feel moisture. Fuck me. Am I *sweating*?

“Popcorn, wine, and a movie?” she asks, then totters out to the coffee table and picks up a box of popcorn, bringing it back into the kitchen and holding it out at me with a friendly smile.

“Absolutely,” I say, grasping at the popcorn like it’s a lifeline. I’m beyond grateful that I don’t have to follow around a drunken Parker from bar to bar when she’s hell-bent on getting laid by some horny jackass who won’t call her tomorrow.

“Hey, Ben,” she says, turning back in the kitchen doorway.

I put the flat popcorn bag in the microwave and hit the POPCORN button. “What’s up?”

“Thank you. You’re my best friend. You know that, right?” She gives me a tentative smile.

Drunk Parker is cute. I smile. “Damn straight. And you’re my best friend, too, Parks.”

Just as long as you keep your shirt on.

Chapter 5

Parker

I spent all of yesterday hung over. It was a blessing, almost. I was so preoccupied with my headache and the queasiness that I didn't have much room to think about the whole being-dumped thing.

But today is Monday.

As if Mondays don't suck hard enough, I woke up feeling like garbage. Not because of the hangover; that was long gone, thanks to yesterday's diet of saltines and Gatorade.

Today's pain isn't physical. It's my *emotions* that are queasy.

I'm so out of it that I even let Ben drive us to work.

Usually I insist we take my car, because his is a big gas-guzzling monstrosity. (I suspect this is because Ben is from the Midwest and likely grew up learning about cattle and cow pies, while I was learning about kale and compost.)

But today I'm low on mental togetherness, and I need to save what few brain cells I do have for the weekly marketing meeting. The junior team takes turns presenting to senior leadership, and since there are eight of us who are low on the totem pole, I have to present only every two months or so.

Of *course* today would be my day. Just my luck.

"You're going to rock it," Ben says, weaving out of our lane and then back into it so fast I nearly get whiplash.

I spare him the tiniest of glares. He always says things like this with utter confidence, but what my best friend

doesn't realize is that not everybody is as effortless in front of people as he is.

Despite the fact that I was the better student and the more dedicated job seeker coming out of college, Ben had gotten twice the number of job offers as me.

Not because his grades were stellar, not because he had any sort of specialized skill set, but because the guy can *talk*.

To anyone, about anything.

I'm pretty sure he could convince a baby it didn't need milk and a dog it didn't like meat if he cared to.

But me? An effortless presentation took effort. I could fake it just fine when I practiced and when I was on my A game.

Today, I am not on my A game.

He glances over at me when I don't respond. "You okay?"

His voice is casual, but his eyes are concerned. Probably because I cried all over his shoulder on Saturday, got *wasted*, then spent all of yesterday locked in my room, opening it only to accept the crackers he brought me.

It's not exactly my typical *Parker's so together* routine.

But Ben knows me. And he knows that if he's *too* nice, I'll start to cry again.

"I'm good," I say, turning my head to face the window.

He nods. "So you won't have a breakdown when I tell you you have white stuff all over your shirt?"

I glance down and swear as I see the rather elaborate pattern of deodorant smeared all over my black top.

"Invisible solid my ass," I mutter, as I futilely wipe at it with my hand.

He nods his head toward the backseat. "There's a towel in my gym bag."

I give him a suspicious look.

"Clean," he clarifies.

"Probably thanks to me and my laundry addiction," I mutter, shifting around and unbuckling my seat belt so that I can reach into the back and dig through his bag.

The first thing my fingers find is small, square, and made of foil. I shake the condom in his face. "Really?"

Ben shrugs. "You never know."

"See, this is what I meant when I said I need to be more like you," I say, turning back around and dropping the condom into his bag. "Ready for sex anytime, anywhere. Even the gym, apparently."

"The gym's sort of the best place, sweetie," he says.

I pull back again. "Really?"

He nods, keeping his eyes on the road. "Are you kidding? All that sweat and blood pumping? You're telling me you've never been horny after a good workout?"

"Well, sure," I say, finally finding the towel and plopping back into my seat. "But where do you *do* it?"

"What?"

"You know," I say, gesturing with the towel, which thankfully, does seem to be clean. "You're off pumping iron, or whatever. Some hot thing on the elliptical catches your eye...then what?"

He grimaces. "Do we have to talk about this?"

"Yes!" I shake the towel. "I told you, I'm going to start doing what you do. Casual sex."

"Okay, first of all, the people that call it *casual sex* are absolutely the ones who should not be doing it. Second of

all, I was sort of hoping that you either didn't remember your insane declaration from Saturday night, or would at least acknowledge that it was a wine-motivated bad idea."

I rub furiously at the deodorant spot. "It's not a bad idea."

"It is."

"*You* do it."

"Yeah, but I'm..."

He breaks off, but I glance up, eyes narrowed. "You're what?"

"Nothing," he mutters.

"Were you just going to say that you're a guy?"

My memory of the other night is fuzzy, but I seem to remember him playing at the same double-standard shit then, too, and it pisses me off. Ben isn't a chauvinistic pig or anything, but I'm definitely getting the feeling that he thinks it's okay for him to play the field, but not for me to follow suit.

"Finish your sentence," I demand.

"Um, no," he says. "You're looking for a fight."

I purse my lips. "You're probably right."

"I'm definitely right," he says as he pulls onto the campus where we both work. We work in different buildings, and he pulls up in front of mine to drop me off.

"Girls like sex, too, you know," I say, making one last swipe at the deodorant mark that has more or less faded, and then gather up my purse and work bag.

Ben rolls his eyes. "Yes, Blanton, I'm aware that you're a modern woman. You're allowed to have sex wherever you want to."

“Even the gym?” I ask.

“Even the gym.”

I pounce. “Okay, seriously, *where?* I mean...there’s nowhere private. Is there? I guess there’s the bathroom, but nobody would ever—”

I break off as I see his wince that he tries to hide and fails.

“No!” I say, scandalized. “You do it in the *bathroom?*”

“Trust me, it’s not as weird or unusual as you think.”

“But—”

He shook his head. “No way. We’ll talk about it later. Go to work. I’ll tell you about the ins and outs of gym sex later. If you’re good, I can even explain how to do it in the shower.”

“Oh my God,” I mutter, opening the car door. “I bet you have athlete’s foot and don’t even know it.”

He motions impatiently for me to shut the door, and I do, turning toward the front door of my building. I dig out my security badge as he drives away.

Minutes later, I’m settling into my cube, my mind pulled in two directions, although, unfortunately, neither is the presentation that I have to give in forty minutes.

Instead, I’m torn between contemplating the logistics of sex in the gym and wanting to wallow in the fact that I’m in my second day of singledom, and not of my own doing.

A tall, thin blonde appears at the entrance of my cube and holds out a paper cup. “Coffee. My treat.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I say, gratefully accepting the cup of completely mediocre coffee that’s free to all employees. I hold out a hand, and she drops two creamers and a sugar packet into my palm.

“You’re good people, Bowman,” I say, adding the creamer and sugar to the cute polka-dot Kate Spade mug Lance got me when I first landed this job. For a second, I debate throwing the mug in the trash, but even getting dumped isn’t a good enough reason to defile Kate Spade.

I pour the coffee on top of the creamer before finally turning to face my friend, who’s flipping through something on her phone, too used to my morning coffee routine to bother watching it.

Lori Bowman is my best work friend, but not in the *We’re only friends because we work together* kind of way. The girl is legit. Snarky as hell, but also the first person to give you a hug when you realize after you’ve come out of a meeting with your boss’s boss that you have major pit stains.

“Huh. I just now realized I have a lot of armpit problems,” I say to her, taking a sip of my coffee.

“Huh?” she says, glancing up.

I point to my shirt. “Deodorant.”

“You should get the invisible kind.”

“I *did* get the invisible kind. Although it apparently doesn’t work because remember last week when I had big old wet spots under my arms like a homeless person?”

“Maybe you just forgot to put deodorant on that day,” she said.

I point at her. “See? That’s what I mean. My deodorant is either on my shirt, not working, or, apparently, not even applied at all. Armpit problems.”

Lori watches me, taking a sip of her own coffee, which she’s drinking from the provided paper cup because she’s not a weirdo about having it in her own mug like me.

“Help me out here, Parks, because it’s Monday morning, and I had a Sunday Fun-Day yesterday with

too many mimosas, and I'm having a hard time following.... When you say armpit problems, are you really talking about armpits? Or is it a code word for something else?"

Just like that, I deflate. "Lance and I broke up."

Her eyes bug out. "No. You guys were like...or you used to be like...*no*."

"Yup."

"Sweetie." She makes a pained sound and reaches out to stroke my head like I'm a dog, but it's actually kind of nice. No wonder dogs like it.

"What happened?" she asks.

I swallow and look down at my coffee. You know how it's really easy not to cry right up until the second you're expected to talk about it? Yeah, that.

Lori understands immediately. "Don't say another word. Not until after the meeting. You're looking fabulous, and red eyes and streaked makeup will ruin that."

I nod.

"We'll talk about something else," she muses. "How about this...the guy I went out with on Friday?"

I jump at the change of topic. "The one who made reservations at El Gaucho?"

Lori and I had been marveling at the fact that her blind date was taking her to one of the most expensive steakhouses in the city—perhaps *the* most expensive. She'd been looking forward to it for days, and we'd spent a ridiculous amount of time planning her outfit.

"Yup," she says, sitting on my desk. "That's the one. Get this. He 'forgot' his wallet."

My jaw drops. "No way."

“Yep. Doesn’t ‘realize’ until the end of the meal after he’d ordered a freaking porterhouse with a lobster tail side.”

My hand covers my mouth and a laugh bubbles up. “What did you do?”

She sighs dramatically. “What could I do? I paid. I think my credit card was *actually* sweating.”

“You think he did it on purpose?”

She shrugs. “I’m not sure. He seemed super apologetic, and told me, like, a million times he’d pay me back ‘next time,’ but even if there is a next time, I don’t know that I’d jump at the chance to go out with him. Nice enough guy, minus the wallet forgetfulness, but I didn’t really feel anything.”

I groan. “You’re not giving me much hope for the dating scene.”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Blanton. It’s a rough world out there. I hate being that girl that wants a boyfriend, but I haven’t been in a serious relationship in over a year, and I miss it, you know?”

I look away, and she slaps her forehead. “Sorry. *Sorry*. I’m such a bitch. Okay, no more talk about guys. Let’s go get the conference room set up and talk about how many passive-aggressive comments Eryn will make during the presentation, ’kay?”

An hour and a half later, the presentation is done, two more mugs of coffee have been consumed, and despite the fact that both Lori and another friend (who I’d texted about the breakup during yesterday’s wallowing hangover) have been texting me nonstop, trying to distract me with non-guy-related topics, I can’t stop my brain from going there.

But, oddly, not in an *I miss Lance so much* kind of way.

Perhaps that will come later. And not in the hurt-pride kind of way of the weekend, either.

I find myself thinking about sex.

I'd been mostly kidding in my interrogation of Ben about gym hookups, because I don't care *how* turned on I am by some six-packed hottie, I'm just not the type of girl to do it in the gym shower or wherever else Ben and his gym rats go at it.

But I *hadn't* been kidding about my foray into playing the field. I mean, I don't need to sleep with the whole town or anything, but I'm in my twenties. My libido is plenty healthy.

I should be getting some.

I *want* some.

I save the spreadsheet I've been staring at blindly for the past fifteen minutes and make my way over toward Lori's cube on the far side of the office.

"Parker!"

My footsteps slow slightly, and I silently scold myself as I realize my mistake in not walking the other way to Lori's cube.

I fix a smile on my face and pause outside my coworker's cube. "What's up?"

I'm sure Eryn Grading is a nice person.

She just hardly ever shows it. At least at work. Oh, sure, she can be sugary sweet when she wants to be, usually when our boss is around. But sometimes she says these things, and all you can do is stare at her and silently wonder if that's really what she wanted to say.

Eryn is sitting at her desk, so I'm towering over her, but then I tower over her even when she's standing. Not because I'm particularly tall at five foot six, but because she's barely five foot.

“Hey there, how’s it going?” she asks.

“Fine!” I chirp, patiently waiting for the real reason she stopped me.

“Good job on your presentation today,” she says, twirling a strand of her super-long hair around her finger.

“Thanks.” I shift my weight, wondering where the *but* is.

“But...”

There it is.

“I just thought you’d want to know that your slide on the first-quarter projections was a little bit cramped. I had a hard time reading it from the back of the room. I’m sure Michelle was a little disappointed, seeing as the senior VP showed up.”

Michelle is our boss, and considering she already told me the presentation was flawless, I’m not even remotely worried.

“I hope you don’t take that the wrong way,” she says.

“Oh, gosh no, it was *super* nice of you to let me know,” I say, already moving away. “Since we’re exchanging advice with no hard feelings, maybe sit in the front of the room next time? It sounds like possibly you’re a bit nearsighted.”

I move away before she can think up some sort of passive-aggressive comeback and make a beeline for Lori’s desk.

She’s on the phone with a vendor, so I hop up on her desk, waiting patiently for her to finish.

“We should go out tonight,” I say, the second she hangs up.

Lori’s blond eyebrows creep upward. “It’s Monday.”

“And that’s stopped you when?”

“I’m not the problem here, babycakes. You’re the one who likes to be tucked in by nine p.m. with your Ovaltine on weeknights.”

I hold up a finger. “Lance’s girlfriend didn’t go out on weeknights. But *single* Parker could definitely go for a couple cocktails.”

“Count me in,” she says, her voice slightly wary. “Is there an agenda?”

“Picking up boys,” I say, kicking my heels slightly against her desk drawer.

“Damn, Rebound Parker moves *fast*,” she says approvingly.

Rebound Parker. I like that.

“But, sweetie,” she says, flicking my knee with her fingers. “You’re not going to go dive-bombing into another relationship, right? You need time.”

“Fret not, dear friend. My needs are more...carnal.”

Her blue eyes go wide at that. “You’re looking to get laid?”

“Definitely. Well, eventually,” I amend. “But I’ve been out of the game awhile. I figure I need a few practice rounds, remember what it was like to flirt.”

“Honey, with looks like ours, we don’t need to flirt. A bit of lip gloss and a tight shirt, and they’ll be begging to take us home.”

I smile at Lori’s immodesty. I’ve always thought of myself as decent-looking, but Lori’s gorgeous and she knows it. She’s got long silky blond hair and these super-light-blue eyes that she accentuates with perfectly applied dark eye makeup. Adding insult to injury, she’s tall and lean and has amazing fashion sense.

“How about Whitehall Tavern?” I ask.

She purses her lips and considers. “A good training ground.”

“Training ground?” I ask, not at all liking the sound of it.

“Hey, you’re the one who said you need practice. And who better to show you the ropes than the Dating Huntress of Portland?”

I snort. “I thought you said just this morning that you want a steady boyfriend?”

“I do. Doesn’t mean I’m not *really* good at playing the field. Stick with me, my young apprentice.”

“That’s my plan,” I say, hopping off her desk. “Meet at seven?”

“Perfect,” she says. “Hey, you bringing Ben?”

I give her a look. “I thought we were over this.”

She gives me an innocent look. “Well, I’m just thinking that a guy’s perspective can’t hurt here.”

“I’m aware,” I say dryly. “And I have every intention of him being my other wingman. But not unless you promise me that you’re not still harboring your crush.”

“I don’t have a crush.”

I lift an eyebrow, and she groans. “It’s just that he’s *gorgeous*, Parks. You don’t see it, because you two have that weird blindness-to-each-other thing, but trust me. Ben Olsen is exactly the type of man that every woman should have in her bed at least once.”

I point a finger at her. “No. Promise me. No hitting on Ben.”

Lori’s lips move into a pout that somehow works for her. “But why?”

“Because despite all your *Huntress of Dating* babbling, I know you want something real,” I tell her, keeping my

voice gentle. “And I love Ben to death, but the guy is not cut out for commitment.”

“Maybe he just hasn’t met the right girl.”

“I mean this with love, but I don’t think you’re the first girl to think that.”

Lori sighs.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt,” I say.

“And if I just want to use him for his beautiful body?”

“Don’t be gross. And I’ve seen the way you laugh way too loud at his jokes. You’re halfway to a full crush, and not just on his biceps.”

“And yet he never makes a move,” she says, tapping her lip. “Am I not his type?”

I roll my eyes. Lori is *definitely* Ben’s type. Lori is every guy’s type. But I’ve given him this exact same warning. Not just about Lori, but all of my friends. It’s one of my house rules:

Don’t hit on my friends.

It’s not that I think every girl falls head over heels in love with Ben or anything, but *if* one of them does and gets hurt, I’m terrified of having to take sides. Of losing a friend.

“Seven o’clock,” I repeat, backing away from her. “I’ll bring Ben if you promise not to cop a feel.”

“I promise. But only because tonight is about getting your lady parts juiced up. Not mine.”

“Shhh!” I hiss, looking around.

She glances toward her cube wall. “Chris, are you over there?”

Nobody responds, and Lori gives me a perky smile. “See? He’s at lunch. Nobody around to hear about how lonely your nether regions are.”

“I’m so leaving now. No more talk of my female bits until I’m at least three drinks in.”

“Fine. But wear your good panties!” she calls after me. “Just in case!”

I smile as I walk away. Since tonight is more an opportunity to warm up my flirting skills than it is a full-blown sexcapade, I’m pretty sure nobody’s going to be seeing my panties.

Still. The fact that it’s even an option makes me feel... tingly.

Chapter 6

Ben

In theory, spending a random Monday night at a trendy bar with two hot girls is every twenty-something guy's dream.

But when one of those women is my untouchable best friend, and the other is her equally untouchable work friend, the reality isn't exactly my best-case scenario.

Especially since they're also dressed to kill, which means the women I *can* touch are likely to keep their distance.

Still, no way am I going to let Parker do this weird sex-stalking thing alone. Her wide smile and loud laugh aren't fooling me for a second. The girl's two days off a breakup from a relationship that lasted years. She's fragile.

And she needs tonight. I get that. Needs to rock the tight black dress and high heels and sexy makeup to shake off the sting of rejection. But she's out of practice with this, and I'm not convinced she'll be able to weed out the total douchebags.

That's where I come in.

And if I happen to take a hot girl home in the process... bonus.

"Another drink?" I ask Lori and Parker.

"What about that one?" Parker asks, ignoring my question as she takes a sip of her vodka tonic. "The guy in the blue shirt."

I follow her line of vision. "That blue shirt is denim. So that's a no."

“I second Ben’s assessment,” Lori says. “Denim shirts work on a Texan cowboy, but in Portland it’s just wrong.”

“What, so I can’t even talk with him because you two don’t like his shirt?” Parker asks.

“What about that one?” Lori says, pointing. “Black shirt, six o’clock. Great shoulders.”

Parker and I both turn our heads to look.

“But he’s already with someone,” Parker says.

Lori and I exchange a puzzled glance.

“The redhead he’s talking to?” Parker says, looking at us like we’re dense.

“Oh, they’re not together,” Lori says.

Parker frowns in confusion. “How do you know?”

“Because he came in with his guy friends just a few minutes after we got here,” Lori explains patiently.

“And Redhead was here *before* we arrived,” I add.

Parker gives us a baffled look. “How do you two know this?”

Lori reaches across and pats Parker’s hand. “This is why you brought us, sweetie.”

“Why, so I can learn how to stalk people? I wanted help with picking up guys, not CIA training.”

“It’s not so different,” I explain.

Parker gives me a look. “Puh-*leeze*. I’ve seen how often you’ve watched Jason Bourne. Keep your guy-spy fantasy out of this.”

“No, he’s right,” Lori says. “It is a little bit like spying.”

I give a *thank you, Lori* smile, and she smiles back, holding my eyes. I jerk my gaze away, lest Parker catch on. Lori is ridiculously hot, and in any other situation, I’d absolutely have made a move months ago.

But strangely enough, I sort of get why Parker's so determined not to let me hit on her friends. In a perfect world, Lori and I could hook up, scratch the itch, and move on. But despite Lori's sex-kitten vibes, I hear about all the dates she goes on from Parker.

Real dates, not drunken hookups.

I'm not looking for that. At all.

"So, wait," Parker says, taking another slurp of her drink. "You're telling me that I should be...casing the joint?"

"Absolutely," I say, managing to keep a straight face. "Be sure you bring your pistol, too."

She shoves her glass across the table at me. "Okay, smartass. I reject your sarcasm but accept your drink offer. So does Lori."

"One vodka tonic, one Jack and diet coming right up," I say, scooting out of the booth. "Also, Parks? Watch and learn."

I ignore her puzzled *Huh?* and make my way to the bar, deliberately positioning myself on the other side of the redhead who's talking to the guy in the black shirt.

The bartender doesn't see me, but I don't rush to catch her eye. I have a lesson to teach.

Black-Shirt Dude is talking Redhead's ear off about football.

Big mistake, dude.

But his mistake will make my job easier. I'm almost bummed. It's been a while since I've had a good challenge.

I raise my hand to get the attention of the bartender. A futile gesture, because the tatted-up blonde's back is to me and she's shaking the heck out of some cocktail, but it accomplishes what I need it to.

My elbow barely—just barely—hits the shoulder of Redhead, who’s standing to my right.

My hand is already touching her forearm in apology as she’s turning toward me.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say, laying it on a little thick. Most dudes would grunt an apology, if at all. But this kind of over-the-top courtesy has gotten me the girl more than a couple of times.

My fingers linger on her forearm as she turns all the way toward me, surprise flickering over her face. And the face is a good one. I was expecting her eyes to be hazel or brown, but they’re blue. She’s got a full mouth, which I like, because, *hello*, and her body’s as good from the front as it was from the back.

“No problem,” she says, a slow smile sliding over her face. It’s a predatory smile, which is kind of a turnoff, but I’m not marrying the girl, so it’s cool.

“Buy me a drink and we’ll call it even?” she says.

Yup. I’d been right. No challenge here. Still, just as well. The little lesson I’m putting on for Parker could not be going any better.

You’d better be watching this, Parks.

“I think I can do that,” I say easily to the girl. “What are you having?”

She pushes a near-empty glass toward me. “White wine. Whatever she’s pouring back there, I’m not picky.”

“You got it,” I say, before flicking my eyes to the dude in the black shirt who just now seems to be figuring out what’s going on here. I’m stealing his target.

“What are you drinking?” I ask him, to soften the blow. I’m not a *total* dick. Plus, I need him to stick around. With any luck, Lori will understand what I’m doing here and somehow maneuver Parker into this guy’s path. Not because I have any intention of letting her go home with

someone who looks slightly dead behind the eyes, but she said she wanted practice, and this guy's harmless.

"Um, beer?" he says.

I hide a grimace. Whitehorse Tavern has more than twenty beers on tap, some of them pretty damn good microbrews. *Beer* doesn't quite cut it as far as descriptors go. I'm about to ask if he wants to be a bit more specific, but the scent of familiar perfume catches my attention. Parker wears Chanel Chance. I know this because I buy it for her every Christmas. It's expensive, but it's a win-win, because she squeals in delight every time, and I don't have to do any thinking.

I turn around to find her looking at me in exasperation. She points at the glasses in front of me. "You forgot our drinks."

"I didn't forget," I say, giving her a meaningful look.

She tilts her head in confusion, clearly understanding that I'm trying to tell her something, but not comprehending what.

Good lord. I glance around for Lori, and find her back at the booth where I left her, engaged in conversation with a hipster type. Some wingwoman. I'm on my own.

"Parker, this is..."

I turn toward the redhead, using the opportunity to get her name.

"Terri," she says warily, her eyes doing a not-so-subtle once-over of Parker. This is why I don't usually try to pick up chicks when my best friend's in tow. She scares everyone away. Tonight in particular, she looks good, dressed in tight-as-sin jeans and a plain white T-shirt that should be harmless but fits her sort of perfectly. Her hair is in a ponytail, but not a messy gym ponytail; it's one of those careful, preppy ones that girls do.

“Parker,” she says, extending a hand. I hope Parker’s friendly smile will put Terri at ease, but Terri’s eyes merely narrow, and I mentally sigh.

“My cousin,” I say to Terri.

I don’t look at Parker, but I can feel her disapproval. She hates when I lie, and I’m not a fan of it myself. But it’s a necessity tonight, because Redhead is definitely thinking that Parker is competition.

Terri smiles at my new (false) revelation, which is good, but what’s even better is that the dopey beer guy in the black T-shirt also seems to jump to attention. His eyes move over Parker, his gaze as assessing as Terri’s was, but with a wholly different agenda. He smirks a little, and it sets my teeth on edge, but if this is what Parks wants...

I clear my throat meaningfully at Parker before turning back toward the bar, this time going all out in my effort to get the bartender’s attention. I need a drink. Stat.

Five minutes later, everyone’s drinks are full and Parker’s apparently figured out my game plan, because she’s leaning back against the bar, elbows propped up on the wood, and she’s laughing at something Black T-shirt is saying. I have to think her laugh’s fake; the dude seems like a bore to me, but this doesn’t seem like her fake laugh. I’m pretty familiar with Parker’s fake laugh, because I’ve heard it turned more than once on some of my ditzier sleepover buddies.

For my part, I’ve been trying to engage in conversation with Terri the redhead. She’s not one of the ditzzy ones, which, I guess, is refreshing, but I’m not really feeling it because she’s kind of...mean. I can overlook plenty of personality flaws in the name of extreme hotness, at least for a one-night stand, but the edge on this girl is exhausting.

“I just don’t get what they expect me to do,” she’s saying. “Like, use one of my vacation days so I can shuttle my grandpa back and forth between his nine million doctors’ appointments? But if I say no, I’m a bitch, right? My mom almost bit my head off when I suggested a cab.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, noncommittally, even though I barely know what she’s talking about. Something about her grandfather being diagnosed with some degenerative disease and everyone in the family taking turns getting him to various appointments.

A setup that Terri’s apparently not a fan of.

I can’t help but think back to when Parker’s mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and Parker dropped everything to help out with the chemo appointments and the devastating aftermath of the appointments.

Hell, so did I.

Mrs. Blanton all but became a surrogate mother during my college years when my own family was on the other side of the country. I’d have moved heaven and earth to be there for her on those afternoons when she lay weak and nauseous on the couch as we watched nonstop reruns of *Gilligan’s Island*, or whatever show she felt like binge watching.

My attention skips away from Terri once again as I watch Black T-shirt, whose name is Tad—seriously?—touch Parker’s hip.

Atta girl.

She may need a little help with the setup, but clearly she’s got enough moves to reel him in. Still, she can’t possibly be thinking—

I meet her eyes, and, sure enough, she’s glancing at me as often as she can without being obvious, and when our gazes lock, she widens her eyes slightly.

I hide a smile. Okay, so obviously we're going to have to coach her on the setup *and* the gracious exit. I'm mentally running through my long list of fail-proof excuses when Lori appears in front of us.

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Blanton, but it's eleven," Lori says, hitching a thumb over her shoulder toward the door.

"So?" Terri asks bitchily, giving Lori the same once-over she gave Parker.

Lori barely looks at her, focusing instead on a confused-looking Tad. "Parker and I made a pact. We've got to be heading home by eleven or we're really going to regret it at our eight a.m. meeting tomorrow."

Parker's nose scrunches for a second, and I suspect she's about to point out that they don't have an eight a.m. meeting tomorrow. And I know for a *fact* that there's been no previously discussed eleven o'clock curfew, but Terri and Tad don't need to know that.

I push back from the bar. "All right, fine," I say, fishing a few bills out of my wallet as a tip for the bartender. "But next time you two drag me out, do it on a Friday," I say with a little wink for Terri.

She frowns. "You're leaving?"

I shrug. "I'm their designated walker."

Lori snorts, but I actually mean it. Parker and I are about a ten-minute walk from the bar, and Lori's a fifteen-minute walk, and no way am I letting either of them do it alone, even if it's a tame Monday night in even tamer Portland.

Lori gives Parker about thirty seconds to mutter something soothing to Tad before reaching forward and grabbing Parker's wrist. "Gotta go."

When we're outside the bar, Parker skids to a halt and stares at the two of us. "Wait, so that's it? We're done?"

“You said you wanted practice,” Lori says with a shrug. “You got it.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No way were you going home with that dude,” I tell her, catching her elbow as she teeters just slightly in her high heels.

“Yeah. No, I mean...no, I didn’t want to,” she says. “He spent the entire time talking about football plays. But what about *you* guys? I don’t want the evening to be a total waste just because my first attempt at a hookup was a dud.”

“Oh, not a total waste,” Lori says, grinning as she fishes a business card out of her back pocket and flashes it at Parker. “I got myself the phone number of a guy who’s co-owner of that new Mexican place on Twelfth.”

“Of course you did,” Parker says with an indulgent sigh, before turning to me. “What about you? That redhead was totally giving you signals.”

“Ah, Parks,” I say, hooking an arm around her neck and pulling her in the direction of home. “I know.”

“But...don’t you want...you usually...”

Mimicking Lori’s motion just seconds before, I fish a cocktail napkin out of my pocket with a phone number scribbled on it.

Parker stares at it dumbly. “How...when?”

“She shoved it in my pocket as we were leaving,” I explain, shoving the napkin back in my pocket, even though I have no intention of calling bitchy Terri.

“I have so much to learn,” Parker says with a sad sigh.

“That’s what we’re here for,” I say. “Soon you’ll be a female version of me. Just not as good-looking.”

She punches my side, and I grin.

But as I walk the two girls home, I can't stop the strangest, most nagging thought.

I don't *want* Parker to become a female version of me.

Chapter 7

Parker

A year and a half ago, my mom called me up on a random Wednesday and asked if I wanted to grab coffee.

It was a weird request. Not because I don't like coffee, and not because I don't love my mom. But not only do my parents live in the suburbs, but my mom *works* in the suburbs, too. She's a high school science teacher.

So there was absolutely no reason she should be downtown on a random Wednesday, but somehow my brain didn't register alarm bells.

It should have.

Cancer.

She and I sat in at the café for nearly two hours, but when I walked away, only that one word stuck with me.

Later, much later, I would bone up on the details.

Lump. Stage Three. Chemo. Radiation. Mastectomy. Prognosis.

All, terrible, *terrible* words, stemming from that one destructive c-word.

The months that followed were as horrible as you'd expect. I cried. A lot. Even worse, my *dad* cried. My mom never did, and that almost made the whole thing worse, because she was the one who was sick, and she was so much stronger than any of us.

She lost her hair. She was sick and frail, but never weak in spirit. I went over there at least three times a week to see her, usually more, and even on the worst days she never once failed to greet me with a smile.

I'd wanted to shave my head to be in solidarity with her, but she wouldn't hear of it. I'd gotten my thick, dark, wavy hair from her, and she'd insisted that I keep mine long so her own hair wouldn't be a stranger when it came back.

So many evenings we'd sit quietly in the living room with a cup of tea, listening to her favorite female jazz musicians as she'd French braid my hair, me on the floor, her on the couch behind me, wearing one of her brightly colored scarves on her bare scalp.

It got worse before it got better. Grim doctors' appointments where the prognosis would give us a thread of hope, and not much more. A double mastectomy where she bravely had her own breasts cut away and replaced by something that looked the same, but wasn't.

And then...

And then my mom got better.

She's been in remission for five months now, and as full of life as she is, it seems like it's been years since we got the good news.

Her hair's still short, but sassily so. Her body's growing stronger every day. So much so that we're running a 5K together next month—a breast cancer fundraiser, where she'll proudly pin a survivor bib onto her shirt.

I couldn't be more proud.

Anyway, during my mom's sickness, I always knew that I wasn't alone, but I tried really hard not to let her sickness be about me. When I cried, it was late at night, when nobody was around. Not Lance, and not even Ben, although Ben knew that I was crying. I *knew* he knew, because some mornings I would find him asleep against my bedroom door, almost as though he'd set up camp there to guard me in my grief.

I don't mean to sell Lance short. He was there for me the entire time.

But it was Ben who really got me through that terrible time.

Ben who'd grieved with me, as though my mom and dad were his parents.

I've met Ben's *actual* parents a handful of times. At parent weekends, for graduation, and so forth. I even stayed at his dad and stepmom's for a full week one summer when I went out to visit. They were nice.

His mom is nice, too, in a controlling, intense kind of way.

But my parents? My parents are *awesome*. My house was totally the house where other kids wanted to come over to do homework, and where my volleyball team always wanted to do their slumber parties. Not because they were lax, *Do whatever you want, kids!* parents, but because they talked to me and my friends like we were people, not children.

And none of my friends benefited quite so much from their coolness as Ben. From the day I took him home my first month of college for a home-cooked meal and to do laundry (dorm laundry rooms are the *worst*), Ben had taken to my parents, and they to him.

I'm an only child, and though they never once indicated that they wanted more kids, I definitely got the impression that if they had a son, they'd want him to be like Ben.

He never tries to kiss their ass or impress them, and that only impresses them all the more.

And they'd never, ever admit it—again, because they're cool like that—but I'm pretty sure they preferred Ben to Lance.

Just slightly.

They were never anything less than perfectly nice to Lance when I brought him home for dinner, but my dad's offbeat humor went over Lance's head more often than not. And Lance, while well-intentioned, was far too deferential to my mother, who prefers someone who talks straight with her.

So tonight, I bring my parents a treat.

I bring them Ben.

"You sure it's cool that I'm tagging along?" Ben asks for the twelfth time, as I pull my Prius into my parents' driveway.

"Actually, no," I say, giving him a sad look. "Maybe stay in the car?"

"You know what I mean," he says, grabbing the bottle of wine we brought with us and shoving open the car door. "Usually Lance goes with you to family dinners."

I pause and look at him in surprise. His tone isn't quite petulant, but it's...*something*, and for the first time I wonder if Ben felt left out when Lance and I started getting serious, and I started taking him over to family dinners.

In college, I always brought Ben with me when I went home, but after graduation, Lance and I started to feel like more of a thing, so I brought him instead. Obviously. He was my boyfriend.

"You know you could have come with us," I say, shutting the car door.

"Yeah, that would have been awesome. Sitting in the backseat on the way over. Squeezing in a fifth chair at the table."

"You came over all the time when Mom was sick," I say.

And he had. I'd never loved my best friend more than when he volunteered—no, *insisted*—on helping out with

some of Mom's chemo appointments.

"Sure, because Lancelot wasn't there," he said, giving me a shit-eating grin.

I pinch his arm as we wipe our feet on the doormat, but the gesture practically breaks a nail because he's all muscle.

He knows I hate it when he calls Lance *Lancelot*.

"We're here," I holler, kicking off my shoes the second we get inside, making my way toward the kitchen.

"Honey!" Mom says, looking particularly glowing and radiant in a bright green turtleneck and jeans.

Her hug is warm and friendly, as always, but her hug for Ben is warmer and friendlier.

I roll my eyes as the two of them gab like long-separated best friends and head into the family room, where my dad is perched on the edge of his leather recliner. No doubt he started to get up when he heard my shout, only to become riveted by whatever sport was on.

"No. NoNoNoNo, YES! Yes!"

I glance at the TV. Baseball. Blerg.

I kiss my dad on the head and wait patiently for him to confirm that whatever call earned his *YES!* would stand. My dad *loves* sports. Not like the usual-guy level of sports adoration, but like, he freaking *loves* all things baseball, football, basketball, tennis, golf, you name it.

He played, like, every possible sport in high school, and baseball in college. He's got crazy-good athletic skills, none of which he passed on to his only child.

But he loves me more than sports. I know, because he mutes the TV and stands up to give me a big hug and a long, searching look, even though something exciting is happening on the screen behind him.

"You okay?" he asks quietly.

I nod. “Mom told you?”

My dad and I have a great relationship, but when it came time to tell my parents that Lance had dumped me, I opted for my mom, who is a little better at doling out relationship advice than dear old dad.

His hands rub my upper arms. “Breakups are hard, but it’ll all work out the way it’s supposed to.”

“I know,” I say, even though I’m only half-convinced that he’s right.

It’s been a week and a half since Lance dumped me, and the truth is, it’s gotten worse, not better. I’m over the anger and, for the most part, over the crying, but the emptiness...the longing. That’s still there.

“Jimbo!”

We both turn as Ben enters the room, and they do the fist-bump thing that Ben taught my dad a few years ago, then Ben throws himself on the couch and reaches for the remote to unmute the TV. “Damn. Close game.”

My dad’s eyes light up, but at the last minute, he glances at me.

I smile and wave a hand as I head back toward the kitchen. “Do your thing. Mom and I are going to go drink wine and man-bash.”

“Leave me off your hit list!” Ben calls after me. “Remember who pulled your disgusting hair clog out of the shower drain today!”

I poke my head back in the room. “Will do. And *you* remember who does your laundry, and most of the dishes, and keeps you stocked in that nasty protein powder you like, and who got rid of your latest psycho sugar baby—”

Ben turns the baseball game up to an ear-blasting decibel, and I grin, having proved my point.

Although, truth? I don't so much mind the household chores. I may have a *touch* of neat freak running through these bones.

My mom's pouring us each a glass of sauvignon blanc when I return to the kitchen.

To my surprise, she jerks her head toward the living room at the front of the house—a room we, like most families, use at Christmas and...that's it. We usually talk in the kitchen as she cooks and I pretend to help.

"Enchiladas are in the oven, salad's already made," she explains. "Besides, I want someone to appreciate the new throw pillows I splurged on. Your father's compliments ended at *They're pink*."

I follow her into the room. "Silly Dad. They're *clearly* raspberry."

She lifts a glass to me. "Vindication! Thank you."

I look her over as we settle into opposite chairs, but I do so subtly, knowing that she's trying so hard to put being sick behind her. As well she should, because she looks amazing.

"So," she says, the second I take a sip of wine. "Has he called yet?"

I shake my head, knowing immediately that she's asking about Lance. "Nothing. Not even a freaking text since the night he dumped me."

Mom purses her lips. "I suppose that's not such a bad thing. A clean break is probably better than a long, drawn-out painfest."

"That's what I thought!" I exclaim, leaning forward. "And it's so true in *theory*. But, in reality, it's making me feel a little...forgettable. How can Lance just put, like, five years of togetherness out of his mind like *that*?" I snap my fingers.

She takes a sip of wine and watches me. “You miss him?”

I glance at my glass. “I miss...yeah, I guess.”

But my tone is lukewarm, and her eyebrows lift. “Maybe you miss being in a relationship more than you miss Lance?”

I bite my fingernail. “Um, kind of...”

She gives me a puzzled look, and I know why. She and I have the type of relationship where I tell her everything. But right now, I’m holding back on her, and she knows it.

“I miss sex,” I blurt out, giving a frantic look toward the entry of the room to make sure my dad is still in sports heaven with Ben.

“Ah,” she says, sitting back in her seat.

To my relief, she looks merely understanding instead of uncomfortable. Seriously. She’s the best.

Mom purses her lips. “Was Lance...Was he—was it bad? With Lance I mean?”

“Not really,” I say, knowing what she’s asking. “It had become, um...infrequent, toward the end. Which I guess should have been a warning sign. But lately I’ve just been thinking, I’m young, I’m healthy, and I just want—”

“Sex,” she says.

I take a sip of wine. A big one. “Yeah. And please tell me you’re not going to call all your friends tomorrow and tell them your daughter’s a hussy,” I say, mostly joking.

She grins. “Please. If anything, I’ll be bragging about what an awesome mom I am for being able to have this conversation.”

“I can confirm that you are, in fact, awesome,” I say. “And, as such, I’m sure you have some sort of wisdom socked away about how physical relationships aren’t

everything, and I just need to cool my jets until the right guy comes along?”

“Absolutely not,” she says with a shake of her head. “I’m far too cool and liberal for that. I didn’t just live through the seventies, I embraced them in *every* way.”

I can’t hide my wince, and she gives me an evil grin. “I see the daughter’s not quite as cool as the mother.”

“Definitely not,” I mutter into my wine. Thinking about my mother and free love, or whatever. Eek.

“Don’t worry. I’ll spare you my glory days at Berkeley,” she says. “But I can tell you this, based on my experience...your heart doesn’t need to be engaged to have, um, well, fun. But you’ll enjoy it much more if you at least like the person.”

“See, that’s the thing,” I say, scooting toward the edge of the chair. “I’ve been going around to bars with friends for a week now. Not looking for a random hookup, so much as seeing what’s out there. And...*blech*. I see a good-looking guy, but two minutes into a conversation I want out.”

She nods. “Chemistry is like anything in life. The more you look for it, the harder it is to find.”

I slump back. “That’s your advice? That it’s going to be hard?”

“*Nooo*,” she says slowly. “I’m just saying that maybe you’re looking for the wrong thing. You’re trying too hard to find raw animal magnetism when what you really need to be looking for is connection.”

“Raw animal magnetism, Mom? Really?”

“You know what I mean.” She waves her glass. “What I’m trying to say is...go to the bars, be twenty-four, have fun. But you’re a smart girl with a good head on your shoulders, which means a great body and a nice face is perhaps never going to be enough for you.”

“Great,” I mutter. “So I don’t get good sex until I meet my soulmate?”

She smiles. “No, I’m saying find someone who you can *talk* to. Someone who makes you laugh. I think you’ll realize that that’s what you find attractive.”

I sigh. “So you’re saying I can’t just bone an empty shell of a man?”

Mom smiles. “It’s never that simple. But if you ever find one particularly well-endowed—”

“My ears! My ears are burning!”

We glance toward the doorway to see an appalled-looking Ben with his hands over his ears.

He shakes his head. “Since I can never unhear that, there’s only one thing to be done.”

Somberly, he makes a pistol shape with his right hand and holds it to his temple before glancing at both of us. “I want it on my tombstone that I’m one of the well-endowed ones. You two owe it to me, since this conversation was my cause of death.”

I laugh and hold my wineglass up. “Please. Last night you spent fourteen minutes explaining how you can gauge a woman’s bra size based on how her breasts fit into your palms. You can handle this.”

He jabs a finger at me. “Don’t say *bra* with me and your mother in the same room.”

“Don’t fret, Benjamin,” Mom says, holding up her own glass. “And Parker has the right idea. Fetch us more wine, sweetie.”

He gives a butler-esque bow and accepts the wineglasses. “Are you guys going to start talking about balls the second my back’s turned?”

“Of course not, darling,” Mom says mildly. “Much easier to discuss balls when you’re facing us.”

“Mrs. Blanton, congratulations,” he says as he turns on his heel. “You’ve done the impossible and officially scandalized me. As such, you can’t get mad at me for the fact that I’ve already eaten the outside edge of the brownies sitting on the stove.”

“That’s fair,” Mom says with a laugh.

But I barely hear this last part of the exchange.

The world has gone completely silent around me, as though I’m deep in a bubble of dangerous thoughts. *Very* dangerous thoughts.

Ben leaves the room, but I continue to stare after him for several long seconds before I slowly lift a finger to my lip and tap thoughtfully.

What if my mom is on to something?

What if the right guy to scratch my sexual itch is the one who makes me laugh? The one I can talk to.

What if the right guy...

...Has been right in front of me?

Chapter 8

Ben

Parker's mostly quiet on the drive home, which doesn't really alarm me. We're comfortable with each other's silences. But she was quiet at dinner, too, and that's unusual.

"Talk or mute?" I ask.

"Hmm?" she asks, not playing our usual game.

I glance at her more closely. "You're being weird."

She cuts me a look across the darkened car. Her expression is unreadable, and that worries me even more. I'm not good at very many things, but reading Parker has always been one of them.

That's what happens when someone is best friend, carpool buddy, and roommate. You start to know them as well as you know yourself. Better, actually.

"You going out tonight?" she asks.

I shrug. "Haven't decided. Why, you want to come?"

I'm silently hoping she'll say no. Not because I don't want to hang out with her, but because we've been "going out" more often than not lately, and while I've had a good time—mostly—I wouldn't mind a quiet evening. Chilling with Parks on the couch with bad TV or a stupid movie sounds way better than getting dressed up and talking to strangers.

Still, one of the things about having a female best friend is that when she asks you to be a wingman, you've got to do it the way you would for a guy friend.

But there's also an extra obligation of protection. She'd kill me if she knew it, but my reasons for tagging along

aren't so much about helping her get laid as they are making sure she doesn't end up with some asshole.

So, no, I don't want to go out tonight. But if she's going, I'm going.

"Nah, I think I'm staying in," she says. "I'm too full to even think about putting on anything other than pants with an elastic waist."

"Second helping of lasagna catching up with you?" I ask, relaxing a little now that she's not being all quiet and weird.

"Says the guy who had three."

I pat my stomach. "I would never offend your mother by eating anything less than an obscene amount."

Parker's mom is a decent cook, but it's not really about the quality of food so much as the homemade factor. I don't miss much about home, but I *do* miss home-cooked meals. Of course, family dinners at my house weren't quite as pleasant as they are at the Blantons'.

I could never decide which was worse, the lectures that ensued whenever I sat down to eat at my mother's house, or the awkward silences as my dad tried to figure out how to talk to us when we were kids.

Parker's fallen quiet again, and this time I let her stew.

Back at home, we both head into the kitchen, her to put leftovers in the fridge, me to get a glass of water.

I assume based on her quiet mood that she's going to retreat to her bedroom, but instead she sits at our small kitchen table, tapping her fingernails and staring at a random spot on the wall.

I roll my eyes, pour her a glass of water and sit across from her. "Spill."

Her eyes flick to mine and her lips purse, and I can tell she's debating whether or not to follow my instructions.

“Fine.” I hold up my hands. “I’ve done my best-friend duty. I’m not going to beg you to talk. Call Lori or Casey if you want to be coaxed into it.”

I’m a good friend. But I have limits.

She grabs my wrist as I pass. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Oh my God,” I mutter, fully annoyed with this girly fit. “Like I haven’t been trying to get you to talk for the past twenty minutes.”

She licks her lips and looks away as her fingers release my wrist.

I cross my arms and stare her down. She has about six seconds to spit out whatever has her all knotted up—

“Do you ever talk to the girls you sleep with?” Parker blurts out.

I lift an eyebrow. “You mean, do I remove their gag and allow them to speak? Only when they please me.”

Her foot sneaks out and nearly connects with my shin, but I dodge. “You know what I mean,” she says. “After you’re done saying whatever you need to to get in their pants, but *before* you begin your usual *Get them out of here* routine, do you talk to them?”

“Sure,” I say, completely unclear on where the heck she’s going with this.

“No, I mean do you *really*? Do you enjoy them?”

“I enjoy their—”

Parker holds up a hand. “No, I mean them as people. Do you *like* them?”

I scratch my cheek. “Why do I get the feeling I’m walking into a conversation in which I’ll inevitably look like an asshole?”

“So you don’t like them,” she concludes.

“Jeez, I don’t know, Parks. I don’t *dislike* them; otherwise, I wouldn’t bring them home or go back to their place or whatever. But it’s not like I—”

I scratch my cheek again, not really sure what she wants me to say. I’m a bit of a womanizer. I get that. But I never give anyone the wrong impression. I never imply that I’m interested in anything other than the one night.

I’ve never really felt bad about my relationship habits (although *relationship* feels like a strong word), but the way Parker is positioning these questions makes me feel like she’s setting me up for something.

“Are you having second thoughts about this whole casual sex thing?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Thank God.

Still, I’m surprised. Not so much that she’s changed her mind—she’s really not a one-night-stand kind of girl—but that she’s changing her mind before she’s even tried it.

Because as far as I know, despite our nearly nightly outings to various bars, she hasn’t hooked up with anyone since she and Lance split a couple weeks ago.

“I’ve been going about it all wrong,” she says.

“Well, yeah,” I say, folding my arms and leaning back against the counter. “But only because you seem to have a knack for finding the biggest douchebag in every bar we go into.”

“Exactly!” Her eyes light up, her voice excited. “I can’t even carry on a conversation with these bozos for more than a minute without wanting to blow my brains out.”

“Ah, and you want to know how I manage to carry on conversations with girls that I’m not really interested in,” I say, finally catching on. Or so I think.

“Um, no,” she says. “I don’t really give a crap.”

God help me, I might strangle her. “Do I even need to be here for this conversation?” I ask. “Seems to me like you can talk yourself into a circle all by yourself.”

She stands. “When I said I’m giving up on the casual sex thing, I meant I’m going to give up on doing the casual sex thing *your* way. Haven’t you ever wanted to enjoy the person you sleep with? To finish up doing, *you know*, and then not want to shove them out of bed?”

“Um, sure, but...”

“Don’t you wonder if it would be better with someone who didn’t drive you nuts? Someone you cared about?”

Warning bells sound in my head. I’d take a step back if I weren’t already backed against the counter. “Please tell me you aren’t going to set me up with one of your friends. I thought you were against that kind of cross pollination.”

“Oh, I am,” she says with an easy smile. “And don’t worry, what I’m proposing won’t end in you having to give anyone Valentine’s Day flowers or remember one-month anniversaries”

“That’s great, but I still don’t understand what this proposal is?”

And since when have she and I had such a hard time understanding each other?

Parker holds her hands out to the sides, then lets them drop. “I think we should hook up.”

I would just like to state—for the record—that I should win a goddamn medal for not laughing, fainting, or straight up walking out of the room.

“How much wine did you have?” I ask, even though I know she didn’t have more than two glasses, and stopped early in the evening since she was driving us home.

“I know,” she says, clasping her hands in front of her and biting her lip. “I know it sounds crazy, and I know I’m springing this on you—”

“You think?” I say, feeling the rare urge to lose my temper. “What the *hell* am I supposed to say to that, Parker? You’ll forgive me if I’m feeling a little blindsided here.”

She looks at the floor and, despite my anger, I feel a little twinge of guilt, because it can’t have been easy for her to say what she just said. It was a bold move. I’ll give her that.

But we’ve spent *years* trying to explain to everyone in the world about how we’re not friends with benefits, that we’re not friends with latent, unexplored romantic feelings, and here she is, willing to throw it all way for—

“Why?” I ask, realizing that that was the question I should have asked from the beginning. My voice is a little softer now. Knowing that there’s got to be a reason behind her sudden burst of insanity.

Her eyes meet mine again. “All the reasons I said. I want...I want to have fun with sex, you know? But I can’t do that as long as I’m preoccupied with how bored I am by the other person, or how annoying he is, or how do I know he wasn’t lying about being free of STDs, or how do I know he’s not a psycho...”

I smile a little at that, because it’s so *her*. “You’re overthinking it.”

“Exactly! My brain won’t let me do this with a stranger, because there are too many unknowns. I wouldn’t be able to relax and get lost in the moment. Maybe if I had years of practice like you, or even Lori...”

“Don’t bite my head off for suggesting this,” I say, holding up my hands. “But do you think maybe you’re just not meant for the casual sex thing? Why not wait

until the right guy comes around and get your rocks off *that way?*”

To my surprise, she doesn't lay into me for having a double standard, or even for using the phrase *get your rocks off*, which she's always hated.

“I can't risk it,” she says quietly.

I frown. “Can't risk what?”

Her voice is small. “My heart.”

My stomach clenches at that. She looks so damn fragile.

“Getting dumped *hurt*,” she continues. “I don't know that Lance was the love of my life. I'm guessing not, since I'm not exactly up in my room pining for him. But I did care about him—loved him—and he didn't love me back, and I don't want to *do* that again, Ben.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling so wildly unprepared for this kind of conversation it's not even funny.

I answer carefully. “I get that. I do. But the answer is not...you and me,” I finish awkwardly.

What would that even look like? Be like?

“But you have flings all the time,” she argues. “Why not with me?”

I give her a look. “You know why. It would mess everything up.”

“Not if we didn't let it,” she says, taking a half step forward. “We trust each other. Make each other laugh. And we're both attractive—”

“Yes, but not attracted to each other,” I'm quick to clarify.

She tilts her head and looks me over. “I bet we could get over that.”

I remember my strange reaction to a drunken Parker taking her shirt off a couple weeks ago and realize she's right. I could get over the *It's just Parker* thing real fast if I saw her in that sexy little red bra again. Or a black bra. Or no bra. Or...

"No," I say tersely. "Not happening."

"It wouldn't have to be weird," she says. "We've managed to avoid all the other clichés of guys and girls being friends, so what makes you think we can't also avoid the cliché of sex ruining the friendship?"

"Not happening," I say, finishing my water glass in two gulps and moving toward the fridge. Except not for more water. Beer. I've definitely earned one.

I feel her studying me as I dig around for the bottle opener. Feel her gaze as I take a long, much-needed pull on the IPA.

"You're probably right," she says finally.

Oh thank God.

"Glad to see you've seen the light," I say dryly.

She moves to the fridge to get herself a beer. "Right." Then she groans. "Ugh. That was...embarrassing. Sorry to put you through that. I just...I was discouraged and started thinking crazy."

"You think?"

She picks up the bottle top I left on the counter and drops that and her own into the trash. "I just kept trying to envision us kissing, and—"

Parker breaks off midsentence and gives a dramatic shudder. "Gross."

I pause with the bottle halfway to my mouth. *Gross?* Awkward, sure. Insane, yes. But *gross?*

"It wouldn't be that bad," I grumble before I can stop myself.

She looks at my mouth and then makes a face before turning away, giggling. “It would be! You know it would.”

Okay, I’m not proud of this, but...her laughter stings. Not in the *I’m going to need to go to therapy* kind of way, but my ego is definitely hurting, just a little.

I point my beer in her direction. “I’ll have you know that I’m a damn good kisser.”

“Sorry,” she says, shaking her head. “I bet you are, but I just can’t picture it.”

I stand up straighter as a thought jumps into my head. “Hold the fuck up. Is this some girly reverse psychology bullshit? You’re trying to get your way by goading me into proving that I’m a good kisser?”

“*Awww*,” she says in a teasing voice. “You’re upset! Did I insult your manhood?”

Yes.

“No,” I mutter.

“I’m sure you’re very good at what you do,” she says, heading toward the living room and patting my arm as she passes. “I just...”

She breaks off giggling again, and something inside me snaps at her laughter.

I grab her arm and pull her back around. “It wouldn’t be *gross*.”

Her nose wrinkles. “Okay.”

I can tell she doesn’t believe me, and my competitive juices boil over. I set my beer behind me on the counter. “Care to make a bet?”

“Like what, a kissing bet?” She looks at me like I’m crazy. And *gross*.

My eyes flick to her lips just for a second, and, strangely enough, it’s temporarily really easy to forget

that she's Parker because her mouth is...appealing.

"Scared?" I ask.

Parker rolls her eyes. "Oh, now who's playing games?"

But she's not scampering away, and I lean forward. "One kiss. If you still think it's gross, I'll do your laundry for a week."

"Like I'd let you touch my laundry."

"Fine, then first dibs on the shower for a week," I counter. "And I won't even complain if there's no hot water left."

Her eyes light with interest. Parker does like herself a long hot shower. "How about a month?"

"Done." I say. "But if you like the kiss...even a little...I get control of the remote for a month. No *Bachelor* unless I approve it. No watching that boring home-makeover show, and no damn cooking shows."

She bites her lip, and I know she's nervous, because this girl could happily spend *hours* watching people on TV make cupcakes.

The stakes are high.

But she must be pretty damn confident that kissing me will be a disaster, because she finally shrugs. "All right. I guess if you're *really* sure you won't mind the ice-cold showers for a month."

I cross my arms. "You're that sure I'm a bad kisser."

"No, I'm sure you're fine," she says, with a little wave of her hand. "It's just that I can't...I don't think I'll like it. You're too much like a brother."

Brother?

Brother?

What. The. Fuck.

Yes, Parker and I are platonic, and, yes, I love her as if she were— No. No. I can't even put the word *Parker* and *sister* in the same sentence.

Right now my cock's all too aware that she's *not* my sister, and that she's insulted my kissing skills.

Time to set the record straight. I haven't spent years cultivating my seduction techniques for nothing.

I pluck the beer bottle out of her hands and put it aside, moving to stand in front of her.

For the first time since the start of this insane conversation, the laughter fades from her eyes and she looks nervous. But she recovers immediately, giving me a mocking grin.

"Just tell me at what point I'm supposed to start swooning," she says sweetly.

"Oh, you'll know," I say.

I take a step toward her and she steps back. I frown. "This isn't going to work if you back away."

"Sorry," she says, holding up her hands, then dropping them. "It's just that this is weird."

It is weird. Horribly so. And yet I'm determined to make it happen. Because I'll admit it: I really want control of that remote. The thought of no ditzy reality TV, the possibility of unlimited sports, all the time...

I move toward her again and I reach out my hands, suddenly feeling a little unsure of where to put them. Waist? Face? Hips?

Don't overthink it.

I settle for resting them gently on her upper arms, since this is only going to be a quick, prove-my-point kind of kiss. And, yes, I can prove my point with a brief kiss. I'm that good.

Her hands stay where they are, although she licks her lips nervously, and my eyes follow the motion of her small pink tongue.

“You have to be honest,” I say, my voice lower than it was before. “If it’s good you have to say it’s good.”

She nods, and I trust her. The girl’s honest to a fault, at least with me.

My head moves forward a fraction of an inch, and then I pause as reality hits me. I’m about to kiss Parker. I’m about to kiss my best friend in the entire world, the most important person I’ve ever—

I push the thought aside. For right now she’s not Parker. Not *my* Parker. She’s just a gorgeous girl looking for a kiss.

I move closer, my eyes locked on her mouth and then...

She giggles.

“Parker!”

She slaps a hand over her mouth. “Sorry! I’m sorry, truly. Okay, do your thing.”

I grit my teeth, confidence shaken, and now I’m even more determined to prove her wrong. Make her regret the laughter. Make her—

My lips settle against hers just barely, and I hear her sharp intake of breath.

Feel it to my very soul. I take advantage of her surprise and move closer.

Her eyes are still open, as are mine, and the close-up eye contact is too weird, so I close mine as I try to deepen the kiss. My lips move against hers in careful friction.

My brain is spinning out of control, both with the unfamiliar yet familiar taste of her, as well as with what feels like a montage of every kissing trick I’ve ever learned.

Not too much slobber, not too much pressure. Don't drool, don't breathe too hard, don't chafe, don't rush...

So busy is my brain, so desperate is my attempt to be not *gross*, that it takes me far too long to realize that I'm the only one doing the kissing.

Parker isn't responding. Isn't kissing me back. *Certainly* isn't moaning in helpless pleasure.

Slowly, I pull back, my eyes opening, only to realize that hers have never closed.

To her credit, she doesn't laugh. She doesn't mock. But when she takes a step back, her expression is just the tiniest bit smug, and I can't blame her.

"Sucks about the month of cold showers you have ahead of you," she says in a sugary voice. "I, for one, won't be needing a cold shower, because that kiss was hardly—"

I advance on her, using my bigger frame to back her into the wall behind her, giving her about five seconds to realize what's about to happen before my hands clamp on her wrists. I lift her hands above her head, pinning her arms to the wall.

I have the briefest moment of satisfaction at the pure shock and lust on her face, before my body presses against her soft curves, before my mouth claims hers.

And this time, I kiss her for real.

Chapter 9

Parker

I've made a mistake. A horribly foolish tactical error:

I've underestimated Ben.

I should have known better. I know him better than anyone. Know him better than I know myself. I know how competitive he is, and should have known that those competitive urges would apply to his sexual prowess.

And holy *crap*, the guy has a hell of a lot of that.

The first kiss had been tepid at best. He'd been trying too hard, yes, but it wasn't all on him. Because *I'd* been trying pretty damn hard myself not to feel a damn thing. To not register that his lips felt just right and that he smelled really damn good. But there'd been too much brain at work, on both of our parts.

But this kiss—the second one—I don't even know where my brain is located.

There are only hands and lips and the feel of an aroused Ben against me. I should be running for the hills, and when this is over, I likely will.

But for now...

I kiss him back.

I've never been kissed like this. Never been pinned against the wall, my hands held out of commission by strong fingers and even stronger arms. Never had my mouth devoured like it was the best kind of dessert as a firm male body reminded me exactly how female I am.

I try to remember that this is Ben.

I do.

And then his tongue finds my upper lip, flicking twice until I gasp, and his tongue slides inside my mouth, tangling with mine, and I forget that I'm Parker, and he's Ben, and remember only that he is man and I am woman and that *this* is what we were meant to do.

I wiggle my fingers, twisting my wrists until he finally releases me, and my hands immediately go to his head, my fingers winding around his neck to keep his mouth close. His hands go to my waist, pinning me even more firmly to the wall as his hips tilt forward in a perfect reminder of what happens next.

And ohmigod, do I want what happens next.

I meant it when I backed off my crazy idea—because his rational explanation that we'd ruin a good thing made sense.

But I'm not caring even a little bit about sense right now.

Not when his mouth has moved to my neck, pressing hot, wet kisses beneath my ear, not when his hands have slid around to my back, moving over me in possessive strokes.

I want...him.

No, that's not right. I don't want Ben. I just want sex. Ben is merely the tool.

Right?

Right?

My brain doesn't confirm this for me, and it sends me into a panic.

My hands find his shoulders and push back, slightly at first, then more urgently.

He pulls back, slowly, reluctantly, and I brace myself for his look of smug victory, but surprisingly he doesn't look triumphant. He looks...confused.

Much like I feel.

I force myself to smile, suddenly desperate to take us back to where we've always been. Easy. Casual. *Friends*.

"Looks like you'll have to watch *The Bachelor* reruns on Hulu for a while, huh?" he says.

His grin is just a little bit slower to emerge than usual, but when it makes an appearance, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"So?" he asks. "Still think it was gross?"

"It was *okay*."

His palms are against the wall on either side of my head, and he slowly pushes back, putting space between us, and I'm both relieved and disappointed. "Okay?" he says.

"Okay, so you were right," I concede quickly. "But so was I."

"How do you figure?"

I flick a finger against his shoulder. "I told you that *this* could be better if you liked the other person."

He lifts an eyebrow and goes to retrieve our beers. "What makes you think it was better?"

It's my turn for a stung ego now. "You're telling me that all of your kisses are like that?"

Please say no.

He retrieves his beer. Takes a sip as he considers my question. "No. Not all kisses are like that."

My stomach leaps in relief.

"Okay, so you may have been on to something," he grumbles. "Maybe this friends-with-benefits thing could be...beneficial."

My belly flips. Not so much with the satisfaction of being proven right, but with a quick stab of panic at what

he's saying. Of what we might be on the verge of doing.

"Maybe we should rethink it," I say.

He gives me a look. "You're not going to try and tell me it was gross, are you?"

Quite the opposite.

"No, I just...maybe you were right. About things getting too complicated." I take a sip of the beer he's handed me. It's totally warm, which makes me wonder exactly how long that kiss lasted.

"Well, that's the beauty of being adults, Parks. We get to decide what we make complicated, and what we let be pure, uncomplicated fun."

I'm tempted. *Oh, how I'm tempted.*

"So how would this work?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes. "It's *your* idea. Didn't you work out any of the details while you were stewing on it the entire drive home from your parents'?"

Damn. Sometimes it's like the guy's inside my head.

"Well," I say, licking my lips, "I was thinking that the first rule is that there are no rules."

He laughs. "I bet your head just exploded. You love rules."

"I know, which is why this needs to be different." I rush to explain. "There's no limit on how many times we can...hook up. No timeline. We stop when it stops being fun."

"Is this an exclusive thing?"

My turn to laugh. "Now it's your head that's exploding. Do you even know what *exclusive* means?"

"I've heard of it," he grumbles. "I'm just wondering...are you going to flip your shit when I bring another girl home?"

“Okay, here’s where I’m at with that,” I say. “As long as we’re doing this—whatever this is—it’s just us. But the moment you decide you want to go back to your different-girl-every-night routine, just say the words, and we call this off, no hard feelings.”

Ben squints. “What about you? Same rules apply?”

“Yup.”

Not that I envision myself having a constant stream of bed partners like Ben, but I’m hoping that hooking up with someone I trust is exactly what I need to unlock my constant overthinking.

Maybe get me to just live instead of *thinking* so much about living.

“Okay,” he says simply. “When do we start?”

Again with the stomach flips.

“One more thing.” I hold up a finger. “I think we need some sort of safe word.”

Ben chokes on his beer. “What kind of things are you into, Parks?”

I roll my eyes. “Not *that* kind of safe word. I mean like if one of us wants out of the arrangement, for any reason, they can just say the word, and we end it, no questions asked, never to be mentioned again. And we go back to how we were.”

“But I thought we just agreed we weren’t going to let it be complicated.”

“We’re not,” I say quickly. “Doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be prepared. A fail-safe.”

He shrugs. “Fine. What’s the word?”

“Something random,” I say. “Something that we won’t say in regular conversation.”

“*Monogamy?*” he asks with a cocky grin.

“I was thinking more like...*kumquat*, or something.”

Ben busts up laughing. “Your safe word is one that contains *cum*, and a syllable that rhymes with *twat*?”

I blush. “You think of one, then!”

“How about *cello*,” he says.

“Like the musical instrument that nobody outside of a high school plays?”

“Exactly,” he says. “You barely know what it is. I *definitely* don’t know what it is. It’s for sure not going to come up in regular conversation.”

“All right,” I say, considering. “Works for me.”

“Okay, then. So...when do we start?”

His eyes drift over my body, and I laugh. “You are such a guy.”

“That kiss was *hot*, Parks. It’s not weird that I say that, right?”

“No,” I muse. “Oddly, it’s not. And yes, it was. Hot, I mean.”

Understatement.

“So what are we waiting for? My bed or yours?”

“Oh, that’s another thing,” I say. “You’ve got to keep your sheets clean. That or it’s always going to be my bed.”

“Overthinking it,” he says with a shake of his head. “Trust me, when we get into it, you won’t be caring whether or not the sheets are clean.”

“I’ll care.”

Except I’m not sure that I will. Not if he does other things as well as he kisses.

Ben finishes off his beer and drops the bottle into the recycling bin. Portland is rubbing off on him. When he

first moved to Oregon he used to throw away recyclable products like it was no big deal. I've trained him well.

He turns to face me. "Okay, obviously your overactive mind needs time to process this, so I'm going to go watch TV and relish my complete control over the remote. You let me know whenever you want to kick this off."

"Tomorrow night, eight o'clock," I say, before I lose my nerve.

He pauses in the process of reaching for another beer. "Oh, hell no. We're *scheduling* this shit?"

I lift my chin. "That's how I work. Take it or leave it."

And then, just to be a little evil, I let my tongue toy with my bottom lip. Slowly. Deliberately.

He notices.

"Fine." His voice is gruff. "Eight tomorrow."

Ten minutes later, we're both sprawled on the couch. I've lucked out, and there's no sports that he cares about on TV, so he's settled on some suspense-thriller movie neither of us have seen.

His legs are outstretched in front of him on the coffee table. Mine are stretched across his lap so I can lie on my side while watching the movie.

It's just like always. Nothing feels different; nothing feels weird.

Except one thing is a *little* different.

I find that I can't wait until eight o'clock tomorrow night.

Chapter 10

Ben

I like my job. I *really* like my job. And I seem to be pretty good at it, because rumor has it that I'm up for a promotion.

But today?

Today I can't concentrate for shit.

And I've become a clock-watcher. As in, I've become one of those sad day jobbers who look at the clock *constantly*, only to realize in outrage that just five minutes have passed since the last time they looked.

Except most people are anxiously awaiting five o'clock. The hour when they can jet to happy hour or yoga, or just get the hell out of Dodge.

Five o'clock means nothing to me. I need it to be eight o'clock.

The time when I'm going to see Parker Blanton naked.

The thought should fill me with dread, or at least panic. She's my best friend. It should be...wrong.

But after that kiss, I'm pretty sure the only thing *wrong* is that we haven't thought of this before.

No-strings-attached sex with the hottest girl I know, who I won't be dying to get rid of after?

Hell. Yes.

I try to turn my attention back to my computer. I'm a product manager on the e-commerce team, one of a half dozen assigned to the men's golf section.

I fucking love it. I know it's not cool to get all geeked out on a day job, and I certainly never expected to, but it comes pretty easy considering I didn't know much about

websites before I started here, and knew even less about golf.

My days are made up of brainstorming enhancements for the section, writing the requirements documents for those enhancements, then testing them, et cetera.

There's something very satisfying about managing the entire life cycle of something, and it's hard not to pat myself on the back for trusting my gut and not going to law school.

Even if it did put me at odds with the old 'rents.

"Wanna grab a burrito?"

Jason Styles has his palms resting on the ledge of my cube wall, chin resting on the backs of his hands as he gives me a pleading, hungry look.

I glance at the clock. "It's 11:07. I've barely finished breakfast."

"Exactly," he says. "We can beat the lunch rush."

I open my mouth to argue, then close it, shrugging as I lock my computer. Why the hell not? It's not like I'm getting anything done. Not with guaranteed sex on my calendar for later tonight.

Jason's right about Burrito King—and yes, it's called that—the line takes us two minutes instead of the usual twenty. "Let's eat it here," Jason says as we wait for our number to be called.

"Avoiding Sandy?" I ask.

Jason's grunt tells me I'm right.

I shake my head as I fill up my cup with Coke. "I told you, dude. You have got to stop hooking up with girls you work with."

"How else am I supposed to meet women? Not all of us can just walk into a bar and emerge with twenty phone numbers."

I ignore this.

“You know, I wouldn’t have this problem if you’d let me ask out Park—”

“Nope,” I say, before he’s even finished the sentence.

“But she’s single now.”

“How do you know?”

“I ran into her at Starbucks the other day. I think she was giving me hints.”

“Trust me. She wasn’t.”

Parker thinks Jason’s a total tool, and I can’t blame her. The guy’s one of my better work friends, but he’s got a bad habit of talking to women’s chests. He’s also got a knack for spending an hour chatting up a woman at a bar, only to get her name wrong at the end of it. And he wonders why he doesn’t get any phone numbers.

“Hey, speaking of Parker...” Jason says.

I whip my head around in the direction he’s indicated. No Parker, but it is her BFF Lori.

She seems to sense our gaze, and her face lights up in a smile as she beckons us over.

“She’s so hot,” Jason mutters under his breath as we make our way toward the gorgeous blonde.

“Hey, join me!” she says, gesturing toward the empty chairs at her table. “I skipped breakfast today and was starving but couldn’t talk Parker into an early lunch.”

She’s talking to both of us, but her eyes never leave mine, and I’m struck by the weird realization that this is one of the first times I’ve ever been around Lori without Parker.

Jason and I both sit down, he a bit too close to Lori, but she’s cool and doesn’t seem to mind.

But ten minutes into our lunch, I'm getting distinct vibes of *weird*. Despite Jason's very dedicated attempt to draw Lori into conversation, she manages to shift everything back to me.

"Were *you* at that concert, Ben?"

"Ben, doesn't that remind you of the time that we..."

"I'm not sure what I'm doing this weekend. Ben, do you have plans?"

Lori's always been flirty. I guess I'd always thought it was just sort of her personality.

Now, without Parker around to redirect conversation, I'm wondering if it's not a little bit more than that.

I finish my burrito and lean back in my chair. Jason is rambling on about how his uncle has a shot at getting Super Bowl tickets.

I glance at Lori—how can you not, when you feel someone's eyes burning into you?—and she gives me a shy, private smile.

I smile back, reflexively, but one thing is abundantly clear: Parker and Lori's Monday morning gossip session hadn't included the little arrangement Parker and I made.

Lori and Parker are tight, and even though Parker and I aren't a thing, there's no way Lori would be giving me all sorts of blatant hints if she knew that I was about to see her best friend naked in, oh, eight hours and ten minutes.

Not that I'm counting or anything.

"Yo, Olsen. Where'd you go?"

I glance over at Jason, who's giving me an impatient look.

"Sorry, what?"

“I was just saying that the four of us should go try this karaoke place my cousin told me about on Friday. Lori’s free, and I’m sure you can talk Parker into it. You in?”

He gives me a look that informs me bro code demands I say yes, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from asking which girl’s going to be the object of his slobbery affection on Friday night.

Still, I’ll confess that I do love a good round of tipsy karaoke, and he’s right—I can definitely talk Parker into it, because she also loves karaoke. Give her a glass or two of champagne, and you’ll be fighting her for the microphone.

“Sure, why not?” I say.

Lori’s smile turns into an all-out beam, and I have the first stab of awareness that my arrangement with Parker has the potential to get a *tad* more complicated than we thought.

Chapter 11

Parker

I keep waiting for things to turn weird with Ben and me.

I was braced for it this morning when we bickered over whether or not he used my towel again.

(He did. I totally know he did.)

I waited for it while he gamely sang along to my Taylor Swift album with me on the way to work.

I waited for it on the way home while I listened to him rant and rave about how his most recent work project had been put on hold because the funding had been applied to a higher priority project that he thought was “complete and utter bullshit.”

But by the time he helps himself to the chicken Parmesan I made for dinner, deliberately ignoring the salad, my fear has all but subsided.

Maybe we really *can* do this. Because, so far, the looming naked time hasn't done crap to rattle our friendship.

Now, granted, we haven't exactly seen each other's nether bits yet. *That* will be the true test.

I sneak a peek at the clock. Seven fifteen.

Forty-five minutes.

I wait for nervousness or second thoughts to settle in.

Waiting...

Waiting...

Nope. I'm pretty damn excited for this. My lady parts are in *need*.

“Hey, you wanna go to karaoke on Friday?” he asks.

“Oh, right,” I say, using my fingers to pick up a long string of mozzarella cheese and plop it into my mouth as I settle at the kitchen table. “Lori mentioned it. Some new place that Jason found?”

“I don’t know that it’ll be any Cody’s,” Ben says, referring to our favorite karaoke bar from college. “But I’m game if you are.”

I shrug. “I’m in.”

I love karaoke. I love singing in general, really.

Ben sits down at the table across from me, shoveling a huge bite of chicken into his mouth. He washes it down with a swallow of beer and then leans back in his chair. “Hey, has Lori said anything about me?”

I glance up at him in surprise. “What, you mean like she wants to meet you under the bleachers after study hall?”

“You know what I mean. I was getting...vibes from her at lunch today.”

I slowly chew my mouthful of salad and then swallow. “Well...she wants to jump your bones, if that’s what you mean.”

He lifts his T-shirt, revealing perfect abs. “Right?” he says. “Who doesn’t? But no, I mean...never mind.”

“What?” I ask, tilting my head.

“I was just curious if you told her about you and me, and our...arrangement.”

“Nope,” I say emphatically, “I was kind of thinking we could keep that quiet. You know, so people don’t start making weird assumptions.”

“Agreed,” he says quickly. “It’s just...I get the feeling she wishes I’d ask her out or something. Maybe I’m being a conceited ass. It’s probably nothing.”

I glance down at my plate. It's not nothing. His instincts are dead-on.

I feel a little stab of guilt.

Guilt over the fact that Lori is truly interested in Ben as a potential boyfriend, and I've been steering her clear of him, only to then go and hook up with him myself.

Still, it's not like I've been vag-blocking her out of spite or jealousy.

I just don't want Lori to get her heart broken when he doesn't fall back. Because Lori's at risk of falling for him.

I'm not. My eyes are wide open. Eyes that maybe, *definitely*, appreciated the flat, ribbed stomach he'd just flashed a few seconds earlier.

I'm only starting to get really into a yummy visual—a visual of me licking the defined lines of Ben's abs—when a thought hits me.

One that's way more disturbing than Ben's six-pack.

“Do you *like* Lori?” I ask.

He pauses in chewing his chicken, and the look on his face is comical. And relieving.

“No,” he says, once he's swallowed. “I mean yeah, sure, I like her, but I'm not...I don't—”

“I know,” I say with a small smile. “You never.”

He lifts a shoulder. “She's great. I'm just not really interested in a girlfriend, even with someone as cool as her.”

“See, that's what I tell her!” I say, throwing up my hands. “But she insists on her little crush.”

Ben wiggles his eyebrows. “Because I'm irresistible.”

I ignore this. “You'll tell me, right? If there is a girl that interests you...like that.”

He nods. “Sure, definitely. I’ll keep you updated on that as well as the progress of hell freezing over.”

I dig back into my dinner, satisfied that we’re on the same page on the Lori front.

Although now I’m wondering if maybe I should tell Lori about our little arrangement. Because if she finds out by accident, she’ll be hurt. Not only because I didn’t tell her, but because I’m afraid she won’t understand it.

For the most part, Lori’s pretty good about comprehending that Ben and I are truly just friends.

But learning that we’re also sex buddies might push the limits on just how understanding my friend is.

And it’s not just Lori who’s bound to lift an eyebrow. I have a good feeling that everyone in my life will have some choice thoughts on my arrangement with Ben.

But I don’t care. I find that all I can think about is the fact that in twenty minutes...

Wait. Wait! Twenty minutes? That’s it!

I noisily drop my fork and stare at my nearly empty plate in horror.

Ben doesn’t even pause in his eating as he looks at me. “What’s up with you?”

“I need a reprieve,” I say.

He frowns. “You’re chickening out?”

“No, I just—I need an extra hour.”

He glances over his shoulder at the clock, then back at me. “Why?”

I point down to my plate. Isn’t it obvious?

Ben shakes his head to indicate he doesn’t understand.

Men.

“I just wolfed down an entire plate of chicken Parmesan, heavy on the cheese,” I explain patiently.

“So?”

“So,” I say, “*obviously* I need to let the food settle.”

“Sex isn’t like swimming, Parks. You don’t have to wait for thirty minutes before diving in.”

He takes another huge bite, and I stare at him aghast. “You’re telling me you can actually feel sexy immediately after eating a huge meal?”

Ben looks down at his plate. Back at me. “Absolutely.”

“Well, I can’t. I’m a girl. We need time for the food baby to go away.”

“Food baby? Do I even want to know what that is?”

“It’s...never mind,” I say, pushing my chair back and picking up my plate.

“Hold up.” Ben grabs my wrist as I’m moving toward the sink and then uses his fork to stab the last bite of chicken that’s on my plate and pops it into his mouth.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter.

He comes up behind me, taking my plate before I can rinse it, and cleans off both plates himself before setting them in the dishwasher. Loading the dishwasher is one chore he’s quite good at. *Unloading*, not so much.

“You’re not serious, right?” he asks.

“Yes I’m serious! I can’t have sex now. What if I get...rumbly?”

Ben busts up laughing. “Oh my God, no *wonder* you and Lance never had sex. Rumbly?”

I punch him in the shoulder. “Keep it up and my hour reprieve will turn into *days*.”

“Okay, okay, listen,” he says, setting his hands on my shoulders. “I get *maybe* how you could feel that way on a

first date, or the first time you sleep with some dude destined to be the future Mr. Blanton. But, Parks, it's me. That's the whole reason we have this arrangement, right? So we don't have to worry about things like food babies, or rumbling, or farting in bed—"

I hold up a finger. "There will be *no* farting in bed. Clear?"

He continues as though I haven't spoken. "Since it's just me, you won't have to worry if you're at just the right angle that makes your stomach look flattest—and don't lie, I know you girls do that—and *I* don't have to worry about what you'll think of my size. Just kidding on that last one, I know it's hugely impressive, and—"

I laugh, pushing him backward. "Okay, fine. You win. You promise not to notice my food baby, and I'll promise not to laugh at your tiny thingy."

His smile drops in mock seriousness. "You take that back."

I shrug. "Sorry. I have my theories, and—"

Ben's fingers wrap around my wrist, and before I know what's happening he's tugging me out of the kitchen toward the stairs.

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you think?" he answers.

"But it's not eight o'clock yet."

"Close enough, Parks. Close enough."

Well.

Okay, then.

Chapter 12

Ben

“You first,” I command.

Parker’s hands land on her hips. “No way. *You* first.”

I grin, because I’m already in motion before she’s finished speaking, one hand reaching behind my head to grab a fistful of shirt, yanking it up and off.

I toss it aside.

Parker’s eyes narrow at my now shirtless abs. “You *knew* I was going to say that.”

“Guilty.”

“Now your turn,” I coax.

She doesn’t move, and we stand facing off in her bedroom.

“The door’s open,” she says prissily.

“Nobody else is here,” I say, with what I think is admirable patience. “Just us.”

“But—”

I anticipate this, too, once again moving quickly, but this time reaching for *her* shirt, which, thankfully, is a stretchy, striped affair that allows for fast, uncomplicated removal.

“Ben!” she shrieks.

I toss her shirt into a pile with mine. *Success*.

Only this time, I’m not *quite* as cocky.

Because for all of Parker’s fussing about her food baby, or whatever, from where I’m standing, she’s pretty much flawless.

I thought I was prepared for this, but seeing her standing there all narrow waist and full breasts, I find that my mouth is dry and my brain is barely working.

Also, cock hard.

My stunned response to her body, newly shed of clothing, must give her confidence. Her nervousness melts away in front of my eyes, and it's her turn to smirk smugly.

“Your turn,” she says sweetly, her hands returning to her waist, but this time in a saucy, provocative manner, as her right hip cocks to one side.

My moves aren't quite as smooth this time.

My fingers manage the buttons of my jeans with ease, but in my haste to get them off, I forget that I'm still wearing shoes and socks, which ends in me having to hobble awkwardly to the bed to disrobe.

Parker cracks up at my clumsiness, and I grin as I hurl my jeans at her.

I'm horny, yes—definitely—but it also hits me that sex with Parker might be fun in a way that I haven't experienced before.

I put my hands behind me, leaning back on the bed wearing only my boxer shorts, as I look her over and her laughter slowly fades.

She lifts her thumb to her mouth and bites her nail.

She's nervous.

We can't have that.

I stand up, moving toward her slowly this time until we're standing face-to-face, chest to chest. Her bra is low-cut and black and lacy, but I force myself to look only at her face.

“Kiss me,” I say.

“Hmm?” She’s staring at my boxers. Or, more likely, the bulge beneath them.

“Kiss me.” It’s a command.

Her eyes jerk back to mine, holding just briefly, as though seeking reassurance. And then she seems to find it, because her eyes lower to my mouth and go smoky.

I take a step closer still, my head lowering just slightly so it’s within easy reach.

“Kiss me.” This time it’s a whisper.

Parker lifts up onto her toes, tilts her chin up, and softly—softly—rests her mouth against mine.

And then she kisses me.

I let her take control. It’s the least I can do after the way I devoured her against our kitchen wall yesterday. It’s her turn to drive.

Her palms cup my face and her lips coax mine apart. Her tongue finds mine, tentatively at first, and I groan at the goodness of it.

Parker’s arms wind around my neck, deepening the kiss and bringing our upper bodies into skin-to-skin contact.

That’s when I lose it. My arms go around her waist, my hands touching every bit of bare skin they can as we kiss hungrily.

I use my nose to nudge her chin upward so I can kiss down her neck, and her head falls backward with a groan, all that long, glorious hair spilling downward toward her butt.

I tangle my fingers in her dark waves to hold her head captive.

I’ve yet to encounter a woman who doesn’t like her neck kissed, but Parker *really* likes it. She’s wiggling

against me all sex kitten–like, and I’m beyond hard and I haven’t even gotten her bra off yet.

Speaking of...

My fingers reluctantly release her hair, and my mouth claims hers again as I move my hands upward on her back those crucial few inches to the clasp of her bra.

I unhook it easily, but I pause before pulling the lacy garment off, my head leaning back slightly to meet her eyes and make sure we’re on the same page.

Her eyes are glossy and dazed.

Yup. *Definitely* on the same page.

With a wicked grin, I slide the black straps over her shoulders, pausing at the tipping point for several seconds to torture us both, and then...

Parker Blanton is well and truly topless.

My grin widens as I smile down at her. “Parks. I think this might be the best idea you’ve ever had.”

Her voice is raspy. “More touching. Less talking.”

I move my hands upward, pausing before I touch her. “I thought you wanted to bang your best friend *because* of the talking. Isn’t that what you said? Parks?”

She growls in frustration, arching her back and leaning in so that her breasts find my hands, and I find that she’s absolutely right.

I was doing too much talking, and not enough of *this*.

Her breasts are full and firm and perfect. Sensitive, too, if the little mewling noises she’s making are any indication.

I let my palms explore, learning her shape until I reward us both for our patience with a swipe of my thumbs against her nipples, and she responds by

grabbing my ass and pulling me toward her with a soft curse.

I kiss her again, once, hard, then I push her toward the bed until the back of her legs hit it and she has no choice but to sit.

My eyes never leave the awesomeness of her breasts as my fingers undo the button of her black pants, pulling them over long slim legs. Those, too, join our growing pile of discarded clothes, and then it's just Parker in her little black panties and me in my boxers.

I can't stop looking at her, but she doesn't seem to mind, because she's doing a little looking of her own, and then she clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle.

"Are we nuts to be doing this?" she asks.

"Absolutely," I say, putting one knee on the bed, a hand on her shoulder pushing her back.

If Parker liked my mouth on her neck, she likes my mouth on her breasts even more. Likes it when I tease her with gentle kisses on the soft undersides, likes when I trail my tongue between them, *loves* when I take a nipple in my mouth and suck.

So lost am I in her perfection that I don't register right away that her hands are working frantically at the waistband of my boxers.

"Someone's in a hurry," I say, pulling back.

"Three months, Ben," she says. "I'm going on *three months*."

"Say no more."

I get rid of my boxers in seconds, but I take my time with her panties, easing them down just slowly enough to build her anticipation, my eyes dragging over her long legs.

And then I toss aside the last remaining garment between me and my best friend.

No. Fucking. Regrets.

She apparently feels the same, because she pushes up onto one elbow, her other hand hooking around my neck to pull my mouth down into a hot-as-hell kiss.

I kiss her back, our tongues playing some game of love and war as my hand slides slowly downward, over her flat stomach (*food baby*, my ass) until I find her wet and smooth and slick under my fingertips.

She bites my lip as I finger her, and it destroys the last bit of my self-control. I pull back and dive at her nightstand like a dying man. “Tell me you have condoms in here.”

Parker doesn’t answer. She doesn’t have to, because the drawer of her nightstand is nothing *but* condoms.

“Holy hell, Parks, I think you’re going to be single-handedly responsible for a global latex shortage.”

She bites her lip and looks at me. “I went to Costco after work while you were at the gym.”

I can only shake my head as I pluck out one of the eight million foil packages. “A girl who buys condoms in bulk. We *really* should have done this sooner.”

I turn back to her, and, despite the urgency of the moments before, I search her face.

This is it.

The turning point.

And although I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want to slide between her legs, I’m not going to ruin our friendship over it. I have to know....

She reaches out. Touches my cock, and it all but leaps into her hand. She strokes me in firm, smooth motions, then licks her lips.

“Okay, then,” I mutter around a groan as I tear open the condom wrapper with my teeth.

She scoots back on the bed as I move over her, her legs spreading as I settle between them. Parker is panting now. Hell, so am I, and it seems crazy that I haven’t been fantasizing about this since the moment I met her, because I’ve never wanted anyone, or anything, this badly.

My hands are on either side of her, her hands are on my waist, and I pause as long as I can, drawing out the moment.

I slide forward, and *oh fuck* she’s perfect. Tight and wet and ready. I gasp a little as I slide further into her, her nails digging into me, pulling me forward as she moans something that might be *please*.

When I’m all the way inside her, I pause.

I savor.

Now, I wouldn’t say I rush this moment with other girls, but, let’s face it, once you’ve found your way home, it’s all sort of the downward rush toward glory, right? I tend to sort of get in, get out.

But it’s different with Parker. More important somehow, so I linger just for a moment, feeling her, watching her face, learning her breathing.

And then she says it again. *Please*.

I lean down, my lips finding hers as I pull out—all the way out—and then sink back in, all the way, our moans mingling together.

I keep the pace slow and steady, at least as slow as I’m able, wanting to make it good for her, because, like she said...three months.

But apparently her sex hiatus has her all revved up and ready to go, because her breathing quickens in no time, her hips urging me on at a faster pace.

I know she's close and my hand slides down, and that's all it takes; one brush of my finger against her, and she's arching, crying out, and clenching around me all at the same time.

The sight and sound of her coming apart destroy me.

I manage only two more strokes before I, too, go over the edge, pulling the soft skin of her neck between my teeth, softly, as I shudder inside her.

I collapse.

She lets me, her arms falling from my back to lay limply out at her side, as I pant into her neck.

I don't know how much time passes. Seconds? Minutes?

Days?

She turns her head so her mouth is near my ear. "So."

"So," I say in response, before pulling myself up just slightly to look into her face, praying I won't see regret.

"That was..." She breaks off.

"Yeah." I say. Because I get it. No words.

"So...again?" Her voice is hopeful, and I smile.

Yup, *definitely* should have done this a long time ago.

Chapter 13

Parker

Twenty minutes later, the sex haze has receded at least a little bit. Long enough for Ben and me to get back to doing what we do so well:

Arguing about the shower.

“I won the kissing bet fair and square,” I say, trying to pinch the arm that lays draped across my stomach. “The kiss *sucked*, so therefore I get first shower. Now, and every day for the next month. That was the deal. Now let me up.”

“No way. Yesterday’s kiss did *not* suck. I had you pinned between me and the kitchen wall and you *liked* it.”

“That was the *second* kiss,” I say, hoping he appreciates the patience in my tone. “Our deal was about the first kiss.”

“No, the second kiss was just round two of the first kiss. I could have sworn we agreed on this last night. You let me pick the TV channel, as was our agreement.”

“Well, now I’ve had time to reconsider it,” I say primly. “I’ve decided that I won.”

“Oh, *you* decided,” he says, lifting up on one arm slightly to stare down at me. “So that’s it?”

I pretend to think about this. Then, “Yup. Pretty much.”

His eyes narrow. “I made you come. Two times. You don’t get two orgasms *and* the first shower.”

I manage to lift his arm high enough to wiggle beneath it. “It’s because of those orgasms that I *need* the shower. I’m all...sticky.”

He lifts an eyebrow, then sits up naked, unabashed. “Oh, you want the logistics of the aftermath. I’ll show you the aftermath.”

He points toward the floor, and we both look down to the two used condoms.

Gross. So, so, so *gross*.

“Not it,” we say at the same time.

Then I’m darting toward the bathroom, squealing when I hear his *No fucking way!* followed by the sound of his feet hitting the floor.

I nearly have the door closed before his palm hits it, shoving it back open again, backing me into the bathroom.

“Be a gentleman, Olsen,” I say, even though I’m giggling.

“Be a lady, Blanton.”

We’re grinning at each other like fools, and I can’t figure out why I ever thought that this wouldn’t work. Sure, it had been weird for, like, a half second when he took my shirt off, but then it had been...good. No, it had been perfect.

And, best of all, it had been fun, and wasn’t that the entire point of sex?

He moves toward me and I take a step back, glancing behind me and realizing that there’s virtually no room between me and the tub.

When there’s nowhere else for me to go, he stops and leans toward me, then a little bit more, and then...

His hand snakes behind the curtain and he turns the water on.

“Tell me you’re turning that on for me,” I say as he stands upright again.

“Nope.” He jerks the shower curtain to one side. “I’m turning it on for us.”

“What? Oh...*oh*,” I say as his hands find my waist, lifting me up and into the tub. He follows me in, closing the curtain so it’s just us in our nakedness and steam.

“Clever,” I say, my voice catching a little as his hands move up over my sides.

“Yeah?” he leans down, his teeth softly tugging at my earlobe. “I thought this had a nice win-win appeal to it.”

His mouth moves down my neck and my eyes flutter closed. I’ve always been a sucker for neck kisses, and Ben seems to have figured this out in record time.

He scoots closer and my eyes fly open once more.

“How are you ready again?” I ask.

I feel him smile against the skin of my neck. “I’m twenty-four. At my sexual peak, baby.”

Lance is twenty-four, too, but he was more of a one-time-then-nap sort of lover. Or, toward the end, a one-time-then-back-to-the-books lover. But even after two rounds of very enthusiastic sex, there’s no questioning that Ben’s lower anatomy is ready for round three.

And, to my surprise, I’m ready, too. Two minutes ago, I was pretty damn sure all I wanted was a long, hot shower and maybe the proverbial cigarette to celebrate the end of my celibacy, but with his mouth doing that thing under my ear...

My hands roam over his rather perfect upper body, my fingertips taking particular interest in the lines of his abs. Then I remember my vision from earlier. The one where I lick every inch of his delicious stomach.

I push at Ben’s shoulders and he pulls back. I’m oddly gratified to see that his eyes are hazy with desire just from kissing my neck. Wonder what he’ll do if I do *this*...

I lean forward, pressing my lips softly to his shoulder, then taking a not-so-soft bite out of the hard flesh.

He hisses, and I smile as my lips travel downward until I get to that glorious six-pack. Or is it an eight-pack?

I let my lips and tongue find out as I trace the firm plains of his muscled abs. His fingers tangle roughly in my wet hair, and the still-hot water pounds against my back as I explore.

My lips drift ever lower, and I hear his breathing grow more ragged.

Wicked, dirty thoughts enter my mind as I grin against his stomach and lower to my knees.

I glance up and lick my lips and Ben groans.

I set my mouth against his cock and he swears. I smile in victory. I've never been quite this brazen, but somehow with Ben, I don't feel embarrassed or tentative. I feel bold and exploratory, and a little bit dirty.

And then I get *a lot* dirty.

Five minutes later a gasping Ben pulls me to my feet and I smile smugly.

His eyes narrow. "Feeling proud of ourself, are we?"

"I'm just sayin', I've never heard you say my name quite like that before. Also, the water's turning cold—"

He spins me around, reversing our positions. "You're going to forget all about the temperature of the water in a minute."

"No, I really won't—"

But then he drops to his knees, and it's his turn to look up at me wickedly. "Ben—"

He leans forward, his tongue finding me, and damn it, he's right. I forget *all* about the cold water.

Several minutes later, he stands, and once I stop gasping I hit his shoulder. “Now who’s looking smug?”

We hurriedly soap up and rinse in the now-freezing water before fighting over, you guessed it, the towel.

“It’s my towel, Ben. This is why we have different colors.”

“Yeah, but that’s the one I used this morning,” he says, pointing at it.

“I knew it! I *knew* you were lying.”

He takes advantage of my outrage to grab it from me. “Don’t think just because we’re fuck buddies means I’m going to start acting differently.”

“What, you mean like human?” I mutter as I reach under the sink to where I keep a spare towel.

He pauses in the process of drying himself. “How did I not know there were clean towels under there?”

“Simple,” I say. “I keep the cleaning supplies under here as well, which means this particular cupboard physically repels you.”

“Huh.” He nudges me aside, opening up the medicine cabinet to get at his deodorant.

I do the same, and it hits me then how truly good our situation is. There’s no embarrassed aftermath, no awkward sneaking out of bed, no regrets.

“Wanna watch a movie?” he asks, tying the towel in a knot at his waist and opening the bathroom door.

“Sure. I get to pick.”

“Nope. Your taste in movies sucks.”

My hand snakes out and undoes the knot he’s just tied so that the towel falls to his feet just as he starts to walk, causing him to stumble a little.

“Oops,” I say sweetly, scooting past him toward my bedroom.

“Just because we’re hooking up doesn’t mean you can demand nonstop naked time—”

I let my own towel drop, giving him an unobstructed view of my butt as I walk away.

“Okay, maybe nonstop naked time is fine!” he calls after me as I shut the door to my bedroom.

I’m still smiling as I put on my PJs, wind my wet hair into a bun, and then head downstairs to where Ben’s already on the couch, remote in hand.

I glance at the open DVD box on the coffee table. “*The Proposal?*” I ask excitedly. “Really?”

He gives a weary sigh. “Call it gratitude for the blow job.”

I grin as I plop down beside him, feeling ridiculously content. No, more than content. Happy.

We definitely should have started doing this a *long* time ago.

Chapter 14

Ben

Parker's right on karaoke schedule. Two glasses of sparkling wine, and *bam*. She's up onstage.

It's not even her turn, but I guess that's one of the benefits of being a hot girl with a hot friend. It took Lori and Parker all of eight seconds and two pretty smiles (with the help of Lori's low-cut shirt, I'd guess) to convince the group of guys who were next in the queue to let them cut in line.

"Your girl's good," Jason says from where he sits next to me, nursing a whiskey.

I tense for a half second at Jason's reference to Parker as my girl, but have to remind myself that he said it a million times before Parker and I started hooking up, and he just means it in the way that she's, well...my girl. But not my *girl*.

Anyway.

Parker's good. Really good. She and Lori have chosen some Destiny's Child song from way back when—one of those ones where I find I seem to know all the words although I couldn't tell you the name of the song if you held a gun to my head.

The bar's freaking loving them.

Rare is the karaoke singer who's got the looks and the voice, but Parker does.

Lori's voice isn't quite as good, and she's mostly sticking to backup, but she's far from tone-deaf. Plus she's more than making up for mediocre vocal talent with sexy dance moves.

The girls wrap up their song to a standing ovation before making their way back toward our table, laughing.

Parker grabs my drink and takes a long sip. “*God*, that’s good.”

“The beer or the stage?” I ask.

“Both.” She slumps back against the booth with a smile. “I think we need more champagne.”

“You *always* think we need more champagne,” Lori says. “But this time I’m in agreement.”

Jason flags down a frazzled-looking server and we order another round, as Lori and Parker start plotting their next song.

“Let’s just go put our name in,” Lori says. “Although someone else is bound to let us cut in after we killed it up there with that last song.”

“Uh-uh. I need another drink first,” Parker says. “Liquid courage.”

“’Kay,” Lori says agreeably. Then she transfers her blue gaze to me. “Sing a duet with me, Olsen.”

I pause in drinking the last of my beer, and I see Parker give Lori a surprised look before she, too, looks at me.

I shake my head. “No way. Make Jason go up there.”

“Hell, no,” Jason says. “I don’t sing.”

“I thought karaoke was your idea,” Parker says, tilting her head.

“Because I like watching *other* people make fools of themselves,” he says, pointing to the stage, where, sure enough, a group of drunken women are slurring their way through “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.”

“Come on,” Lori pleads, kicking me softly under the table. “It’ll be fun.”

I shift my gaze to Parker, who shrugs. “Go for it. Your voice is better than most of the people getting up there.”

What she *doesn't* say is that it's usually the two of us doing the duets. We used to do karaoke most weekends in college, and we covered everything from old country ballads to Top 40 stuff. It's kind of our thing. Or at least, it used to be.

Still, she doesn't look even remotely put out by the thought that my first song of the night will be with Lori instead of her, and why would she be?

Parker gives me a little wink, and I shrug at Lori. “All right. Cool. Let's do it.”

Lori's smile is just a bit more excited than it should be, and the way she grabs my hand the second I stand is completely unnecessary, but oh well.

Her confidence that she'll be able to cut in line was well-founded, and a few moments later, a microphone's in my hand and Lori and I are singing “You're the One That I Want” from *Grease*, and the crowd seems to like us nearly as much as they liked Parker and Lori.

I'm definitely getting more than a few interested looks from the ladies in the crowd as I play up the strutting John Travolta thing.

I wink at a particularly interesting prospect at a table in the back. A black-haired woman in a killer red dress. At least until my eye catches our nearly empty table.

Jason is still there.

Parker is not.

Luckily I know this annoying song by heart, thanks to our college karaoke career, so I can sing on autopilot without having to look at the lyric board. My eyes scan the room for my best friend.

There she is, talking to a guy.

And she actually looks interested.

Huh.

Lori grabs my hand and pulls me into some dorky fifties dance move that fits the song before we end with a rather spectacular finish, if I do say so myself.

Everyone is whooping and cheering.

Everyone except Parker, who barely looks away from the blond guy she's chatting up at the bar.

I'm happy for her.

Maybe she's finally getting the hang of this whole flirting/pickup scene.

Hell, maybe all she needed was some rather excellent sex—not bragging, just stating facts—to loosen her up.

And sex with Parker truly is excellent. It was excellent last Monday when we first broke each other in, so to speak. It was even better on Tuesday. And Wednesday, and Thursday. And it was excellent earlier tonight when we did it in the kitchen, just minutes before we headed out to meet Lori and Jason.

Not that I'll be getting any gratitude from the blond guy in the white button-down. He has no idea who he has to thank for Parker's newfound sexual confidence.

Me.

I've been so preoccupied with trying to assess the Parker situation that I don't immediately realize that Lori didn't let go of my hand after we got off the stage.

It's not until we get back to our table that I manage to maneuver my fingers from hers under the guise of reaching for my beer as we sit down.

"Where's Parker?" she asks Jason, who's looking increasingly inebriated and is being even less subtle than usual about checking out Lori's chest.

Jason jerks his head backward toward the bar, and Lori cranes her neck until she spots her friend.

“Ooh! Cute guy. And she actually looks happy.”

She holds up her hand to me. “High five. I think all of our lessons finally paid off. Our girl’s found her groove!”

I slap her hand, probably with more force than necessary, and then take another sip of beer to stop myself from pointing out that *I’m* the one who found Parker’s groove. Several times.

I’m saved from having to say anything when Parker comes all but strutting back to our table, shooing Lori over so that her friend now has an excuse to press her thigh against mine. I shoot Parker a warning look, but she doesn’t notice.

She’s too busy flaunting a cocktail napkin with a phone number. “Look what I got!”

“You go, girl!” Lori says, and now it’s Parker’s time to get a high five.

Note to self: Drunken Lori is big on high fives.

“Right?” Parker shakes her hair back, grinning happily.

“The way he was leaning into you, I thought for sure he’d be taking you home,” Lori says.

“Oh, the offer was definitely on the table,” Parker says smugly, taking a sip of her bubbly wine.

“And you didn’t hit that?” Lori asked. “He was hot from where I was sitting.”

“Yeah, but I’m with you guys,” Parker says, her nose scrunching. “I wouldn’t ditch.”

I feel a weird stab of guilt, remembering exactly how many times I’d been out with Parker and ditched *her* for a hookup. After checking to make sure she had a ride home, of course.

Parker drains her drink and then scoots back out of our booth. “Gotta pee.”

Lori looks like she’s about to follow, but then an unnaturally tanned guy appears in front of her. “You were really good up there.”

Lori’s smile is slow and sexy, and I breathe a sigh of relief that she has someone to distract her from touching my leg.

“Yeah?” she says, and I see her settle into her seat to receive more compliments.

“Hey, let me out,” I say, elbowing a mostly zoned-out Jason, since it’s easier to move him than a flirty Lori.

He sighs but scoots out of the circular booth so I can get out. He wobbles only slightly once on his feet.

“Maybe slow down on the whiskey there, champ,” I say.

He gives me the bird and then half-walks/half-stumbles toward the bar, and I say a silent prayer on behalf of whatever woman’s about to be subjected to his leering. Definitely might be time to rethink my “friendship” with the guy. Parker’s right. He’s kind of an ass.

But right now, Jason is the least of my worries.

I ask an irritable waitress about the direction of the bathrooms, then find myself in a dimly lit corridor.

There’s a couple making out, another couple arguing, but no sign of Parker.

I lean against the wall across from the women’s restroom and survey the area while I wait.

When Parker emerges a few moments later, she pauses in surprise. “Hey.”

In response, I grab her hand, pulling her toward one of the side exit doors. It’s unseasonably warm, so I’m

counting on her not fussing about what I'm about to do.

“Ben, what are you—”

I push her up against the brick wall of the building and kiss her. Hard.

Her response is immediate, her tongue tangling with mine as her hands slide around to my back, her nails digging through the fabric of my shirt.

I bite her lip, and she makes a sexy little growling noise. “So *this* is what you do when you disappear when we're out,” she says, pulling back and giving me a speculative glance.

“You like?” I say, nibbling her throat.

“It's very—” she gasps, as my palm finds her breast. “Naughty.”

I smile, because Parker hasn't even seen my naughty side yet.

Still, I'm not about to take her against a wall in a not-so-private alleyway, so I settle for making out for several more minutes before I rub my hands over her increasingly chilly arms.

“Let's get you inside.”

She makes a pouty face, and I run a thumb over her lip. “Unless you wanna get out of here?”

“I do, but...” she says slowly, and I freeze, hoping that she's not about to tell me she's going to go home with the other guy.

I brace as she looks up at me.

“A duet?” she asks.

My breath rushes out in relief. Not that I'd begrudge her a chance to get her groove on with some other dude. It's part of our deal. But considering my cock's hard

enough to cut glass after nothing but a few hot kisses, I'm not sure my ego could quite deal with the rejection.

"All right," I say. "One song."

"One song, and then what?" she asks coyly.

I tilt my hips forward against her. Her eyes widen, then flutter closed. "On second thought, we can do a duet some other time...."

I'm already moving toward the front of the bar. "I'll get us a cab. You tell Lori and Jason we're heading out. I don't think Jason will notice, and Lori's got herself an admirer."

Five minutes later, we're on our way home.

Turns out, Parker's never made out in the back of a taxi.

We fixed that.

Chapter 15

Parker

The Thursday after our karaoke adventure, I make the unpleasant realization that I'll need to work late. Really late.

It's been one of those days where back-to-back meetings equals zero desk time, and zero desk time means that I haven't had a chance to address those "urgent" emails, nor pull together my weekly report for tomorrow's meeting with my boss.

Definitely an after-five kind of work night.

I finally get a five-minute break between meetings, and it gives me a chance to pee, grab a much-needed Diet Coke, and text my carpool buddy who also happens to be my fu—, er, sex buddy, who *also* happens to be my best friend.

I shake my head as I pull out my cellphone, marveling, not for the first time, at how intertwined my life is with Ben Olsen's.

Especially lately.

On paper, I'm sure we look unhealthy, spending so much time together, especially now that we've added *nights*—all night—to the mix.

But the thing is, it doesn't *feel* unhealthy.

Because if it were, I wouldn't feel so happy all the time, right?

And I do.

Feel happy, that is.

I guess that's the power of regular orgasms?

I text him:

Hey, you okay if I work late? Maybe Jason could give you a ride home?

I start to put my phone away, but he texts back immediately, probably between meetings himself.

Nah, I'll wait around. Have some things I can work on.

Cool. Meet you at the car around 7?

Yup.

I set my phone on top of my notebook and start to head toward the conference room when it buzzes again.

Wanna grab dinner out tonight? Somewhere expensive? My treat. I've got news.

My eyebrows lift. *Olsen, you asking me out on a date?*

His response is immediate.

Totally. I hope you like the three dozen pink carnations I ordered. I also wrote love notes all over your windshield.

I smile. *And *this* is why you don't have a girlfriend.*

Why would I need a girlfriend when I'm getting regular sex from my hussy roommate?

"What are you looking so happy about?" I jump as I see Lori and Eryn walking toward me.

Lori slows her walk and makes a slight face toward Eryn.

Eryn, in all her inappropriateness, tries to look at my phone, and I lock it before she can see the screen. The last thing I need is for the office snot to learn about Ben and me.

Or for Lori to learn.

"Ooh, I know that look," Eryn says in an annoying singsong voice. "Parker's texting her boyfriend."

“Actually, Lance dumped me,” I say with a wide smile. “Thanks for bringing it up, though.”

She has the decency to look slightly embarrassed by her gaffe, but I don’t like her enough to reassure her that I haven’t really thought about Lance in days.

Eryn slinks into the conference room, but Lori and I don’t immediately follow. It’s our weekly team meeting, and our boss is always late.

I take a sip of my Diet Coke and Lori moves closer. “Okay, don’t make me ask again.”

I frown in confusion. “About what?”

She rolls her eyes. “Did you call him?”

Him ...Him...Him who...?

Oh. *Him.*

“Not yet,” I say, pretending to be fascinated with my pop can.

Lori has asked me every day this week whether I’ve called the guy from the karaoke bar, and I’m running out of excuses.

There’s no good way to tell her that the only reason I’d call that guy was if I was still pursuing my hookup agenda.

And there’s *also* not a good way to tell her that the only reason I even talked to that guy in the first place was because she and Ben were looking all twosome-ish up there onstage, and I’d felt...not jealous, precisely.

But maybe a little thrown off by not being the one up there onstage with Ben.

Still, the guy at the bar—Brandon—had really seemed like a decent kind of guy. Funny, normal...

And yet, I have absolutely zero interest in calling him.

I'm saved from having to think up yet another excuse when we spot our boss heading toward us, cellphone tucked under her chin, even as her finger furiously swipes across the iPad that she's never without.

The meeting runs long.

So does the meeting after that, and the one after that, and then I get pulled into an impromptu review session with some designers who can't agree on a color scheme.

By the time I get back to my desk, Lori's left a note that she's gone for the day and to *Call The Guy TONIGHT*.

Sigh.

I race through my emails, none of which were as urgent as the senders seemed to think, but my reporting takes longer than I expect because I get an error on every other screen.

By the time I get to the car Ben's leaning against my Prius, messenger bag across his shoulder, totally focused on his cellphone.

"This is why I gave you my spare set of keys," I say, unlocking the door as I approach. "So you don't have to wait in the cold."

He looks up. Grins. "Forgot 'em."

"By *forgot 'em*, do you mean *lost 'em*?" I ask.

"They're around," he says as we both toss our bags into the backseat and climb into the car.

Yup. He's totally lost them.

I turn to face him before starting the car. "That's why you wanted to go out to dinner, huh? You've lost my keys and you know how expensive they are to replace? You're buttering me up."

Ben makes a tsking noise. "Now, Blanton, not everything is about you."

“So you *do* know where my keys are, or...?”

“I got the promotion,” he says in response.

My thoughts about my extra car keys scatter.

I squeal. Then squeal again.

He winces. “Take it easy, Parks.”

I punch him in the arm. “I so will not take it easy! You got it! You’ve been telling me for weeks you thought they were going to bring in someone from the outside!”

A couple months ago, the senior product manager on Ben’s team relocated to Atlanta, and Ben heard rumors early on that he was under consideration to be her replacement. Rumors that he continually disregarded, because for reasons I don’t understand, Ben has it in his head that he’s mediocre.

I, on the other hand, know otherwise. He’s amazing.

I’ve heard him on work calls. Seen him working late into the night. The dude knows his stuff. He’s really, *really* good at his job, and, strangely, he’s the only one who doesn’t seem to know it.

I start the car and shake my head. “You are so not buying dinner. *I’m* buying dinner. And we’re getting champagne.”

“Uh-huh, and I’m sure that last one is all for me, huh?” he says, knowing my love of the bubbly wine.

“You have to drink it with me tonight,” I insist. “Promotions and champagne go together like...peanut butter and jelly.”

“Steak and potatoes,” he says, picking up on our old game of “things that go together.”

“Spinach and strawberries.”

He makes a face. “More like, margaritas and nachos.”

“Beer and wings?”

“Better,” he says, with a nod of approval. “Tomato soup and grilled cheese.”

“Cookies and milk.”

“Cocks and condoms,” he says.

“Gross. How about...” I purse my lips, thinking for one I haven’t used a million times before. “Ooh, I know. Candles and bubble baths.”

Ben looks scandalized. “I don’t even know what that means. I take your candles and bubble baths and raise you Bert and Ernie.”

“Ummm...” I tap my fingers on the steering wheel as I think.

You and me.

I jolt a little in surprise at the thought, trying to push it away, but the thought merely digs its heels in. *Two things that go together: you and me. Ben and Parker.*

I frown.

Well. That’s new.

“You win,” I say hurriedly. “Game over.”

He holds up his right hand in a fist, then bumps it with his left fist.

I shake my head. “Did you just fist bump yourself?”

He shrugs. “Well, I knew *you* wouldn’t fist bump me. You hate losing.”

I back out of the parking spot, relieved that he seems oblivious to my treacherous thoughts from a moment ago.

“Portland City Grill?” I ask.

He raises his eyebrows. “Feeling spendy, are we?”

“Feeling proud,” I correct. “You got a promotion, Ben. It deserves to be celebrated.”

You deserve to be celebrated, you big oaf.

He falls silent then, and I glance at him across the car. “You’re doing that thing, aren’t you?”

“What thing?”

“Where you think you don’t deserve it. Where you’re trying to figure out why the heck they picked you.”

He shrugs and looks out the window. “I didn’t do anything special. Any of the other people on the team would have been—”

“Stop,” I interrupt. “None of that. Don’t do that thing. You’ve got to stop thinking that just because you didn’t follow your parents’ defined path of success means you aren’t a success.”

He slams his head back against the headrest. “Now *you’re* doing that thing. The one where you try to fix a guy.”

“That’s not a thing.” At least it’s not *my* thing.

“Only because you didn’t have to fix Lance,” he mutters. “Lance already had it all figured out.”

His voice is grumpier than usual, and I have the oddest sense that we could be on our way to a mini-fight, except we’re saved by the buzzing of my phone.

“Can you get that?” I ask, pointing my head toward my purse in the backseat.

He digs it out and looks at the screen. “Lori.”

I groan.

“What, you guys in a girl fight or something? And if so, can I watch if it gets handsy?”

“No, not fighting,” I mutter as I merge onto the freeway toward the restaurant. “She just won’t stop bugging me about calling that guy.”

“What guy?”

“The one from the karaoke bar.”

“Ah,” he says. “The one who was making you do your head-back laugh.”

“My what?”

“It’s how I know when your laughs are genuine. You tilt your head back.”

“That’s weird,” I mutter. “But, yeah, I guess the laughs were real. The guy was funny.”

“So why not call him?” Ben asks, silencing my still-buzzing phone and dropping it into the console between our seats.

“I—”

I don’t know.

That’s the truth. I don’t know why I don’t call this guy.

“You think I should?” I ask.

Ben shrugs. “Not about what I think.”

I press my lips together. He’s right. It’s not about what he thinks, because he and I aren’t together. We’re just friends. With really amazing benefits.

And from the very beginning we asserted that this was exclusive only as long as we wanted it to be. That the second one of us changes our mind, we just say the word, and go back to sleeping with other people.

But when I first suggested that he and I use each other to scratch an itch, I hadn’t thought it would be quite so... constant.

Or so consistently good.

But there *are* times when we’re apart. He goes to the gym nearly every day. And he went out for drinks with his friend John just last night. Maybe he’s got a few quickies scattered in here and there.

I want to know. I’m dying to know.

But I can't ask him. It's not my business.

"I think you should call him," he says.

"I thought you just said it's not about what you think," I say, my voice taking on just the slightest edge.

"It's not, it's just..." Ben turns his head to look at me. "I think if you don't start dating again, you're never going to get over Lance."

Lance? *Lance*? He thinks this is about Lance?

Of all the—

But wait. It *should* be about Lance.

Any hesitation over whether or not I call a promising romantic prospect absolutely *should* tie back to the fact that the guy I thought I was going to marry dumped me only a month ago.

"Okay," I say slowly. "I'll call him this weekend."

"Good girl," Ben says with a nod. And then the topic's apparently closed, because he changes the subject. "You're sure you're buying tonight?"

"Absolutely," I say.

Then I glance at him. "Wait, why do you ask it in that smug tone?"

His grin flashes white across the darkened car. "Just trying to figure out how many lobsters I want to order."

Chapter 16

Ben

It's been a long time since Parker and I have shared a meal like this.

I mean, we share meals all the time.

Random lunches if we're out running errands, or taco Tuesdays with friends at our place, or waffles on Sundays, since they're about the only thing I know how to make.

But tonight is different.

Tonight there's a white tablecloth, and a gorgeous view of the city, candles, and, yes, champagne. Of course.

And for just the briefest of seconds, when we first sit down and are arguing over which appetizer to start with, I have a moment of panic.

Panic because this looks like a *date*.

No, not looks like a date. *Feels* like a date.

But the panic recedes almost immediately, because dates are all about sweaty palms and painful small talk and that slight nagging stress over whether there's going to be another date to follow.

There's none of that with Parker.

It's just dinner with your best friend, my brain soothes. *Chill*.

And for the most part, my brain does settle down, except for one nagging, tiny seed of annoyance that I can't stop thinking about:

Parker's planning on calling that guy from the karaoke bar.

I mean, I *told* her to. I *had* to tell her that.

I meant what I'd said about her needing to get over Lance, and while she hasn't been moping, I *know* her. I know she can't possibly be as healed as she pretends to be. Not after that moron dropped her like it was no big thing.

But it bothers me that she's thinking about other guys while she and I are still...you know. Doing it.

I mean it doesn't bother *me*.

It bothers my ego. Because from my side of the bed, and the shower, and the couch, and the kitchen counter, things have been pretty damn exceptional.

So exceptional, in fact, that I haven't even *looked* at another girl since that first night.

Whoa.

I sit back in my chair at that whopper of a realization, totally tuning out the inquisition Parker is giving our server over the preparation of the fish special.

Two weeks, and I've only been having sex with one girl.

Not just any girl. Parker.

Huh.

And, I know, I know, two weeks isn't a big deal. Except to me it is.

The last relationship I had was in my sophomore year at college, and that lasted all of four semi-miserable months. Since then I've been happily cruising along in the no-commitment lane.

Sure, I've had plenty of repeat hookups with a few girls, but it's generally been the once-and-done thing.

I run a hand over my face as I look across the table at Parks.

She's wearing some sort of navy sweater dress, which shouldn't be all that sexy since it's a long-sleeved turtleneck kind of deal and shows almost no skin—especially since she's paired it with knee-high boots—but it hugs her just right.

Her dark hair's down today, flowing around her shoulders, and with the stupid candlelight, she looks... pretty.

I barely let our server finish his sentence before I blurt out, "Can I see your bourbon list?"

Parker shoots me a puzzled look, probably because I hardly ever drink anything other than beer, or sometimes wine if I'm with her. "I'll save the rest of the champagne for you."

Except that's not the real reason I want the bourbon. The real reason I need something stronger than wine is to help me come to grips with the fact that I'm on the verge of a sexual rut.

Worse than the rut is that it doesn't feel like a rut at all.

The server moves away, and Parker leans forward. "What's wrong with you? You look ready to puke."

I lean forward, too, deciding to lay it out and play it totally straight with her, because she's my best friend and she deserves it.

"When you pitched this whole friends-with-benefits thing, how long did you envision it lasting?" I ask.

She blinks. "Um, I don't know. Can't really say that I was thinking about a timeline."

I breathe out a long breath. "Are you aware that it's been nearly two weeks? We've been having sex for *two weeks*."

"Yeah? So?" she says, her nose scrunching.

“I haven’t...” I rub a hand over the back of my neck. Might as well just say it. “I haven’t been with anyone else since the first night you and I hooked up.”

Parker’s silent for several seconds before she starts cracking up. “Oh my God. You should see your face right now.”

I smile begrudgingly. “It’s not funny.”

It is. A little.

“Sorry.” She tries for a straight face and fails, chuckling into her champagne flute. “Okay, so I thought we covered this. If one of us wants to sleep with someone else, we just say the word—”

“Right,” he says quickly. “Like you and that guy from the bar—”

“Brandon,” she says.

I clench my fists beneath the table.

“Sure. So you’re going to call Brandon, and then it won’t be weird if I hang out with another girl.”

“Definitely not weird.”

“Right.”

“Right,” she repeats.

“Right.”

The server comes back with the whiskey menu, which I take, my eyes never leaving Parker. The server is astute enough to know that she’s interrupting something and backs away without a word.

“Oh God,” Parker says, her voice a little panicked. “We’re not going to let it get weird. Are we?”

No. No way will I let that happen.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” I say, opening the menu. “Tomorrow is Friday. *You’re* going to see if

Brandon wants to go out. *I'm* going to go out on the prowl."

"Don't call it a *prowl*, weirdo."

I continue as though she hasn't spoken. "And then *you're* going to get laid by this Brandon guy. I'm going to find myself a cute blonde."

I shut the menu after verifying that they have my favorite and look back at Parker. "Sound good?"

"Definitely," she says with a little smile. "Because we wouldn't want you to get in a sex rut."

"Exactly," I say, smiling. "That, and I don't want to ruin your sex life forever. Too much of me, and the poor other guys will never measure up."

She points at me with her wineglass. "I don't know how you got it in your head that sort of cockiness is a turn-on, but I'm here to tell you it's not."

I lean forward. "You sure about that?"

My voice is huskier than I mean it to be, and Parker's eyes respond by going a little smoky.

She licks her lips. "So this whole sex-with-other-people thing...that starts...tomorrow?"

"Mmm-hmm," I say, my gaze studying her mouth.

"And that will mean the end of...us. This sleeping-together thing."

I ignore the stab of disappointment that shoots through me at these words. This is the right call. Better to end it before it gets...messy.

"So that means tonight," she says, "you and me...last time—?"

She breaks off and lifts her eyebrows in question.

I grin. "Definitely."

Chapter 17

Parker

Ben's idea was really, really good in theory.

The whole *Let's sleep with other people so we don't let things get too intense* idea, I mean.

And I'm relieved that he came up with it, truly.

Because he's so right.

Even though we're not, like, falling for each other, the fact that we've been completely monogamous for two weeks is so *not* what our arrangement was supposed to be about.

It was supposed to be casual sex with the other person whenever we felt like it.

Only, we aren't supposed to feel like it *all the damn time*.

So, like I said. Ben's plan of changing up our sex partners? It's a good plan. A great plan.

In theory.

The reality...

Ugh.

Okay, here's the thing. The *entire* reason I pitched my friends-with-benefits plan to Ben was because of my inability to think sexy thoughts about a stranger.

As my mom pointed out, I clearly have to have some sort of connection with someone before I sleep with them.

Which is why...as nice as Brandon Mallory is, and as good-looking...I can't go home with him. I just can't.

To his credit, Brandon doesn't push me.

After a perfectly lovely meal at a casual little Italian place he'd suggested, he doesn't even blink when I say that I'll hail a cab.

"Can I call you again?" he asks, as we do the awkward linger-in-front-of-the-taxi thing.

"Sure, I'd like that," I reply, meaning it.

I don't know that Brandon's the love of my life or anything, but dinner was nice. I may not be feeling the sexy vibes tonight, but a second date can't hurt.

"Good," he says with a slow smile. Brandon has a nice smile.

Then he puts his hands on my cheeks and kisses me, and that, too, is nice.

It's only after I'm in the cab on my way back home that I realize how often I'm applying the word *nice* to Brandon.

Nice is fine.

But nice is not...

Nice is not what I'm after.

I want more.

I just don't know *what*.

I pay the cabbie, pulling my keys out of my purse as I head toward my front door.

All hopes of a quiet evening with a good book and a glass of red wine are dashed the second I walk in the front door.

Music is blaring, struggling to compete with the TV (also blaring), as well as with the high-pitched din of a bunch of drunken voices.

I sigh as I set my purse on the console table by the front door. Looks like Ben's big plans of a wild night out on the town have transitioned into a wild night *in*.

I can't really blame him, as I'm sure he thought he'd have the house to himself.

I'd definitely given the impression that I'd be going home with Brandon, as was our agreement.

Maybe I can sneak upstairs and he'll never know....

"Parks!"

Damn. I've been spotted.

It's Ben's friend John Harris. I haven't seen him since the night he came over after Lance dumped me, and the details of that evening are fuzzy at best.

"Hey!" I say, pasting a smile on my face. I've always liked John. Way better than douchebag Jason as far as Ben's friends go.

He gives me a hug, and I mentally give him points for not getting handsy despite the fact that my black dress is very, um, tiny.

"Ben said you weren't coming home tonight," he said.

Bless him. John's voice is apologetic, probably because he knows my house sounds like a freaking rave right now.

"Change of plans," I say with a smile. "Sounds like you guys are having a good time, though."

"For sure," he says. "You should grab a drink and join us."

I hesitate, wanting to go directly to my room.

But John will for sure tell Ben that I'm here, which will then have Ben wondering what the heck is going on, and, even worse, Ben will know that I'm avoiding him.

I take a deep breath. "Sure!"

I pour myself a weak vodka tonic from the boozy selection sitting out on my kitchen counter and venture into the living room.

The scene looks pretty much exactly like it sounded.

A bunch of half-drunk people are plopped around the room alternating among watching TV, talking over one another, and singing the wrong lyrics to the music.

I recognize a few of the guys as Ben's football buddies; they're an okay bunch. A little noisy whenever they come to our place to watch a game, but polite. And they've always been pretty cool about using coasters without my having to remind them.

But coasters are *clearly* not on the agenda tonight. Red keg cups cover virtually every surface, and I feel a little surge of annoyance because it all feels so...college-y.

An overly muscled guy in the corner notices me first—Roy? Ray?—I forget his name.

“Hey, it's Roomie!” he says, in a too-loud voice.

Eight heads swivel around to see me standing awkwardly in the doorway.

Roomie is what Ben's friends call me. Probably because they don't remember my name, but I don't take offense since I didn't remember Roy/Ray's name just now.

I lift a hand in a dorky *hi* gesture, and I tell myself that I'm *not* going to let my eyes seek out Ben, but of course they do.

Hard to miss him with the big-boobed blonde sitting in his lap.

Ben's eyes go wide. “Parks?”

I smile faintly.

“What happened to—” Ben starts to get up, but clearly isn't sure how to maneuver Blondie off his lap, and I hold up my hand quickly, telling him to stay.

I debate my next move, wondering if it's too late to retreat upstairs.

A couple of the guys give me a *what's up* before turning back to the TV, but most of the girls are still staring at me curiously.

I'm used to this.

Not because I think I'm something to look at, but because it's a boozy Friday night. Sex is likely on everyone's brain, which means everybody's trying to figure out who will pair with whom, and none of the girls like that there's another female in the mix.

John comes up behind me with his refilled drink, his hand finding rest on my back. "What are you doing in the doorway? Come sit. Joe, move your ass, man. Make room for Parker."

There's really no choice but to move forward, and I let John maneuver me next to a zoned-out-looking girl with pink tips in her blond hair. John settles on the other side of me. He sits close, but not too close, and I have a feeling he's protecting me from Joe, who, honest to God, seems to be staring at my crotch.

I shift, wondering why I feel so awkward. It's certainly not the first time Ben's had people over whom I don't know all that well.

Nor is it the first time I've watched him make moves on a girl right in front of my face.

It didn't used to bother me.

It doesn't bother me *now*.

So why do I feel like I'm going to be sick to my stomach?

I take a sip of my drink, letting my eyes sneak back over to my left, where Ben and Blondie are sitting on the L part of our sectional couch.

I'm struck by the irrational thought that it's *my* couch. *My* Ben.

Snap out of it, I tell myself.

Still, my eyes can't help but take in the fact that his hand is settled on her skinny hip while she leans back to whisper something in his ear.

He laughs, and I want to know if it's a real laugh.

I apparently have a tell—yesterday he told me I tip my head back when my laugh is real, and he's probably right—but I don't know what *his* tell is.

I'd never really noticed, because when he and I are laughing together I *know* it's real, and when he's laughing with other people...

Well, I've never cared much.

Until now. I want to know badly if his laugh is real. If his smile is genuine.

But *why* do I care?

This is the arrangement. I'd get laid. He'd get laid. And not by each other.

It was the best way of shaking things up before he and I ended up somewhere dangerous.

Ben's hand slides up a few inches to the blonde's waist and my stomach does that clenching thing again, and I'm faced with a horrible realization:

What if we're too late?

What if I *already* ended up somewhere dangerous?

It's not that I want Ben for myself.

I don't want him at all, really. He's still...Ben. My best friend.

He's not boyfriend material for *anyone*, least of all me. But the thought of his hands on another girl and actually having to watch it—

My stomach rolls, and I shove my cup at a surprised John as I stand up.

“I’m headed up to my room,” I say.

“You okay?” John asks.

“Yeah, just exhausted. Long week.”

I don’t look at Ben as I awkwardly climb over John’s legs, then over pervy Joe. He “accidentally” touches my thigh and I slap at his hand, not caring that I’m acting like a prude on an otherwise sexy Friday night.

What is wrong with me?

I kick my heels off at the bottom of the stairs, scooping them into my hand before I sprint up, wanting to leave the scene behind me as quickly as possible. Wanting to bleach it from my mind as quickly as possible, too.

Inside the safety of my room, I shut the door and lean back against it. For a second I consider calling Brandon and asking if he wants to come over.

Let’s just see how *Ben* likes watching me with another —

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Even if calling Brandon were a good plan—and it’s not—it wouldn’t work.

Ben doesn’t care who feels me up. He doesn’t care who I sleep with.

He’s the one who told me to call Brandon. The one who complained about the fact that he’d slept only with little old boring me for the past two weeks.

Two weeks. As if that were *soooo* long or something.

I peel my dress off, tossing it onto the bench at the foot of my bed, and then climb under the sheets, not bothering to change out of my sexy lingerie or take off my makeup or do anything but wallow.

It will be better tomorrow, I tell myself.

Tomorrow I'll be back to normal and I won't care that Ben's about to take that blond girl up to his bedroom and touch her the way he touches me....

I let out a scream through gritted teeth and dig the heels of my palms into my eyes, wishing I could scrape away the painful mental images.

Ben and my no-strings-attached relationship?

Yeah. Turns out that there are suddenly strings after all.

And I'm completely tangled in them.

Chapter 18

Ben

Something is wrong.

No, *everything* is wrong.

Not just with the scene, although, if I'm honest, the scene definitely isn't doing it for me.

Which makes no sense. The girl in my lap is hot, and even if she wasn't, the four others in the room are good-looking. She's not even totally annoying, although for the life of me I can't remember one damn thing we talked about.

The beer's free-flowing, the music's good...

And I can't get into it. Any of it.

But I'm less worried about me and the fact that I'm suddenly indifferent to something that used to work like a charm, and more worried about my best friend.

I feel eyes on me and look over to see John giving me a weird look. He holds up the drink Parker shoved at him and lifts his eyebrows in question.

I shake my head. *Dunno*.

Then his gaze shifts to Cora—the girl in my lap—and his brows lift again. I realize way too late that Cora's kissing my neck, and not only am I not getting into it—

Hell, I didn't even *notice* it.

This is not a good sign.

There's no good way to do this, so I grit my teeth and put both hands on Cora's waist, shifting her to the right as I ease to the left.

She gives me a startled look, but an apologetic smile is all I can manage. It's on the tip of my tongue to say I'll be right back, except...

I don't know that I will.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing, only that I need to find Parker. Figure out why she's home instead of getting laid by Brendon or Brandon or whatever.

I pause by Jason on my way toward the stairs. "Get rid of them. But nicely. Send the booze with them to ease the blow."

"You got it," he says, pushing to his feet.

I feel kind of crappy about the fact that I'm going to throw, like, ten people's Friday night off its game, but hell...they're all mostly drunk anyway. They can always relocate to Joe's house; he's a three-minute walk away.

I take the stairs two at a time, not surprised to see that Parker's door is shut.

I am surprised to find it locked.

I didn't even know she had a lock.

My chest feels tight.

"Parks?"

I knock with one knuckle.

Nothing.

I pound the door louder, this time with my palm, telling myself that maybe she can't hear over the still-thumping music.

Still nothing.

Well...fine.

I'm not a younger brother for nothing. I know just how to handle a locked door.

I head toward my own room, yank a shirt off a wire hanger, and then unbend the hanger into proper lock-picking position as I head back to her room.

Only to find that the door's open by the time I get there.

Parker's standing there, dressed only in lingerie—*wow* lingerie—as she stares down at the hanger in my hand.

“Really?” she asks, when her eyes come back to mine.

But all I can think is...*thank God*.

I don't know thank God for what, whether it's the fact that she's not crying like I thought she might be, or that she's looking really fucking amazing, or if it's just pure gratitude that she opened the door to me.

I don't ever want her to shut the door to me.

“You locked me out,” I say.

“I didn't lock *you* out,” she says. But her eyes shift away and I'm not entirely sure I believe her. “Your friend Joe was giving me weird looks.”

“So you dressed in your laciest, skimpiest bra and panties?” I ask, unable to tear my eyes away from her perfect figure.

“That wasn't for Joe. Or you,” she's quick to add. “I thought—”

“Brandon,” I say, crossing my arms.

Parker bites her lip, then looks over my shoulder toward the stairs. “What are you doing up here? Did you need something?”

I'm a little stung by what seems to be a dismissal. “You seemed upset. I came to check on you.”

“Seems to me like you were looking to invade my privacy,” she says, with a chin nod at the hanger still in my hand.

Her voice is even, but her words are a little snippy, and it dawns on me that I should leave her to her bad mood and go back downstairs, where at least one girl will actually be happy to see me.

She starts to shut the door again, and I hold up a single finger. “Parker Blanton, do not close that door in my face.”

“But—”

I run back into my room, dig through my dresser until I find a T-shirt, do a quick sniff test to make sure it’s clean, then run back to where she’s still standing in the doorway.

“What are you—”

Her words are muffled as I unceremoniously yank the T-shirt over her head, not bothering with the armholes, but tugging it downward until she’s covered to upper thigh.

She blinks up at me and I push her back into her bedroom and close the door.

“I can’t think when you’re half-naked,” I say.

She slowly pushes her arms through the armholes. “You’ve shoved a T-shirt over my head before,” she says. “That night when Lance dumped me and I was hurling my clothes around, you put a T-shirt on me then, too. I just now remembered.”

“Yeah, and I did it then for the same reason. I don’t feel right looking at pretty lingerie that isn’t meant for me.”

Except back then, the fact that her lacy undergarments had been for Lance hadn’t bothered me in the least.

But tonight? Knowing that she got all dolled up for a guy she doesn’t even know?

That bothers me.

Even though I told her to do it.

I run a hand over my face.

“What happened?” I ask. “With the Brandon guy? Did he say something or was he—”

“No,” she says, holding up a hand and sounding so weary my chest squeezes. “He was perfectly nice. I may even see him again. I just wasn’t feeling it tonight.”

She looks down at the floor and crosses one foot over the other. “Sorry.” Her voice is quieter now. “I know that was part of our deal. Me hooking up with him, and you with...”

She waves a hand toward the door, I’m assuming to indicate Cora downstairs.

Then her head lifts. “Hey, the music stopped.”

I nod. “I had Jason clear everyone out.”

She stares at me. “Why?”

The easy answer would be to tell her that I thought she was upset about something, and that I cleared them out on her behalf. And that’s the truth. But only half of it.

So I tell her the other half. “I guess I wasn’t feeling like holding up my part of the bargain, either.”

Her eyes search my face. “Didn’t look that way from where I was sitting.”

“You mean where you were sitting for all of thirty seconds,” I correct.

Because had you stayed you’d have seen that I wasn’t even remotely into that girl.

Parker licks her lips nervously. “So are you going to, like, go out again? Find another girl?”

I take a step nearer to her, relieved when she doesn’t step away. Those few moments of weirdness between us seem to have faded, as though we’re back to normal. Or,

at least, our new normal. The normal that involves us seeing each other naked.

“I’m not going to find another girl,” I answer quietly, lifting a hand to her face. “Not tonight, anyway.”

My other hand comes up to cup the back of her neck, and her fingers wrap around my wrists as she looks up at me.

“What about your crippling fear that your cock’s going to fall off if you have sex with only one person for more than two weeks?” she says quietly.

I grin. “Well, at least I’ll rest easy knowing that I’ll be in the company of my best friend when it happens.”

I lean my head down for a kiss, but she pulls back just slightly, her gaze worried. “We’re still not going to let this get weird, right? We’ll still be able to go back to how we were when this is over?”

I pause. “I’m not going to do anything that would jeopardize our friendship. So if you want to use the safe word...”

She opens her mouth, and for a heart-stopping moment I’m afraid that that’s exactly what she’s going to do, and for the life of me I don’t know how I’d feel about it.

Then she smiles. “Nah.”

She lifts to her toes and I meet her halfway, and the second our lips meet, I realize that *this* is the reason I couldn’t get into Cora.

Because the only person I want to be kissing is right in front of me.

Chapter 19

Parker

One of these days, sex with Ben is going to get old.

I'm sure of it.

Eventually we'll know each other's bodies so well that there will be nothing left to discover and we'll be able to chalk this whole arrangement up as an experimental time in our friendship and go back to how we were before.

But today is not that day. Tonight is not that night.

The kiss is a little hesitant at first. Both of us testing to make sure that this is really okay—that we're totally fine with the evening's carefully laid plans going up in flames.

Then his tongue touches mine and it becomes rapidly clear that we're both fine with it.

More than fine.

Ben's hand slips under the ugly T-shirt he pulled over me—bet he's regretting that now—and his palm is hot against the small of my back as he pulls me closer.

I mimic the motion on him, sliding my hands up and under his shirt until they're against his back, taking in his warmth, pulling him to me.

And it's perfect.

But the longer the kiss goes on, the longer it's not enough, not nearly enough, and when he tugs impatiently at the hem of my shirt, I lift my arms and allow him to pull it over my head with a lot more ease than when he put it on.

He groans in gratification at the sight of my admittedly pretty bra, and somewhere in the back of my brain, I

wonder if I actually put this on for Brandon, or if I hoped all along that it would be *Ben* who'd be appreciating that I spent way too much on the navy bra with adorable pink bows.

Ben's mouth dips to my neck and I think I hear him say my name, but then I get kind of preoccupied with his lips on my neck and the delicious goosebumps that result.

I need him naked.

My fingers are clumsy, all but tearing at the buttons of his shirt, but he doesn't seem to mind. Only once I finally get the buttons undone, I find him wearing a stupid undershirt underneath, and I pull at it with a little growl of frustration.

He gives me a quick grin and a kiss before peeling off the last remaining layer between me and his bare chest.

Gratified, I lay my hands against his shoulders and lean forward, kissing him softly just for a moment, before my hands and lips go crazy, touching every part of his warm skin that I can reach.

He laughs a little at my urgency when my fingers move to his jeans. "Jesus, Parks."

In response, I give him what I hope is a *Hurry up and get your clothes off* look before walking toward the bed, giving an extra little sway of my hips before I put one knee on the bed.

A quick glance over my shoulder confirms that he's watching me, and the hungry expression on his face makes me feel bold.

On my hands and knees, I slowly move toward the middle of the bed, then look once more over my shoulder.

Ben needs no further invitation. He's naked in seconds, then he's on the bed behind me, his hands

moving slowly over my hips, his thumb slipping under my panty line just barely.

“Christ,” he mutters.

His hands roam over my back, then my front, before he slowly unhooks the bra, letting the straps slide over my shoulders.

His hands are on my breasts before I even can toss the bra aside. I moan in satisfaction as he touches me just right, knowing that I prefer teasing touches over rough ones, knowing exactly when to circle, when to flick, and when to lightly pinch.

“*Ben.*” It’s a plea.

One he answers by sliding a hand down over my stomach, unhesitatingly moving under my panties until one finger slicks all the way inside me. His breathing is as harsh as mine as he adds another finger, and my back arches upward in a desperate attempt to get closer.

He fingers me for several torturous minutes until neither of us can take it anymore. He pulls a condom out of my nightstand drawer in record time, and then he doesn’t even take my thong off, he merely pulls it to one side and pushes forward.

I’m beyond ready for him, and he slides in in one smooth stroke.

One hand fists my hair, pulling my head back just roughly enough so that I gasp as his other hand holds my hips steady while he plunges into me again and again.

My fingers slide down, too turned on to be embarrassed as I touch myself.

“Yes. Parker, *yes.*”

And then he cries out with a sharp yell and I’m right there with him, sinking down onto my elbows as shudders rock through me.

I feel both of his hands splay over my back, his fingers against my rib cage, and his breathing is hot and heavy against the damp skin of my back.

A few moments later, he disappears (I've trained him to throw away the condom in the bathroom), and while he's gone I somehow drag myself up the bed so that my head finds the pillow, although I lack the energy to pull the covers up all the way.

He comes back in and surprises me by crawling into bed behind me.

Not that we haven't slept together in the past couple weeks, but usually that's more of a pass-out-from-sex kind of situation, whereas this feels...different.

Deliberate.

The sheet comes up around me as he pulls me back against him, and I have the strangest awareness that Ben is spooning me....

And I like it.

"Night, Parks," he says, his voice sleepy.

I smile, feeling, for the first time today, like all is right in the world.

But as I drift off to sleep, my last thought is a worried one.

We dodged a bullet tonight, obviously.

But we're going to have to handle the other person sleeping with someone else *eventually*.

Won't we?

Chapter 20

Ben

Parker's parents are big on regular weekend trips to the Oregon coast. They've gone a couple times a year since Parker was a little kid. They always rent the same place, play the same games, eat at the same restaurants.

It's like a Blanton family *thing*.

I've tagged along a couple times, but not since college.

Like Blanton family dinners, I sort of stopped participating in family things once Lance and Parker got serious.

But when Parker asks if I want to go with her and her parents the weekend after our failed "have sex with other people" experiment, I jump at the chance.

Mostly because I'm dying to get away from Portland.

Things at work have been more hectic since the promotion, and since I've been feeling kind of itchy and bored with the whole bar scene, I'm not really sure what to do with myself.

I've got this weird restless feeling, like change is on the horizon, and I don't really know how I feel about it.

I need a break.

"So. Ben."

Parker's mom snags a carrot off the cutting board where I've been assigned to chop vegetables for the salad, and nibbles it as she leans back against the kitchen counter and studies me.

I continue to slice the carrots in careful, even rounds and don't look at her, hoping like crazy that she's not

going to ask me about my intentions toward her daughter.

Parker says she hasn't told her parents about the fact that we've gotten all sexy-times, but Sandra Blanton's always struck me as the type of parent who knows things.

"I hear congratulations are in order," she says.

My knife falters. Surely she doesn't mean...

"On your promotion," she continues, grabbing another carrot.

Oh. That.

"Yeah, thanks."

She laughs. "Oh, come on! You sound like it's a punishment."

I shrug. "It's just...not that big a deal is all."

"Well, Parker seems to think it's a pretty big deal. She talked about it for, like, thirty minutes straight when she called to tell us about it."

I glance up to look out the window to where Parker and her father are manning the barbecue.

It's cold and dreary, seeing as we're at the beach in almost-winter, and she looks adorable in one of my oversized gray UO sweatshirts with the hood drawn up and the sleeves hanging several inches below the tips of her fingers.

"Your parents must have been so excited," Mrs. Blanton is saying.

I glance back down at the cutting board and reach for the cucumber.

"Ben..." Her voice has that warning, maternal thing going on. "You *did* tell your parents?"

"Not really," I mutter.

“But why? Parents live to hear news like this about their children.”

Parents like you, maybe.

And it’s not that my parents don’t like hearing good news about their kids; it’s just that I don’t think my title change from product manager to senior product manager would even register with them, much less be deemed worthy of congratulations.

Not when my brother just made partner in his hotshot law firm, or when my sister’s just announced that she’s adding a Yale PhD in addition to her Harvard law degree.

Mrs. Blanton apparently senses that I don’t want to talk about my parents—or my promotion—and I’m grateful when she changes the subject.

“How’s she doing?” she asks.

“Who, Parker?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes good-naturedly. “Who else?”

Chop. Chop. Chop. I carefully slice the cucumber. “Why ask me?”

Mrs. Blanton gives me a funny look. “Um, maybe because you’ve been her best friend for a good six years now? Maybe because you live with her. Or, wait, I know, because you came on our family vacation...”

No mention of the sex. The excellent, amazing, mind-blowing sex.

I don’t say this last part out loud. Obviously.

“She’s good,” I say.

Parker’s mom absently grabs a cucumber slice from the board and turns to face the window, her eyes on her daughter. “I’ve been worried about her.”

I glance over. “Yeah?”

“I’m worried she’s not dealing with her pain. Not even *acknowledging* it.”

Pain? Parker’s in pain? I swear to God, I’ll hurt whomever—

Sandra keeps talking, oblivious to my flash of rage. “I’m *all for* her embracing this single-girl phase in her life, but it’s just, well...did Parker ever tell you she thought she was going to marry Lance?”

My hand jerks then, and I have to take a deep breath before continuing. Then, on second thought, I put the knife down. We have plenty of fucking vegetables.

I reach for my beer, which will better prepare me for this conversation than carrots.

The thought of Parker marrying Lance...*blech*.

“She seems to be doing okay with the breakup,” I say, dodging the marriage reference altogether.

“Yeah, but that’s just the thing,” Mrs. Blanton says, pursing her lips. “Doesn’t that seem odd to you? They dated for four years, almost five years, and toward the end there, she started talking about how he was *the one*.”

My beer doesn’t seem to be settling well in my stomach so I put it aside. “Do you think Lance was...the one, or whatever?”

She hesitates. “Well, it’s not up to me, is it? But he seemed like a good enough sort. Made her happy.”

Did he?

I think back, trying to ignore the last two months in which Lance had all but ignored Parker.

I guess Mrs. Blanton’s right.

Parker *had* been happy with the guy. Or at least, pretty damn content. The two of them had never fought much, he’d taken her on date nights...they’d been completely compatible, in a sort of boring, rigid kind of way.

It's strange, but after that first night, when Parker cried her eyes out and I wanted to gouge Lance's eyes in revenge, I realize that I haven't done much thinking about her ex.

For that matter, it doesn't seem like *Parker* has done much thinking about her ex, but maybe Mrs. Blanton's right.

Maybe that's a problem.

"She'll find someone new," I say. "Someone better."

"She will. And I don't want her to rush it. It's just...I want her to have someone who's *there* for her."

I glance at Sandra.

It's an odd sort of thing to say about an independent twenty-something woman with a solid job and a thriving social life, but maybe it has something to do with the whole surviving-cancer thing.

I sometimes forget that the woman beside me stared death in the face. It makes sense that she'd have done some thinking about what life for her only child might be like without her.

"She has me," I say quietly.

Sandra gives me a surprised look. "Oh, Ben, sweetie. I know that!" She reaches over and squeezes my arm. "It's just...Parker's your number one girl now, and you'll always be there for her, but as a mom, I can't help but thinkthinking about the day when you and Parker meet your true loves, and things change."

My brain rebels against this. "They won't."

"But they have to," she says, her voice gentle as she turns to face me. "I know you've got your whole bachelor thing right now, and that's great, but you'll fall in love someday. You're too good of a guy not to. And how do you think that woman's going to feel about being number two in your life?"

I open my mouth. Then shut it. I can't imagine another girl replacing Parker.

But then, neither can I imagine my future eventual girlfriend, or wife, or whatever, being completely thrilled if I tell her that Parker comes first.

"Exactly," Sandra says kindly, seeing the second I put the pieces together. "Your friendship with Parker won't fade, per say, but it *will* change. I want her to have that perfect guy for whom she'll *always* be number one. The one who will drop everything for her. Who will die for her."

I open my mouth, but for the life of me, I don't know what to say. I don't even know what I *feel*.

"Oh God," she says, putting a hand over her mouth and letting out a little laugh. A gesture that makes her look just like her daughter. "Sorry. Sorry, Ben. I don't mean to get...I bet you're thinking I sound like a fuddy-duddy old person."

I force a smile.

"It's a mom thing," she says, patting my arm in apology. "We fret. I don't mean for a single second to imply that you've been anything but a wonderful friend to my daughter and that you won't *always* be that friend for her."

I pick up my beer again, tilting it back as I wait for my thoughts to sort themselves out into something that I can at least half-comprehend.

They don't.

She claps her hands together. "Now, what did I do with those oven mitts? I think those baked potatoes are just about done, don't you?"

The back door opens, and Parker steps through holding a foil-covered plate. "Steaks are ready, girls!"

She grins at me, but her smile slips just slightly when she sees me, and she tilts her head as though to say *You okay?*

I mentally shake myself and force a grin in response. *I'm good.*

Except I'm not good. Not at all.

I can't help but think about that moment that Mrs. Blanton is talking about.

The one where Parker and I have found people more important to us than each other.

And I don't like it at all.

Chapter 21

Parker

Whatever weirdness crawled up Ben's butt while I was out on the deck with my dad has disappeared by the time we get to dessert: a delicious, locally made marionberry pie with vanilla ice cream, of which I have two pieces and don't feel even remotely guilty about it.

By the time we finish the dishes and my parents have headed to bed, I'm feeling the most content I have in a long time.

"Want to start a puzzle?" I ask.

Ben groans. "You and your puzzles. How about a walk on the beach?"

I glance outside skeptically. "You mean, walk on a pitch-black beach next to the angry Pacific Ocean in forty-degree weather in the rain?" I ask.

He grins. "Yes. Exactly."

"I'm in."

Five minutes later, we're covered head to toe, me in the big college sweatshirt I've confiscated from him, and Ben in his black fleece pullover. We make the short walk to the beach, and thankfully the rain seems to have tapered off to little more than a faint mist.

It's not as cold as I expected, and since nothing makes me crankier than sand in my shoes, I take off my socks and tennis shoes next to the steps, setting them on a large, unmistakable rock, so I'll be able to find them again.

Ben follows suit, and we both roll our jeans up to mid-calf.

The sand is cold under my feet, but deliciously so.

I've always loved *all* my family's trips to Cannon Beach.

It's one of the prettiest places in the world, all rough waves and smooth sand and the famous Haystack Rock looming over the beach.

But despite the fact that summer is its high season, with bonfires and ice cream cones and sunshine, I've always loved it best in winter.

Nothing beats curling up with a good book and a blanket while it storms outside, or roasting marshmallows in the fireplace. And, of course, the puzzles.

But the best part is having the beach all to yourself.

Well. You and your best friend.

Ben seems to feel the same way, because he breathes deep and I practically feel him relax as he walks beside me.

It's low tide, which makes the sandy expanse feel endless. In silent agreement we turn left, although it doesn't really matter which way we go. We're not in it for the destination.

We walk in silence for several moments before I speak. "So, what did you and my mom talk about that had you ready to poop your pants?" I ask.

He's quiet for a minute, almost as though debating whether or not to tell me. Or how *much* to tell me.

"Your mom's worried about you," he says finally.

I whip my head around in surprise. "Seriously? Am I giving off damaged vibes that I don't know about?"

Ben doesn't crack a joke in response like I think he's going to. Instead, he shoves his hands into his pockets, tilting his head back to the sky for a moment. "She thinks you're not dealing with your breakup with Lance."

I open my mouth, then shut it.

Well, this is a twist I didn't see coming.

Most of the time I feel like my mom and I are on the same page, but this catches me off guard. "She said that?"

He shrugs. "Something about pent-up emotions, blah blah blah."

I shove my hands into my own pockets as I think on this.

In all truthfulness, I haven't done much thinking about Lance. Or the breakup. But if I'm *all* the way truthful...I haven't really *let* myself think about it.

Whenever something reminds me of Lance, I immediately go to how awful I felt when I realized he was breaking up with me, and my brain sort of skips away from that thought because it's too painful.

"Is she right?" he asks after several moments. "Are you not over him?"

I stop, because suddenly it feels like too much to walk and think and talk about a topic so close to the heart at the same time.

"Maybe," I answer quietly.

He stops, too, turning to face me. I can't really make out his face. There's no light to work with beyond the stars and a half moon shining through the mist, but I can sense his intensity.

"Maybe you need to deal with that," he says.

"Yeah, but *how*?" I say. "I mean trust me, I *want* to move on—truly move on—more than anyone. I don't want to be one of those ladies who hits her forty-fifth birthday only to realize she's been carting around twenty-year-old emotional baggage. But there's not, like, an instructional manual for mental health."

Ben rolls his shoulders forward and looks down at the sand. “Maybe you start by talking to Lance. Exploring how *that* makes you feel.”

It’s not a terrible idea. Closure, and all that.

“I guess I could call him up for coffee or something,” I mutter.

“You sure vodka wouldn’t be the better choice when meeting one’s ex?”

“Nah. I’d want a clear head,” I say.

We start walking again, both of us quiet. I know why *I’m* quiet, but I can’t quite figure out why Ben’s all lost in thought.

“Did my mom say anything else?” I ask. “You seem sort of...pensive.”

“Pensive, huh?” he says. “That sounds kind of sexy and brooding.”

“It can also be annoying, so spit it out, Heathcliff.” I nudge his elbow playfully with mine.

But his next words are anything but playful.

“I don’t want our friendship to change,” he says.

My footsteps falter, and then I skip ahead so I’m in front of him, holding up a palm so he has no choice but to stop as well. “Wait, what? What the heck did my mom say to you?”

Honestly, this isn’t like Ben at all, and I don’t know that I like it.

I rarely have a cross thought about my mother, but I’m not exactly loving that she’s somehow changed my best friend into a reserved shell of himself tonight.

Ben looks away from me. “It’s just...I guess I’m realizing that we can’t be like this forever. Carefree and going off on vacations together whenever we want.”

“Yes, we can,” I say stubbornly.

His smile is a little sad. “Can we? What happens when you meet someone? I mean not just a good-looking guy in a bar, but like...*someone*. Or when I do? What about when one of us gets married?”

If I thought that my brain shied away from the memory of Lance dumping me, it’s nothing compared to the way my brain refuses to comprehend the thought of Ben getting married.

“Have you met someone?” I force myself to ask. “I mean someone...special?”

“No. Not even close. It’s just...it’s going to happen someday, you know? For both of us.”

It’s a weird role reversal for us. Him being all reasonable and forward thinking, and me being stubborn and in-the-moment.

“Yeah, but maybe it doesn’t make sense to be thinking about that *now*,” I say slowly. “It may be our future, but it’s not our present, you know?”

He turns and looks out at the water before looking back at me. “You’re right. Sorry. Man, your mom’s a pro about getting inside someone’s head, huh?”

“Apparently at getting inside *your* head,” I tease.

We begin walking, and the tension seems to fade, and I think we’re back to normal. Back to where we should be.

But then...

Ben slowly reaches out a hand toward me, and I’m confused right up until the moment his fingers brush mine.

The gesture is tentative. Sweet. And maybe just a little bit desperate for something that neither of us want to name.

Ben—my best friend in the whole world—is holding my hand.

And despite the fact that my brain is completely freaked out, my fingers seem to know what to do as they intertwine with his, and we walk hand in hand on a quiet beach, each of us lost in thought.

But for the life of me, I can't muster the courage to ask him if his thoughts are as dangerous as my own.

Chapter 22

Ben

I can't sleep.

The beach house the Blantons always rent has four bedrooms, and Parker and I are in separate ones, obviously, since her parents don't know that we've been sharing a bed in recent weeks.

But it's been over an hour since Parker and I got back from our walk on the beach, and I've been staring at the ceiling for a good forty-five minutes.

Finally I have to admit the real reason I can't sleep:

Because Parker's not beside me.

Somehow in the past few weeks, I've gotten used to her warm softness curled against me.

Gotten used to the smell of her shampoo and the sound of her breathing.

It's just sex, I tell myself.

Other than the few days Parker was all Crazy-Town thanks to PMS, we've had sex every damn day. So the fact that we haven't today? That's what's throwing me off. That's all. Just the lack of sex.

I'm pretty sure.

I hesitate for about thirty more seconds before throwing off the blankets and quietly moving toward the door of my bedroom and opening it. It squeaks. *Damn it.*

Then I let out a silent little laugh, realizing that I'm acting like a teenager trying to sneak into a girl's room to cop a feel while her parents sleep down the hall.

And that's *exactly* what's about to happen.

Parker's door is unlocked, and she must be awake, too, because she sits up in bed the second that I open her door.

I shut it behind me, but then, oddly, I lose my nerve, and don't move.

But she does.

She doesn't say a word, just scoots from the middle of the bed to the right side. Making room for me.

I grin as I hurry to the warmth of her bed. To the warmth of *her*.

We lie down at the same time, heads on our respective pillows as we face each other.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

And just like that, I'm back to feeling hesitant. Shy, almost.

What the fuck is wrong with me? With us?

I'd come in here with every intention of hot, raunchy sex, made even hotter by the fact that we'd have to stay completely silent.

But now that I'm here, just barely able to make out her familiar features in the darkness, I find that I want something different. Something I don't even have a name for.

My hand slides across my pillow, then hers, until my palm rests on her cheek. My thumb rubs across her soft skin, and I think I hear her sigh. I wish there was a little more light so that I could see her, but I make do with touch as my fingers explore her cheek, her closed eyes. Her lips.

She kisses my fingertips then, just barely, and my chest squeezes.

I move slowly closer until we're chest to chest and I can feel her breath against my lips.

I kiss her.

Slowly, softly. It's a different kiss. Dangerous in its intimacy, but neither of us seems eager to hurry it along to our usual frantic pace. My tongue dips into her mouth again and again, loving the way her fingers pull restlessly at my T-shirt.

My mouth moves down to her neck, her hands roaming through my hair as I linger there endlessly before moving down her body, kissing her breasts, her stomach.

I stop at her waist, pushing her tank top up slightly so my mouth can rest on the bare skin just below her belly button, and it's there that I pause, realizing that what makes sex with her on some whole other level from sex with other women is not her amazing body, not the way her frantic fingers contradict her soft sighs.

It's that she's *Parker*. And sex with someone who I care about is...different.

Better.

My hands slide all the way under the shirt, and I move back up her body, pulling the shirt with me as I go. She lifts her arms above her head so I can remove it all the way. My own shirt follows, as do her panties and my sweatpants and boxers, although not before I pull a condom out of the pocket, because...Boy Scout.

There are so many things I want to do to her. Things that I want her to do to me. But when her arms come around me, pulling me closer, all I can think about is being inside her. Being home.

There's none of the usual joking or impatience as I roll the condom on.

My hands are on the pillow on either side of her head, my eyes locked on hers as I gently move a strand of hair out of her face, wanting to see her. Needing to see her.

I watch her face as I slide all the way in, one smooth stroke that has both of us gasping in the quiet night air. And then somehow my hands have found hers on the pillow. Our fingers link together on either side of her head, and somehow the palm-to-palm contact feels every bit as important as the feel of me inside of her.

I plunge again and again, her hips lifting to mine.

“*Ben.*” My name on her lips is a whisper, a plea. One that I answer by moving against her just right until she arches against me, clenching around me.

I groan, and somehow this quiet, straightforward missionary sex makes me come harder than I ever have before.

I rest my forehead against hers lightly, catching my breath before pulling back and pressing my lips to her cheek.

I want nothing more than to lie beside her, cradle her to me, but reality is slowly creeping into the dreamlike sequence of the past several minutes, and I remember where we are. *Who* we are.

“I should go back to my room,” I whisper.

She nods.

Neither one of us make any effort to unlink our fingers.

I feel like there are things to say, but I don’t know what the hell they are, so I settle for kissing her one last time.

It’s only once I’m back in my room that I realize perhaps it’s not so much *things* I should have said, but *thing*. As in one thing.

Because for the first time since we started this whole thing, I'm wondering if one of us shouldn't utter our safe word.

Before it's too late.

Chapter 23

Parker

We both try to pretend that things haven't changed. That last night wasn't both awesome and weird.

But the ride back to Portland is strained in a way I've never experienced with Ben.

We still talk. We still argue over what to listen to on the radio, still play the license plate game where we try to be the first person to think of a word that contains all of the letters of whatever license plate is in front of us.

But I can't stop thinking about last night.

About how it had felt *important* somehow.

And when we finally pull up to our driveway, I'm relieved. I need some alone time to think. To figure out just what to make of the hand-holding on the beach and the intense intimacy of the sex that followed.

All visions of me-time evaporate, though, the second Ben puts the car in park and I see the guy sitting on my front porch.

My mind seems to go perfectly blank, although over the ringing in my ears, I hear Ben mutter "What the hell?"

It's Lance.

Lance is sitting on my front porch, watching with an unreadable expression as Ben and I get out of the car.

Ben pulls both of our bags out of the backseat, slinging my weekender bag over one shoulder and his duffel over the other.

Lance stands as we approach, and the look he gives Ben is definitely wary. A quick glance at Ben's face tells

me why. His usual easy smile is nowhere to be seen. My fingers touch Ben's forearm, the gentle touch telling him to stand down.

His eyes meet mine, his expression angry. Still, he respects my request even if he doesn't agree with it, because he merely jerks his head at Lance in grumpy acknowledgment as he passes.

"Hey, Ben." Lance moves out of the way as Ben walks past him, and I'm pretty sure if he hadn't, Ben would have done one of those too-hard shoulder bumps.

"We're just getting back from Cannon Beach," I tell Lance, out of the need to say *something*.

"Ah." His smile is slight as he studies me. "I have fond memories of that place. Most of them involving sneaking into your bedroom in the middle of the night."

Ben just put his key into the lock, but he clearly overhears because his shoulders stiffen.

No. No! And all my brain can register is *oh my God!* because is this really happening?

Objectively, I know Lance's comment isn't geared at Ben.

He can't possibly know about last night. And it's obvious from the slightly desperate expression on his face that his comment is an attempt to remind me of good times—better times.

And yet I have the strangest urge to run after Ben. To tell him that yes, Lance came to my room once or twice, but that was before...before...

"What are you doing here?" I ask Lance, irrationally angry at his presence.

Lance slumps a bit, probably at my less-than-excited tone. "Can we talk?"

I glance once more at Ben, only to see him slam the door shut without so much as a backward glance.

My fingers touch my forehead as a headache starts creeping up out of nowhere. “Sure.”

Because what else am I supposed to say to the guy I dated for five years? Even if he did dump me.

I lower myself to the step, and Lance frowns in confusion, probably because it’s winter, and inside the house makes so much more sense for a heart-to-heart. But I don’t want Ben and Lance in the same house. I’m not sure I want Lance in my house at all until I know what he has to say.

“Um, okay,” he says. He sits beside me, close, but not quite touching. “So Ben went with you to Cannon Beach?”

“Yup.”

It’s not much as far as explanations go, but then I don’t really owe Lance anything.

Still, it’s odd that he even asks. One of Lance’s best qualities was always his lack of jealousy over my relationship with Ben. He always seemed to understand in ways that others didn’t.

But there’s a slight edge to his voice now, which makes me wonder if he doesn’t somehow sense the shift with Ben and me. Although heck if I know what that shift is.

I *thought* I did, but now...

Lance looks up at the sky, which is cloudy but thankfully not rainy. “I think I made a mistake, Parker.”

I put my hands between my knees and then squeeze my legs together. I say nothing.

He glances over at me. “I...I’ve been thinking about you. About us. A lot.”

“Yeah, I totally sensed that from all the phone calls,” I say sarcastically.

He’s quiet for a few moments. “I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me. And I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure. Didn’t want to jerk you around.”

I snort. “Where was all that consideration when you strung me along for the last two months of our relationship even when you weren’t *feeling it*?”

Lance shifts so that he’s facing me more fully, and his expression is very matter-of-fact. “You’re upset. You should be. I hurt you. But we’re adults, so before this conversation goes any further, just tell me if I even have a chance here. Because if I don’t, I’m not going to waste either of our time.”

It’s not a particularly romantic thing to say, but I find myself smiling, because it’s so *Lance*.

But then my smile fades, because...I don’t know what to tell him. I don’t know anything anymore.

And then it hits me that maybe my mom was right when she told Ben that I had unresolved feelings about what happened with Lance.

Because now that he’s here, I’m flooded with all sorts of memories and familiarity, and, yes, definitely a little bit of pain. I remember how we were. And how we were was *good*.

I wish Ben were here. To sit beside me while I figured this out. To tell me what to do.

“Parker?”

“I don’t know what to feel right now,” I tell Lance.

“Well, you’re not telling me to get out of here, so that’s good. Right?”

“Sure.”

“And I’m guessing the fact that you’re not ordering me off the property means you haven’t already moved on to some guy with movie-star good looks?”

His voice is teasing, but my mind flashes to Ben. To the way he’d looked at me last night. The way he’d held my hand.

I shake my head in denial of my own thoughts. It’s *Ben*. My best friend. Friend and *only* a friend.

Lance’s hand extends toward me, moving slowly, giving me a chance to move away. I let him take my hand, mostly to see what I feel, but I feel...

Nothing.

His fingers squeeze mine. “I want another chance, Parker.”

I finally turn to face him then. “Why? I thought you weren’t *feeling* it,” I jab again. “And what about the other girl? The one you *noticed*.”

To his credit, he doesn’t wince. Doesn’t apologize for his cold words all those nights ago, nor does he deny anything.

“She was...she was too much like me.”

My stomach clenches.

“So you dated?”

He shrugged. “Grabbed coffee a couple of times, but—”

“She didn’t want you.”

He grinned ruefully at his hands. “She has a boyfriend. But, Parker, you have to know—you *have* to—I’m not coming back because she wasn’t available. You and me... we have nothing to do with Laurel.”

Laurel. Blech.

“I miss you.” His voice was urgent now. “I was stupidly consumed with work, and school, and—”

“And you’re not now?” My voice is skeptical.

“Those things are always going to be important to me, but I realize now that I need balance. I...God, this sounds cliché. I didn’t know how much I needed you—loved you—until you weren’t there.”

I don’t exactly swoon, but his words definitely make me feel warm. What I wouldn’t have given to hear them *before* I hopped into bed with Ben Olsen.

“I do love you, Parker. That never stopped. I know that now.”

I go from warm to toasty warm, and I swallow, realizing how much I want this. Want someone to love me and need me and want me.

His fingers squeeze mine. “I want another chance. With you. And I don’t want to just pick up where we left off, I want to start fresh.”

I shake my head, indicating that I don’t understand. I sense that I’m missing whatever he’s trying to tell me.

Lance’s other hand comes up so he’s holding my hand with both of his. “I want you to move in. With me.”

I stare at him. “Come again?”

His smile is rueful. “Look, I get that Ben’s your friend, and it’s totally cool that you guys were roommates back in college, but I want to have a grown-up relationship with you, Parker. And we can’t do that with you living with another man. If I’m really being honest, I think that was part of the reason I had a hard time committing to you all the way.”

I frown. “But you...you were never jealous of Ben. Right?”

“Not jealous, no. I get that there was nothing between you but friendship, and you’re more like brother and sister....”

I look away, hoping he doesn't see the guilt on my face.

"It's just—" He breaks off as though trying to think of the right words. "You know, like if Ben and I were in two different car accidents and were at different hospitals...I was never really clear on which one of us you'd come visit first."

"That's...gruesome," I say.

It's a deliberate nonanswer to his hypothetical scenario, and I hope he doesn't notice.

"You know what I mean," he says with a half smile. "A guy wants to come *first*."

I freeze as the simplicity of his statement hits home. He's exactly right, but the implications are staggering.

Because it means that Ben and I can't keep just going along like we are. We both deserve to have an all-encompassing, all-consuming love, and we're not going to do that as long as we're clinging so desperately to each other.

And when I mentally reorient myself, I feel something click into place: the realization that my mom and Lance are absolutely right.

Lance is also right in that we're all grown-ups. The platonic, buddy-buddy thing was cute and fun in college, but I'll be twenty-five in a couple months. Hardly old, but old enough to know that I want something real.

I want what I have with Ben—the laughter, and the commitment, and someone to talk my problems over with....

But I want the other stuff, too. The flowers on Valentine's Day, the kisses in public, the eventual ring on the fourth finger.

I want someone who will hold my hand at the mall or at Starbucks. Not someone who will only ever touch me on a quiet deserted beach at midnight.

“What do you say, Parker?” Lance’s voice is pleading now. “Move in with me?”

Chapter 24

Ben

When Parker comes back in the house, I'm watching TV, but not really *watching* it.

Mostly I'm grinding my teeth, hating myself for bringing up Lance's name last night. It's like I summoned the bastard by uttering his name out loud.

Because how else, after three weeks of us not even mentioning him, has it come to be that he's on *my* goddamn front porch, talking to *my*—

Best friend.

I hear the front door close with a quiet click, and I tense, listening for the second set of footsteps that would indicate that Lance has been invited inside.

When Parker appears in the living room alone, I breathe out a quiet sigh of relief, although I never look away from the TV, not wanting to give away too much.

Not wanting her to see...Hell, I don't even know what it is I don't want her to see.

Only when she sits beside me and breathes a big sigh do I turn to face her, silencing the TV as I do so.

"Talk or mute?" I ask, defaulting to our old game. Because although a part of me wants to shake her and demand that she spill every last detail of whatever Lance said to her, she's still my friend, first and always, and I'll be whatever she needs me to be.

Even if that's quiet.

She blows out another long breath. "Lance wants to get back together."

The words tear at me a little, even though I'd been pretty prepared for them. I mean, why else would he wait around on our front porch like a loser, and then go and throw in that little reminder of when he used to sneak into Parker's bedroom on family vacations?

And that—*that*—is what's really clawing at me. The knowledge that not only was I just a stand-in for Lance on the Blanton family vacation, but that I'd also been a stand-in in Parker's bed last night.

Here I'd been romanticizing the whole thing like some sort of dope, whereas for Parker it was old hat.

"How do you feel about that?" I force myself to ask. *How do you feel about him?*

Her head falls back onto the couch and she looks exhausted.

Which, I guess, is better than her being all giddy about the fact that Lance finally saw what an idiot he'd been. But I'd prefer if she was maybe just a touch scathing, and a bit more forthcoming with some sort of over-my-dead-body proclamation at his get-back-together request.

"I don't know," she says. "I'm...it's all so weird and confusing."

She turns her head then, meeting my eyes for the first time really since last night, and I get the feeling she's asking me something, but I don't know what, and even if I knew the question, I sure as fuck wouldn't know the answer.

"You'll figure it out, Parks." It's the only thing I can think of to say.

"Do you think I should get back together with him?"

Oh God, don't ask me that.

"I think you should do what you want to do," I answer carefully.

Her arm swings out and she thwacks me across the chest. “Don’t be that guy. I need advice, damn it. Be my friend.”

I smile a little at her joking tone, because maybe things aren’t so changed between us after all.

Maybe last night was just a weird fluke. A moment of weakness, or whatever.

There’s no reason we can’t go back to how we were before, with our easy jokes. Even if she gets back together with Lance. Maybe that’s exactly what we need to pick up where we left off.

Back when our weekends involved harmless trips to IKEA, not trips to the beach that ended in mind-blowing sex.

“Don’t make it so complicated,” I tell her. “You’ve just got to decide. Are you happier with Lance? Or without him?”

“*Riiiiight*. Nothing complicated about that little tiny decision,” she says sarcastically.

I pat her hand where it’s fallen to my thigh. “You’ll figure it out.”

If my fingers linger just for a moment, we both ignore it. Because we each know that if she gets back together with Lance, these casual, lingering touches will be a thing of the past.

Parker’s chewing on a fingernail on her other hand, staring straight ahead. Her forehead’s all creased, and I know she’s overthinking this.

“Okay, walk me through the conversation,” I say. “Was it just a *Sorry, babe, my bad, let’s pretend it didn’t happen?*”

She rolls her eyes. “He’s not *you*. He cares about these things.”

My head snaps back a little, stung, but she's too lost in thought to notice.

Is that what she thinks of me?

That I'm not capable of caring about people just because I don't want to be in a committed relationship?

"He just got wrapped up in work and school. Didn't know how to balance it all," Parker explains.

I frown, not at all liking the way Lance seems to compartmentalize his life. A guy lucky enough to have Parker as his girlfriend should be *all consumed* by her. She shouldn't be a checkbox on his "balanced life" worksheet.

"So what changed?" I ask.

She shakes her hand free of mine, and then leans all the way forward so that she's staring at the floor. "He realized he needs me. Loves me."

I swallow. "And you need him? Love him?"

The words feel sour on my tongue, and my body feels tight, like it wants to physically reject the words. And especially wants to reject what her answer will be.

"I think so," she says quietly.

I ignore the strange splintering feeling inside me. "You *think*?"

"I don't know!" she says, exploding off the couch. "I... can we just go back to the beginning of the conversation? I want to choose mute. I need to think, and I can't think with you chirping in my ear."

My temper spikes. "Not thirty seconds ago you were begging me for my thoughts on this. It's not like I've been sitting here dying to force my opinion on you."

"Do you even *have* an opinion?" she shoots back. "On *anything*?"

“I’ve got plenty of them,” I say, fully angry now. “But not on this. This has nothing to do with me!”

My outburst hangs between us, and she nods. “Right. You’re right, of course. This has nothing to do with you. I’m sorry, I just...I’m overwhelmed is all.”

“I know,” I say quietly. “I’m sorry for yelling at you. Probably not helpful.”

Her smile is small and sad and she doesn’t meet my eyes.

“Parks?” Instinctively, I know there’s something more. Something she hasn’t said yet.

Something I’m not going to like.

She lifts her eyes to mine, and they’re wide and a little bit scared.

“Lance wants me to move in with him.”

There’s no air in the room. I can’t even breathe.

“What did you tell him?” I manage.

“That I needed some time.”

I nod. “What are you *going* to tell him?”

Her eyes never leave mine, pleading with me to understand. “I’m going to tell him yes.”

Chapter 25

Parker

“I still can’t even believe this,” Lori says as she studies my leopard print flats before seeing them carefully into a moving box. “It’s the end of an era.”

I swallow.

The end of an era indeed.

I’ve had the *exact* same thought a million times.

And then I had about a million *more* thoughts wondering if I could get out of it—if I could back out of moving in with Lance.

For a second, I want to tell Lori everything. I want to confide in someone that the only reason I said yes to Lance was because I was scared. Scared to death that if I stayed with Ben things would change, horribly.

Except they’re still changing horribly, only now I have to deal with the change minus a best friend.

But telling Lori any of this is bound to bring up questions I’m not ready to answer.

Questions about me. And Ben.

About what the hell happened that last night in Cannon Beach.

So instead I say nothing, and continue my self-pep talk that moving in with Lance is the right decision. The move-forward-with-my-life decision.

I don’t look up from where I’m wrapping all of my perfume bottles in Bubble Wrap. “Thanks for helping me pack.”

“Oh, of course,” she says with a wave of her hand. “This is the easy part. At least you have two dudes to help

with the heavy stuff tomorrow.”

I say nothing, and she pauses. “Right? Ben’s helping? Because I love you, but no way am I going to ruin my new manicure by helping you move that freaking dresser.”

“I haven’t really asked,” I say, keeping my back to her so she can’t read my expression. “But, yeah, I’m pretty sure Ben will help Lance load up the truck tomorrow.”

I’m not sure of this at all.

It’s not that Ben and I aren’t talking. We are. We’ve been perfectly civil. We *have* to be, because until noonish tomorrow, we’re living together. And we still carpool to work together.

But in the two weeks since I told him that I was moving in with Lance, we haven’t really connected. Not mentally. Not emotionally. Definitely not physically.

Neither of us will admit that anything is wrong. But something is wrong, and I’m dying inside.

“Okay, hey, I need to talk to you about something,” Lori says, oh-so-carefully setting a pair of ancient flip-flops in the box like they’re Louboutins before plopping down on my bed.

“Sure,” I say, grateful for the change of topic. Anything to stop thinking about Ben.

“It’s about Ben,” she says.

Or not.

“Okay...” I say.

I have the sudden premonition that I’ll want to sit down for this, only to realize that I’m *already* sitting cross-legged on the floor. Crap. Maybe I should be holding on to something.

“I’m going to ask him out. Ben. I’m going to ask out Ben,” she says.

Her voice is calm, matter-of-fact, and very, very clear, and yet it takes what feels like several minutes for her words to register in my brain.

“Lori—”

“No, I know what you’re going to say,” she interrupts. “That he’s a womanizing turd, and he’s going to break my heart because he doesn’t do relationships. But I *like* him, Parker. Enough that I want to risk it.”

“But—”

Lori’s smile is kind but firm. “Sweetie, with all due respect here, it’s not really up to you. I’m going to ask him to dinner. If he wants to say no, he can, but you don’t get to say it for him.”

I blink. She’s right, of course. I don’t get to decide with whom Ben goes on a date, but it’s just...it’s just...

Lori is studying me closer. “You’re okay with this, right? Because you’re sort of giving off this vibe like I’m breaking some sort of girl code or something—”

“No! I mean...of course I’m fine with it. It’ll be a little weird when—*if*—things don’t work out between you, but worst case I’ll just hang out with the two of you separately if that happens.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. “I’m glad. I mean, I know that you try to keep your girlfriends away from him, and I can’t even blame you, it’s just...I think about him all the time. And sometimes when we make eye contact I feel a little...something, you know?”

“Sure!”

My voice is too high, too hyper, but Lori doesn’t seem to notice.

Even though I don’t think Ben’s going to be dating anyone—even someone as great as Lori—I can’t stop the montage of hideous images from going through my head.

Lori and Ben holding hands. Kissing. The four of us on double dates.

Ugh.

Lori looks at her phone. “Oh, crap, how is it two already? My yoga class starts in twenty minutes. You cool if I ditch you? I can come back over later.”

I shake my head. “Don’t even worry about it. I’m mostly done. It’s just throwing the rest of the stuff in boxes. Plus, it’s not like I’m moving across the country. If I have to make a couple trips back here over the coming week to pick stuff up, I will.”

“So Ben hasn’t found another roommate yet?”

I shake my head. “Not yet, but I think his friend John is a likely candidate. His lease is up in a month and he’s been looking for a cheaper option.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m proud of you,” Lori says, pulling her bag over her shoulder. “Adorable as you and Ben are, you can’t do the *Will and Grace* thing forever, you know?”

I smile faintly. “If you’re hoping to coax Ben into a relationship, you’re probably not going to do it by comparing him to an iconic gay character. He likes the opposite sex too much.”

She waves this away. “You know what I mean, though. It’s good that you end it before you wind up codependent and sabotaging your other relationships. This is a smart move.”

I nod unenthusiastically. I’d been hearing that sentiment a lot lately. Casey, my mom, Lori, Lance...even my *dad*. Everyone seems in agreement that it’s time for me and Ben to “get on with our lives.”

Everyone seems thrilled by this new development, my moving in with Lance.

Everyone except me and Ben.

Lori leaves for yoga, and it's just me and my depressed thoughts.

I should be excited.

The whole point of this move is a fresh start for me and Lance. A chance to commit to someone who loves me, and who wants me for more than booty calls and the occasional trip to IKEA.

So why do I feel like I'm in mourning?

There's a not-so-soft knock at the door, and it opens even before I respond.

It's Ben. "Hey."

"Hey!" I say back. "Come on in!"

But, of course, he's already inside, flopping down on my bed. "Thought I'd see if you need any help."

I lift an eyebrow, and he looks sheepish. "I know. The offer's a little late. It's just...moving sucks, you know?"

It's a cop-out, and we both know it, but since I haven't exactly been myself lately, either, I let it go. I'm just glad that he's here, and that things seem...well, not quite normal, but at least we're talking.

"So what can I do?" he asks.

I point at the closet. "Finish packing my shoes? Lori started a box, but I swear it took her five minutes to place each pair *just* right—"

I watch as Ben scoops up an armful of shoes and dumps them unceremoniously into a box.

"I see that's not going to be a problem with you," I say dryly.

He grins, then repeats the motion. "How many shoes do you have, woman?"

"The fact that you added *woman* to the end of that sentence tells you all you need to know. A lot."

“I hope Lance is prepared to clear out eighty percent of his closet,” Ben says, holding up a pink wedge and looking at it skeptically before throwing—yes, throwing—it into the box as well.

It’s the first time since I told him that I was moving in with Lance that Ben’s even mentioned my boyfriend’s name.

And yes, Lance is my boyfriend again. Not that we’ve, um, consummated that status, but I’m moving in with the guy. Of course he’s my boyfriend.

Still, I’d avoided having Lance come by the house as much as possible. The thought of seeing him and Ben in the same room is just too much.

“So, how happy are you to have a bathroom all to yourself?” I ask, my voice determinedly chipper. “All that hot water. Oh, and you’ll have complete control of the remote. And your beer won’t have to share the fridge with my champagne. And there won’t be any long dark hair clogging the shower drain, and—”

To my utter horror, my voice breaks then, and I realize that I can’t even see the necklaces I’ve been trying to untangle for the past two minutes because my eyes are so filled with tears.

“Hey, now,” Ben says, his voice panicked as he scoots my way and sinks to the floor next to me, popping a bunch of Bubble Wrap in the process. “What’s this?”

His finger catches a tear, and that makes me cry all the harder.

“I don’t know,” I say, my voice all hiccupy. “I just...I think...I don’t...”

He gently presses the backs of his fingers against my cheek. “I’ll miss you too, Parks.”

I look at him through my blurry vision. “I bought you some new bath towels. Lots of them. And I washed them

all and put them under the sink in the bathroom so you'll have a long supply of fresh ones. And I'll call you every day to remind you not to—"

He puts a hand over my mouth. "Parker. Get it together, babe. You're moving about five minutes away. It's not like we're never going to see each other again."

"I know." I wipe my runny nose with the back of my hand. "But it'll be different. Won't it?"

Ben has his knees pulled to his chest, his arms looped around his legs, and he looks down at his hands. "Yeah. It'll be different."

It's not what I want him to say, and I cry harder before launching myself at him awkwardly, my arms wrapped tightly around his neck.

He tenses for a second, but then one arm goes around my back, the other into my hair. "You and your crying."

"I know," I whisper against his neck. "I'm a wreck."

Being held by him feels right, and for the millionth time since I agreed to move in with Lance, I wonder if I'm doing the right thing.

I pull back so I can look into his eyes, and our faces are just inches apart. It's weird to think that just a couple weeks ago, that would have put us in kissing position—a position we both would have taken advantage of.

It's even weirder that I still want to.

Oh God. I absolutely, positively cannot still want Ben.

For starters. Lance.

Also...

Okay, I can't think of another reason.

"Lori's going to ask you out," I blurt, desperate for something to derail the scary direction of my thoughts.

His eyebrows lift, although I don't know if it's from the sudden change of topic or the news itself. "Yeah?"

I nod. "I tried to warn her, but...she's determined."

His brow wrinkles. "What do you mean, *warn her*?"

"Prepare her," I amend. "For when you say no."

Ben is studying me, his face unreadable. "What makes you think I'd say no?"

"Well, I mean...she's not asking you for a hookup," I say, forcing a smile and batting his knee. "I've been telling you all along that Lori's looking for a relationship. A real one."

"Okay..." His tone indicates that he still doesn't get it.

"She wants a boyfriend," I say slowly, spelling it out for him.

I wait for it all to click into place so that he can assure me that no, he has absolutely zero intention of saying yes to Lori or any girl.

That he'll continue to be his charming, one-night-stand-ish self.

Because while I don't exactly relish the thought of him going back to sleeping with his bimbos, it's a hell of a lot easier to picture that than him *caring* about someone else....

But Ben says none of those things. Instead he shrugs. "I like Lori."

My mouth drops open. "You're not *actually* thinking of saying yes."

His laugh is short and a little harsh. "Well, I mean, it's not like she's proposing. So, yeah, if she asked me out, I'd say yes."

"But—"

"I don't want to be single forever, Parker."

His voice is a little sharp, and mine is just as edgy when I snap back.

“Since when?”

I see his jaw clench in irritation, but I press on. “I mean, when have you *ever* given any indication that you wanted a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know, but damn. I’m allowed to change my mind, right? I mean, I’m not saying I’m going to go rushing into anything or doing ring shopping on weekends, but that doesn’t mean I’m not open to dating if the right girl comes along.”

My throat stings. I don’t understand why, but this little announcement of his both surprises and wounds me.

Ben’s been waiting for the right girl?

I’d always assumed that he was just determinedly single. To think that he actually *wants* to be someone’s boyfriend—

It rocks the very foundation of who I thought he was.

Of who I thought *we* were.

It doesn’t make sense. Nothing makes sense anymore.

“You’re really going to date Lori?” I try to keep the bitchy note out of my tone, but fail miserably.

“What the hell is with this double standard?” he asks, pushing to his feet, his expression full-on angry now.

“What double standard?” I get to my feet as well so we’re facing off.

“The one where you get to have the boyfriend and the best friend, but I’m only allowed to have *you*?”

“No!” I say. “That’s not what that is, I just thought—”

He crosses his arms. “What? What did you think?”

I wince at his icy tone, but I can’t respond, because the answer that’s on the tip of my tongue will destroy us.

Because the crazy thought that keeps going through my head is that I can't fathom the fact that Ben's been waiting for the right girl...

Because it means that *I'm not her*.

All this time, I've never let myself think of Ben as boyfriend material, because I thought that he didn't want that.

But that isn't it at all.

He just doesn't want *me*.

Which is fine. I don't want him, either. I mean, we're just friends who—

“Oh my God.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “We did it.”

“Did what?” His voice is still irritated.

I force myself to meet his dark eyes. “We messed up our friendship. We complicated it with sex.”

“That, or *you* complicated it by deciding to get back together with your asshole ex-boyfriend.”

“Hey!” I point a finger at him. “That is *not* fair. I asked your opinion on that, and you said—”

“It shouldn't matter what I say!” Ben shouts. “You either want Lance, or you want—”

He breaks off, and rubs both hands through his hair, but I step forward. “I want Lance or I want whom?” I press.

It's crazy how much I want him to finish that sentence.

Instead his arms drop to his side and his eyes shutter. “This is fucking nuts. I'm getting out of here.”

“Great plan. Run away when things get tough,” I say snidely. “I can see Lori's a lucky girl. You're going to make a really great boyfriend.”

Ben looks up then, and his eyes are ice-cold. Colder than I've ever seen them.

“I’ve got one word for you, Parker, but know that when I say it, I’m not saying that I want to go back to how things were before we were fuck buddies. When I say it, I’m saying that I don’t want to go back *at all*.”

I feel a stab of panic. “Ben—”

He holds up a hand. “No, listen. You’re right to move in with Lance. You need to move forward. But *I* need to move forward too, and I can’t do it with someone who thinks I’m nothing but a superficial, womanizing asshole. I can’t do it with someone who thinks *she* can have it all, but doesn’t want the same for me.”

“Wait, Ben—”

He leans forward so we’re eye to eye, and the look on his face is lethal as he utters the one word I never imagined hurting so much: our safe word.

“*Cello*.”

And just like that, my best friend walks out of my life.

Chapter 26

Ben

THREE WEEKS LATER

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?”

“For the last time, yes,” I say. Then I give Lori my best smile to soften the edge of my tone.

But *seriously*, she’d asked me about twenty times, in a dozen different ways, if I’m okay with this, and if I have to hear it one more time...

Of course I’m okay with this.

Why *wouldn’t* I be okay having dinner with my best friend—*former* best friend—and her live-in boyfriend?

Sounds *great*.

I open the door to the trendy Italian restaurant Lori’s been yammering about all week and allow her to go in first.

I’m not really big on all the crowds and hype around the “opening” of restaurants, but Lori knows someone who knows someone and acted like getting reservations on a Friday night was like the Heisman Trophy of eating or something, so I’m trying not to be a dick about it.

The place is noisy and packed, which I kind of hate, but it smells amazing, so I try to think positive.

Lori tells (shouts) our name to the frazzled hostess, who points to the back of the restaurant. Lori nods before beckoning me to follow her.

I take a deep breath and wind around the tiny, too-close-together tables, trying to brace myself for what’s to come.

And then I see her.

I see Parker, and all thoughts of thinking positive about the evening fly out the window.

I don't think I can do this.

But, of course, I have to.

Lori and I have been on a handful of dates now, and I'm officially out of excuses for dodging this double date.

Parker and Lance stand as we get closer.

Parker so that she can hug Lori, Lance so that he can shake my hand in that weird, man-to-man thing that guys do.

If Lance or Lori notice that Parker and I don't say hello, much less hug, neither says anything.

"This place looks amazing," Parker gushes as we all sit down around the too-small table. She and Lori are sitting across from each other against the wall, with me across from Lance on the outside.

This leaves Parker and me kitty-corner from each other, which I guess is as good as can be expected given the circumstances, but it still feels too close.

Lori doesn't know about our fight, and from the placid look on Lance's face, I suspect he doesn't know, either, so we'll have to play nice.

And since Parker's currently talking, playing nice means looking at her. Pretending to listen.

She's wearing a black sleeveless top with a low scoop neck and a bunch of layered necklaces. Nothing special. Her hair's pulled back in a long ponytail, her makeup all smoky and Friday-night-out-ish.

She looks amazing, and that pisses me off. I don't want her to be miserable—not really—but I don't exactly need her to look like *that*, either. All pretty and glowing and... happy.

“I’m so glad we could do this,” Lori is saying, *because oh my God are we still talking about the restaurant?* “We could have gotten a better time next weekend, but obviously that won’t work with Ben going back to Michigan.”

Parker glances at me in surprise. “You’re going home?”

And then it’s Lori and Lance’s turn to look surprised, because normally—as in *before*—Parker would have known that not-so-little detail about my life.

I take a sip of water. “It was too expensive to fly on Thanksgiving, so I’m going back the weekend before. It’ll appease the parents without blowing my entire savings account on a plane ticket.”

“Right, of course,” she murmurs.

I suspect that she, more than anyone, knows how much I’m dreading the trip.

And, yes, I know that’s an awful thing to say. I hardly ever see my parents, and putting in some time at the winter holidays really isn’t too much to ask.

It’s just that I always come away from trips home feeling woefully inadequate. Four straight days of passive-aggressive versions of *So, when are you going to stop messing around?* will do that to you.

“I hear you,” Lance is saying. “My parents are paying for me and Parker to fly to Boston for Thanksgiving, so expenses aren’t a problem, but, *man*, I hate traveling on the holidays.”

It’s my turn to glance at Parker in surprise, but she’s staring at the candle on the table and won’t look at me.

Thanksgiving in the Blanton household is a big deal.

I mean, *all* families like to be together on turkey day, but Thanksgiving is Sandra Blanton’s favorite holiday, so she goes all out.

More than even Christmas.

I can't believe Parker's going to miss it to spend it with Lance's family.

Lance, who dumped her just a couple months ago. Lance, who—

My thoughts are interrupted by our server, who rattles off five specials of things I've never heard of before taking our much-needed drink order and disappearing, once again leaving the four of us in awkwardness.

At least it's awkward for *me*.

Lori and Lance seem to be continually oblivious to the fact that they're carrying the entire conversation.

Probably because Lori is really good at talking.

I've learned this about her in the two weeks since we started "dating," if you'd call it that.

Not that it's a big deal. Just a couple dinners. Lunch together at work. She came over the other night and watched a movie.

And yet...no sex. Nothing even close to sex.

I can tell she's puzzled, but she hasn't really pressed. I feel a little guilty. I'm pretty sure she thinks that I haven't made a move out of some gentlemanly sentiments, but the truth is...

I haven't been interested in sex with Lori. Or with anyone.

I glance at Parker and Lance, wondering how *their* sex life is, only to realize that the thought destroys my appetite. Since the supposedly excellent food at this place is likely to be the only good part of the evening, I push the thought away.

Things go pretty well through our first round of drinks.

And through appetizers. It's right after our main dishes are served that they start to go downhill.

"So, Ben," Lance says, cutting a bite of his steak and then glancing up at me. "I've gotta say, when Parker told me that you and Lori were dating, I practically fell out of my chair."

"Gosh, thanks, Lance," Lori says sarcastically.

"Not because of you, honey," he says with a little wink. "It's just I always thought Ben here had no intention of dating."

"Wonder where you got that idea?" I say with a pointed look at Parker.

She pauses in the process of winding pasta around her fork and narrows her eyes at me. "I'm pretty sure he picked it up from your track record. Because, remind me, when's the last time you saw the same girl for more than one night in a row? Is it four years ago now? Or five? And didn't you cheat on her—"

"Hey, now," Lori says with a little laugh. "We all did things we shouldn't have in college. Slept with people we shouldn't have—"

"Became friends with someone we shouldn't have," I mutter around a bite of my pork.

Parker's fork clatters to her plate, but she reaches for her glass of wine to cover it, and the place is so noisy, nobody seems to notice.

Except *I* notice.

Just like I notice the look of hurt on her face and feel instant regret. This fight that we're having is stupid. I get that. Six solid years of friendship, and I lost my temper all because she thought I didn't want a girlfriend.

But *damn*, that had burned.

The way it didn't even occur to her that I *could* be a boyfriend.

The way she couldn't even begin to picture that if I cared for someone, I would treat them like they were my *everything*.

The way she'd thought I wasn't good enough.

Sure, I'd been her boy toy for a while there, and that had been more than okay. I'd gone into that situation eyes open, perfectly content to be there.

But until our conversation in her bedroom that last day, I hadn't realized that she *only* thought of me as a boy toy.

And it had hurt.

Just like *she's* hurt now, by my careless statement about regretting the friends I made in college.

But I'm not feeling all that apologetic just now. Not when Lance's arm drops around the back of her chair as he starts to tell some boring-ass story about an art show they went to last night.

The only time Parker and I ever went to art shows was to make fun of the art, but, hey, if her *boyfriend* wants to go...

"So, what are you two doing the rest of the weekend?" Parker asks, putting her elbows on the table and smiling at Lori.

Lori gives me a nervous little glance. "Oh, I don't know. No plans really. I have my sister's baby shower tomorrow afternoon, and then—"

"We're going to Portland City Grill," I interrupt.

Both Parker and Lori look at me, and it's tough to tell who's more surprised.

"We are?" Lori asks.

I give her a slow, seductive smile. “Surprise.”

And then I feel like *the biggest asshole* because she gives me this beyond-happy smile, and I realize I’ve just done the ultimate dick move of toying with one girl’s emotions just to get a rise out of another girl.

I suspect Parker knows it, too, because she’s no longer looking wounded; she’s looking pissed.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Not only have I given Lori the wrong impression about where our “relationship” is going by claiming to be taking her to one of the nicest restaurants in Portland, but now I’ll have to actually try to get reservations, plus foot the ridiculously expensive bill.

All because I’d been wanting to jog Parker’s memory of *our* night there, back when we’d been carefree and happy.

Fuck.

I need to regroup.

I can’t think in this crowded, noisy hellhole, so I take the coward’s way out and stand under the pretense of having to go to the bathroom.

Problem is, Parker’s had the exact same thought, and she stands at the exact same time, *also* announcing that she has to use the restroom.

I start to sit, but Lori touches my hand with a little laugh. “You two can go at the same time. I’m sure Lance and I can manage to make conversation without you.”

Fuck again.

The old Parker and Ben would have had no problem heading toward the restroom at the same time. We wouldn’t have thought a thing about it.

The *new* Parker and Ben...

I force a smile and avoid Parker's eyes as I gesture for her to precede me in the direction of the restrooms.

The cramped dining room and the noise of tipsy diners prevents us from having to make conversation, but then we step into the deserted hallway and it's annoyingly silent.

Still, we say nothing as we walk to the restrooms.

Correction.

Restroom.

Singular.

The tiny restaurant also apparently equates to tiny facilities, which means there's only one coed bathroom. "You first," I mutter.

She nods in thanks and brushes past me, but before she can close the door, my palm is on the door and I'm pushing it open, crowding her backward as I follow her in.

I shut the door, leaving us alone in a tiny dark room lit only by a few tiny candles that smell like lavender or some shit.

"What the *hell*, Ben," she says, pushing at my shoulders. "I have to pee."

"You do not," I snap. "You were trying to escape the table just like I was."

She says nothing. "I can't believe you got us into this. Why didn't you just tell her you didn't like Italian food?"

"Because *everybody* likes Italian food. Why didn't *you* just tell her that you and I aren't on good terms?"

"Why didn't you? You're her *boyfriend*."

I open my mouth to refute this, only to realize that my lack of boyfriend potential is the entire reason for our

fight in the first place, and I refuse to give her any ammunition.

“You and Lance seem cozy,” I say snidely. “I take it he hasn’t gotten bored yet? Remembered all the reasons he dumped you in the first place?”

Shit. Too far.

Way too far.

Even if Parker hadn’t gasped in surprise, I would have known I’d crossed a cruel line with that.

I reach for her arms, gently, but she jerks back. Only she can’t, because the stupid bathroom is so small, we’re still chest to chest, both of us angry, both of us hurting.

“I’m sorry,” I say after several moments of strained silence. “That was an asshole thing to say.”

She glances at her feet before crossing her arms. “It’s okay. I know you hate me now.”

My chest tightens. “No. *No.*”

This time when my hands reach for her, she doesn’t move away, and I gently press my fingers into her upper arms as I shake her, just slightly. “I’m mad, yes, but I don’t hate you, Parks. I could never.”

She still won’t look at me. “You basically told me our friendship was over. All because we had one little fight. That’s not what real friendship is, Ben. You don’t just get to end it because you’re mad at someone.”

You hurt me, I want to say. You’re my best friend. The one who’s supposed to tell me I’d be the best boyfriend in the world and that any girl would be lucky to have me, not the one who laughs outright at the thought that I might need someone to love.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, because I can’t say any of the other stuff.

But it's not enough. I know the quiet apology isn't enough to repair the rift between us.

Mostly because I don't even fully understand what the rift *is*, and I suspect Parker doesn't, either.

"You should get out before someone comes and finds us in here together," she says quietly.

"Yeah." But I don't move.

Neither does she.

And then I'm pulling her closer, my hands sliding up her arms.

I cup her face, tilting it up to mine, bringing her lips closer—

Parker turns her head.

"Don't do this," she says with a harsh gasp.

My blood feels like it's turning to ice water in my veins.

Except...

I *know* she wants it. It's written all over her face. I know it because I know *her*. She wants me, and the thought gives me a flare of hope like I've never—

"Please, Ben," she says, her voice small, her eyes pleading. "Please don't make a cheater out of me."

Right. *Right*.

Because she's with Lance now. Again.

And I'm sort of with Lori.

And then, because I've never been able to deny Parker Blanton anything that she wanted, and what she wants is *Lance*, I release her.

Slowly, though, my fingers savoring the familiar soft skin.

And then I let her go.

I let her go all the way then, because she's my best friend.

And because I care way too much to hurt her any more than I already have by keeping her close.

Chapter 27

Parker

So.

Ben and Lori broke up.

If you could even call what they had *being together*.

“It doesn’t even make sense,” Lori is saying, tapping her pen furiously against her notebook as she sits next to me in the conference room. “We didn’t even...”

She glances around at the still mostly empty room.

“*You know.*”

I try to ignore the thrill that this news gives me.

Ben and Lori never slept together.

It shouldn’t matter to me, but it matters so damn much I can barely breathe.

“Maybe because he respects you more than all those other girls,” I say kindly. “Knows that you deserve more than *wham bam thank you ma’am.*”

Her pen taps even faster. “But if that’s true, then why did he end it? Like, he didn’t see me as the good-time girl *or* the long-term girl.”

I purse my lips. “Tell me again what he said, exactly.”

She gives me a strange look. “I’ve told you like two times already. Honestly, *you’re* supposed to be the one doing the talking. He’s your BFF. Explain him to me!”

I hesitate. I’ve yet to tell Lori that Ben and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms, and I’m a little surprised she hasn’t seemed to pick up on this. Neither has Lance. It makes no sense to me. I’ve never felt more alone, more

lost, and two of the people closest to me don't even notice.

And the person who's *supposed* to be closest to me—my best friend—isn't even *kind of* my friend anymore.

“He just said I deserved more,” Lori says with a shrug, after it becomes obvious that I have nothing to add to the conversation.

“I don't even know what that means,” she continues. “More *what*? Then he started talking about his job, and his family, and something about how his older brother just got some sort of public service award that he'll never get, and he's saying all of this, and all I can think is, wait, so I'm not even going to get laid?”

Lori is sitting to my right, and a dramatic sigh comes from my left. We both turn to give an irritated look to Eryn.

Too late, I realize that while our conversation started as a whisper, it got increasingly louder as Lori got more and more upset.

Eryn confirms that she overheard everything with a snide remark. “You do know there are better places to talk about your love life than the conference room?”

Lori lifts a finger, and I can tell she's getting ready to go all diva, but I gently push her hand down. “Eavesdrop much?” I ask Eryn.

She doesn't look even remotely sheepish as she turns to face us more fully.

Eryn gives a quick glance around to ensure our boss still hasn't shown up, and that the only two other people in the room are at the far opposite end of the enormous conference table, one talking on her phone, the other playing what seems to be *Words with Friends*.

“You guys are talking about Ben Olsen, right? Parker's bestie?”

Neither Lori nor I confirm, but she keeps prattling on anyway. “It’s so *obvious* what’s going on with him. Inferiority complex.”

I scoff. “You’ve met him, what, like, five times at company functions?”

“Yes. And all the times he’s tagged along as your plus-one at team happy hours, or whatever. I have to do something while you guys are all ignoring me, so I watch.”

I feel a little sting of guilt. Eryn’s so flipping annoying that it’s never really occurred to me that maybe part of the reason she’s so obnoxious is because she’s always on the outside.

I wonder which comes first...someone being left out in the cold because they’re annoying, or someone becoming annoying because they’re left out.

“Look, you said he just got promoted, right?” Eryn asks.

Lori’s eyes bug out. “Exactly how often do you eavesdrop?”

Eryn waves at this. “Oh, all the time. You guys talk super loud, and keep in mind our cubicle walls only come up to boob level. Not exactly soundproof. Anyway, so Ben’s recently been promoted but refuses to tell anyone about it, which means he thinks he doesn’t deserve it. He also has, like, an endless string of bimbos, and then he finds someone he thinks is nice”—Eryn gives a skeptical once-over of Lori here—“and he dumps her because she deserves more?”

I stare at her, my mind racing.

Eryn gives one last snotty little shrug. “Like I said. Inferiority complex. The guy thinks he’s no good at anything—that he doesn’t deserve better.”

Lori starts to lay into Eryn about how she doesn't know crap and how she should get her own life, but I sit back in my chair, taking in everything Eryn's just said.

Because while Lori's right—Eryn doesn't know Ben—I think she might actually be right about this.

Oh my God.

Lori and Eryn's catfight is interrupted by the appearance of our boss, and I try to focus on the meeting. I really do.

But I keep hearing Eryn's words over and over. *He thinks he's no good at anything—that he doesn't deserve better.*

Suddenly I'm replaying everything.

The way he denied deserving that damn promotion.

The way he refused to tell anyone about it.

I replay the way he clams up *every* time he has to go home to visit his all-star family.

The way he plays down everything important about himself, and instead jokes only about his *Call of Duty* skills or his prowess in the bedroom.

And then, worst of all, I replay the fight we had the day before I moved out.

The one where I'd all but laughed out loud at the thought that he could actually be somebody's boyfriend.

My reaction had been borne out of shock—maybe even jealousy—but what if Ben saw it differently?

What if *he* thinks *I* think that he's not *capable* of being a good boyfriend?

What if he thinks I think that nobody would want to date him?

The thought makes my heart hurt, because as at odds as we are right now, I know that Ben cares what I think,

just like I care what he thinks.

I am—I *was*—important to him, and I'd all but told him he was good for nothing more than a roll in the hay.

And this thing with Lori...

Does he think he's not good enough for her?

I start to get angry the more that I think about it, because Ben is good enough for *anybody*.

Ben is the freaking *best*.

But just as I start to get really good and fired up about this, I deflate.

Once upon a time, I could have been his champion. The one who'd go find him right this second and give an animated monologue about how he was being an idiot and that any girl would be more than lucky to have him love her.

I could have done that once. But not now. Because I'm too afraid that I'll slip up. Say something I shouldn't.

Something like *I want to be that girl*.

Chapter 28

Ben

Turns out, I kind of like living alone.

John didn't work out as a roommate. His landlord freaked at the thought of him moving out, so he gave John a killer deal to stay at his old place.

Which means that I'm still on the hunt for a new roommate, but I'm not in a hurry.

Parker rather decently volunteered to pay two months of her share of the rent, given the short notice of her move. Plus, the recent promotion at work came with a nice boost in salary.

For the first time ever, money's really not an issue. It feels very...adult.

Of course, the extra income didn't take any of the pain out of dropping my credit card at Portland City Grill that night with Lori.

Not that the meal with Lori had been unpleasant.

It had been fine.

But that was the night it hit me: Lori deserved more than *fine*.

She was a nice girl who deserved more than a guy who'd really agreed to date her only to prove a point to a friend.

And that's the real kicker.

I'd said yes to Lori mainly to prove Parker wrong, only to belatedly realize that Parker didn't give a shit one way or another who I dated, or even *if* I dated.

Parker had moved on. And moved out.

“Wanna go out?” This from John, who, while not my roommate, has been spending a fair amount of time over at my place since my TV’s bigger.

I glance at the clock. It’s eight o’clock on Saturday, and I want nothing more than to stay exactly where I am, vegged out on my couch, contemplating whether or not I want pepperoni or sausage on my pizza.

And that’s when it hits me. I *need* to go out. Need to get out of this weird funk.

I need to get fucking *laid*.

I haven’t touched a girl since that night in Cannon Beach with Parker—the one that I attached way too much importance to and got burned for it.

I swing my legs off the coffee table. “Yeah,” I tell John. “Let’s go out.”

An hour later, I’m right back in my element. And pardon the cliché, but picking up girls is kind of like riding a bike. It’s coming right back to me.

If I’m reading the vibes right—and I usually do—by the end of the night, I’ll have my pick of two cute blondes, a gorgeous Latina, or a pretty brunette who I pretty quickly rule out because she looks too much like Parker.

Parker, whom I haven’t spoken to since that night in the restaurant.

I’ve seen her once or twice. We were in the same line at Starbucks the other day, and I’m completely ashamed to admit that I pretended not to see her.

Except I’m not *that* ashamed, because I’m pretty sure she did the same thing.

“Yo! Olsen!” I turn around and my smile slips a little when I see who’s called my name.

“Hey! Lori!” It’s been about a week since I gently suggested that things weren’t working out, and although

she took it like a champ, it's never exactly fun being confronted with an ex, even though I don't know that Lori and I were ever serious enough to warrant the ex label.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. Her voice is a shade too loud for the circumstances, which tells me she's well on her way past tipsy. "Um—"

"Just kidding," she says, before I can answer. "I know exactly what you're doing here. Same thing as me!"

She does this goofy little thrusting thing with her hips, and I laugh, because she doesn't *at all* seem pissed about the way we left things.

"Slim pickings tonight, at least on the guy front," she says, glancing around before coming back to me. "At least until now."

Her eyes lock on mine meaningfully, and only then do I realize that I was too quick to let my guard down, because the speculative look in her eyes makes it clear what she has in mind.

A one-night stand.

"Come on," she says with a little tug on my arm. "I promise I'm not going to trap you into buying me dinner again. I just want some fun, you know? With someone as hot as I am."

I look her over, and she's right about one thing.

She's definitely hot. Breasts are displayed to perfection in a tight blue shirt that ends just a couple inches short of her jeans' waistband, displaying a smooth strip of flat stomach.

She's gorgeous and fun, and all but guaranteeing a night of no-strings-attached sex, and...

I can't.

I need to get laid, yes, but I need to do so in order to stop thinking about Parker, and doing it with Parker's friend?

Not the right thing to do. For any of the parties involved, least of all Lori.

She sees the moment I'm going to reject her and gives an aw-shucks snap of her fingers. "Oh well. Worth a shot. Fear not, Olsen, I've got myself a brunet backup plan."

"He's a lucky guy," I say, meaning it.

She winks and starts to walk away, before turning back and giving me a curious look. "Question."

"Sure," I say, taking a sip of my drink.

"When I asked you out, and you said yes...that was about Parker, huh? Somehow?"

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

"And when you broke up with me," she said. "That was about Parker, too?"

Still no words.

Lori's smile is slower, more confident. "And just now, when you turned down my offer of sex?"

I nod slowly, figuring I owe her the truth. *Yep. That was about Parker, too.*

"She's my best friend," I say, lest Lori get the wrong idea and think that by *about Parker* I mean I have some sort of romantic interest in her.

Because that's not what this is about.

Sure, for a weird moment there in Cannon Beach, things had felt kind of...intense. But she's still *Parker*.

Lori lets out a self-deprecating groan. "Oh my gawd, how could I have been so freaking blind!"

Then she seems to perk up, her light blue eyes pinning me. "Though," she says, "not that I'm even close to being

as blind as you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

But Lori’s already walking away from me and gives a little dismissive wave of her hand over her head as she sidles up to some beefy dude by the wall.

“Whatever,” I mutter.

I turn back to the bar, relieved to see that my original targets are still here. Just because I have no intention of taking Lori up on her offer doesn’t mean that I’d turn down an invitation from any of these lovely anonymous ladies.

Anonymous sex is exactly what I need right now.

In fact, it’s all I’ve *ever* wanted. And damn Parker for messing that up with all her *Sex should be fun* and *You should be able to talk to the person after* bullshit.

Sex was sex.

Talk was talk.

The two were kept completely separate, as Parker and I had just so disastrously demonstrated.

And as for feelings? That shit didn’t belong in there at all.

In the end I settle on the shorter of the two blondes, a friendly publicist who’d recently accepted a new job in Austin, and has made it *abundantly* clear that she’s looking for a last hurrah in Portland before relocating.

The girl practically has *no strings attached* written across her cute, perky butt.

Five minutes later, I’ve settled up our bar tab and waved goodbye to John, who’s also looking to be on the verge of getting lucky, and I’m about to escort *Ana with one n* back to my place when my phone vibrates in my back pocket.

I take it out with the intention of silencing it, but my thumb freezes when I see the name on the screen.

Parks.

It's been so long since she's called me, texted me, *talked* to me, that, for a moment, my face breaks out in a smile, until I remember the state of our friendship:

Deteriorated.

I tell myself to ignore it. Tell myself to focus on what's simple, like Blondie here.

But my brain doesn't listen, because then my thumb swipes across the screen, and I lift it to my face, although I don't actually say anything.

Don't know what to say.

"Ben?"

I skid to a halt then, because I'd know that voice anywhere. It's her crying voice.

Automatically, the sound of it brings out the *I will slay dragons for you* instinct in me.

Even now.

Especially now.

I will slay dragons for you, Parker.

"Tell me," I say.

"It's my mom." Her voice is tiny. Scared.

My heart drops.

"The cancer came back. It's...it's really bad."

"Where are you?"

"At my parents'. You don't have to come, I just...I wanted...I needed—"

"Shut up, Parks. I'm on my way."

And just like that, I know. Know that I'd do anything—*anything*—to get my best friend back.

“Who was that?” Ana asks when I hang up.

“A friend.”

“Sounded like more than a friend,” she says indifferently, taking a piece of gum out of her purse.

I stare at this tiny blonde as my brain buzzes.

It strikes me as utterly ridiculous and yet completely undeniable that this virtual stranger is the one who opens my eyes to the biggest, most crucial truth of my life:

Parker is more than a friend.

Has perhaps *always* been more than a friend.

The realization turns me upside down, inside out, and yet...

I can never let her know it.

Not unless I want to lose her all over again.

Chapter 29

Parker

I don't know what made me call Ben instead of Lance.

I only know that when I open the front door of my parents' house and see Ben standing on the porch that I've made the right decision.

A realization he only confirms when he steps into the foyer, closes the door, and without a single word, takes me into his arms and holds me.

I let out a shuddering breath, and for the first time in an hour, I feel...well, not *good*...but I feel like I can survive this.

Like I can survive *anything* as long as Ben's here.

My fingers clench, tangling in the fabric of his shirt. I rest my head on his shoulder and let myself remember what it feels like to breathe. For the first time in hours.

No, for the first time in weeks.

He smells like other women's perfume, but I don't even care. I care only that he's here.

That he came.

After everything we've been through, after the way we've spoken to each other, after the immature way we threw away years of friendship over a stupid squabble, he's come, and he's here and he's holding me.

My eyes water, and his hand moves over my hair. "Don't cry."

But of course I do. I sob. Just like he knows I will.

And he lets me, never uttering stupid *it will be okay* platitudes. He doesn't make weird soothing noises. He just holds me.

Eventually I manage to pull back enough to let out a huge slobbering noise, and he glances down at his white shirt, which is now smeared with black eye makeup and the faint beige tinge of my tinted moisturizer.

He points at his chest. “Well, *here’s* one thing I haven’t missed.”

I smile faintly.

“I’ll get the industrial-sized tissue box,” he says, running a hand down my arm before heading toward the bathroom. Then he pauses. Turns back. “Parker?”

“Yeah?” I say, wiping my eyes with the sleeves of my sweatshirt.

He points to his stained shirt again. “It’s the *only* thing I haven’t missed.”

I meet his eyes and melt a little at the warmth there. At the apology written all over his face.

And just like that, we’re okay again. I know it down to my bones.

I sit on the couch, and in a moment he comes back with the box of tissues, dropping it into my lap before he sits beside me. “Where are your parents?”

“Upstairs,” I say, staring at my hands. “Last time we went through this, my mom was so brave, so positive, but this time...” I swallow. “She’s been in her room ever since they learned the news.”

I stare at my hands before continuing. “My dad had to be the one to tell me. And when I went up to see her...all we could do was cry.”

This, of course, starts me crying all over, and Ben once again does the holding thing that he’s so good at.

“It’s in her lymph nodes,” I say when the latest crying jag subsides. “They’re going to start treatment immediately. Some experimental mumbo jumbo that

they've apparently had some success with, but they're still throwing around the word *prognosis*," I manage.

Six months. Maybe a year.

Ben releases me then, leaning forward.

His hands are clasped tightly together, and then he bows his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

Belatedly I realize that I'm not the only one torn up by this news. He loves my mom, too.

I put a hand on his back. Letting him know that I'm here for him, just like he's here for me.

"She's strong," he says. "She'll fight it."

"She will," I say. "I just...God, Ben, I don't know that I can do it all over again. Watching her hair fall out, and her throwing up, and shrinking and shrinking and so pale."

"She'll get through it," he says, shifting toward me and holding my hands. "She'll get through it because you'll be there with her every step of the way. As will your dad. And me. And Lance," he says, although I suspect this last one is more of an afterthought.

All of my thoughts over the past month bubble up in my chest, and I feel the need to talk.

Because there are things I need to tell Ben.

Things I don't know how to express, but my heart is full of *stuff*, both grief for my mom, and myself, but other things, too.

Important things.

Things that I'm just now beginning to understand.

"Ben, there's something that I should—"

"You should call Lance. He should be here," Ben says at the exact same time.

He smiles. "Sorry. You first."

But my courage has failed me. Here I am trying to tell Ben that I think I might—that I have these *feelings*...and he's reminding me to call my boyfriend?

The worst part is, he's right. I should absolutely call my boyfriend. Not only for Lance's sake, but because *I just got Ben back*. I can't risk losing him again with stupid admissions.

And so I do exactly what he says.

I find my phone. I call my boyfriend.

And try very, *very* hard to bury feelings that will destroy everything.

Chapter 30

Ben

ONE MONTH LATER

Parker and I are back to normal.

She's still living with Lance, of course, so the roommate element isn't there anymore.

But everything else is just like it was before we started hooking up.

There's the joking, the laughter, the easy conversation.

The carpooling. Parker picks me up every morning for work in her hippie car, drops me off every evening, and conversation doesn't lull the entire time.

Just like before.

The Blantons invited me for Christmas, and I was tempted. Especially given Mrs. Blanton's cancer treatment.

But, in the end, I'd gone home to Michigan. My first Christmas at home since graduating from college.

It had been an important one.

A chance to make a fresh start, not just by letting go of my reliance on Parker and her family, but also a fresh start with *my* family.

I think I made progress. Over the holidays I made an effort to get on equal footing with my siblings—to establish that just because I didn't take the path chosen for me didn't mean I wasn't a success.

My mom is still struggling a bit with my decision to eschew law school despite "all her sacrifices," but I made definite progress with my dad and stepmom. Enough so

that I'm actually looking forward to when they come out and visit over Presidents' Day weekend in February.

All things considered, my life is as good as it's been in a long time, ignoring, of course, the not-so-minor fact that I have very real, very complicated feelings for my best friend.

Feelings that eat at me when I'm all alone late at night, when the dark loneliness is begging me to tell her how I feel.

But then I see her the next day, and she has some cheerful anecdote about how she tried to make Lance breakfast and exploded avocado smoothie all over the ceiling, and I remind myself that if I care about her—and I do, more than anything—the best thing I can give her is her happiness.

And her happiness is Lance.

Which brings me to the news I'm about to spring on her...

Parker's already in the driver's seat when I get to her car after work, tapping away on her phone.

"Hey, karaoke tonight?" she asks as I climb into the car.

"Sure," I say, fastening my seat belt. "Who's going?"

"You, me, Lance, of course."

Of course.

"Plus, Lori and that new guy she's dating. Lori's sister. Oh, and this girl from work, Eryn."

I frown. "I thought we hated Eryn."

Parker holds up a finger. "We *used* to hate Eryn. Now we think Eryn maybe just needed a friend."

"Got it. Well, Eryn's in luck, because it just so happens I'm an *excellent* friend."

“Definitely,” Parker agrees. “You are. Except, of course, when you—”

I put a hand over her face to shut her up, then drop some of the folders I’ve been carrying in her lap.

She glances down. “What’s all this?”

“There’s this cool trick I’ve heard about,” I say. “It’s called...oh, now I’m forgetting...oh yeah, *reading*.”

She ignores me, already flipping through the assortment of brochures and pamphlets and getting the idea quickly.

Parker glances up. “Business school.”

I lift a shoulder. “I’ve decided it’s time to start embracing the fact that I love my job, and that I want to challenge myself. I was thinking maybe this could be, like, my do-over, since I was pretty average in college. I want to be good at something.”

Her face is elated as she listens to me, and I can’t help it, I think my chest puffs a little, because she also looks proud.

She returns to the brochures, riffling through them more quickly now. “Have you thought about what your specialty would be, or are you going to start general, and —”

She breaks off and I tense, knowing what’s going to happen.

Parker looks up, and this time her face is confused. “These are all in Seattle.”

“Yeah,” I say, shifting in my seat and trying to play it casual. “They’ve got some great schools up there, and—”

“And they have some great schools here. In Portland,” she says stubbornly. Cutely.

“But Seattle is only a two-hour drive,” I counter. “Close enough for an easy weekend trip.”

Hence its appeal. Close enough to be, well, *close* to Parker. To be there for her. But far enough to give us both a little bit of distance.

Far enough to get over her. I hope.

“But what about your job?” she says. “You just said that you—”

“There’s a spot for me in the Seattle office. They said it’s mine if I want it.”

“You’ve already talked to them?” Parker looks stunned. “How long have you been thinking about this?”

I hear the question she’s not asking:

You didn’t tell me?

I understand her confusion. Because once upon a time we’d told each other everything, but now that I *can’t* tell her everything, I have to be, well...careful.

It’s self-preservation.

And maybe it’s completely selfish, but going to Seattle is one way that I can continue to be Parker’s best friend and to maintain all of the best parts of our friendship without completely destroying myself in the process.

“Well, I’m happy for you!” she says. “And I love Seattle! I’ll come up all the time, and you can take me to Pike Place Market, and we can—”

I see the tears welling up, and put a hand over hers. “I just need the change, Parks. You get that, don’t you?”

She snuffles. Squeezes my hand back. “Yes. And if this is what you want, I’m happy for you. *Truly.*”

I smile, because I know she means it. Because over everything we’ve been through, that’s one rather crucial detail we’ve each learned about the other person. That we’ll put their needs first. Always.

We both jerk our hands away when we realize that we're all but holding hands in our office parking lot. So, okay, not everything's *exactly* like it was. We don't touch anymore. Or when we do, accidentally, it gets weird.

By tacit agreement, we don't talk about my possible Seattle move for the entire ride home, focusing instead on the latest recall of my company's running shorts that apparently have been linked to a rather unfortunate rash.

"Lance and I can pick you up tonight for karaoke," she says. "Seven?"

"Nah. I'll meet you there," I say.

I'm doing pretty good with the Lance-Parker relationship. As well as can be expected. But I avoid hanging out with just the two of them as much as possible. Again, it's a self-preservation thing.

The rest of my afternoon passes quickly. Gym. Shower. Take a call from my sister and listen to her ramble all about the *uh-mazing* new guy she's dating. Do laundry, which I hate more than ever.

I'm still living alone. I keep meaning to put up an ad for a new roommate, but over time I start fantasizing that maybe Parker will come home, and I find an excuse not to do it.

It's like I said. I *really* need to get to Seattle. Need to get on with my life and get my relationship with Parker back to a purely platonic, non-longing kind of place.

By the time I show up at the karaoke bar at seven, my mood is veering toward irritable, and I'm wishing I had said no to the invitation.

And then it gets worse.

The seating arrangement ends up with Lance *between* me and Parker.

Night. Mare.

Thankfully the rest of the group is hyper and fun, and I feel my spirits start to lift despite the fact that Lance won't stop fiddling with Parker's earring like a total weirdo.

I talk to Parker's new friend Eryn, whom I've apparently met before but don't remember. She's actually kind of funny in a very forthright, *Oh my God did she just say that* kind of way.

Parker finally manages to detach her ear from Lance's fingers and the girls all traipse onstage to sing some girl-power anthem I'm only vaguely familiar with, while all the guys at the table take the opportunity to drink heavily in case we're next for getting dragged onstage.

"You know, I've never tagged along when Parker's done the karaoke thing," Lance shouts in my ear. "Always thought it was stupid. But she's really good, huh?"

I nod, because *hell, yes*, Parker's good, and this shrieking song doesn't showcase it all. It's mostly a bunch of them jumping around and shouting.

My brain's already running through our usual duet options when it hits me that maybe a duet with Parker is off-limits now.

As Lance just told me, he's never come out with us before on our karaoke nights, which means he hasn't seen just how good Parker and I are onstage. Together.

And suddenly I want to show him how good we are.

I want to show Parker. I want to remind her.

But the duet opportunity never presents itself. Lori and her new boyfriend sing an off-key version of "Yellow Submarine," and it's terrible.

Eryn gets up and sings a country song that I think might have a subtext of stalking, but I can't be sure.

Parker tries to drag Lance up onstage, but he flat-out refuses, and her eyes meet mine before looking warily at Lance, and I know she's feeling conflicted. That she wants to sing with me, too, and knows that maybe we shouldn't.

Lori saves her from the choice. "Hey, Parks, get up there and do a ballad."

"A ballad?" Eryn asks, wrinkling her nose. "Isn't that kind of a buzzkill?"

"Not when Parker does one," Lori says confidently. "Just watch. The room will fall quiet, but in the totally entranced way."

"Do it, babe," Lance says. "I love your voice."

He's looking at his cellphone as he says this, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes. *Ass.*

Still, if I can't sing *with* Parks, hearing her voice—*just* hers—is the next best thing.

I glance up, surprised to see her watching me. Almost as though she's looking for permission, although for what, I have no idea.

"Do it," I say, lifting my drink to her.

She bites her lip and stares at me for just long enough that I wonder if everyone else thinks it's awkward, and then she walks toward the stage.

"Wait, we didn't pick your song!" Lori shrieks after her. "Damn it, I hope she does Adele."

Parker doesn't pick Adele.

The song she *does* pick takes my breath away.

It's not a trendy one. Not even close. "I'll Stand by You" by the Pretenders.

Our freshman year of college, when she and I were just starting to get close, I'd gotten drunk one night. Not

super drunk, just *talk about things I shouldn't* drunk.

And I'd confessed in a moment of weakness that this drippy, mopey song was my favorite.

I hadn't thought about it since that night.

But Parker remembered. All this time, she remembered.

Her voice is tentative at first, but grows in confidence as a hush falls over the room, and whoever's working the lights must be paying attention, because everything dims so there's just one shining down on Parker.

And then suddenly I can't breathe, because her eyes find mine. They find mine and they hold.

And even though there are a hundred people in the room, and her boyfriend is sitting right next to me, it feels like she's singing to me. *For* me.

I don't move a muscle as she sings.

Sings about friendship. About being there for another person.

Her eyes never leave mine, and I know from the deepest part inside me that this song is for me. For us.

And it's not a bubblegum, best friend pop song.

The song is bittersweet. Agonized. *Raw*.

Tears are streaming down her face by the time she's done, and I'll deny it to my dying day, but my eyes feel a little damp, too.

I can't shake the feeling that Parker just told me goodbye. Not goodbye to our friendship, because that will always be there in some capacity.

But goodbye to the way we used to be. The way we could have been.

The crowd goes nuts for her. Of course they do. She's the best damn singer in the room, and everyone knows it.

“Damn, Lance, you better hold onto your girl,” Lori’s boyfriend shouts over the whoops and yells.

I give him a sharp look, wondering if he was talking about me, but then he motions to the room in general. “Every guy in here wants to hit that right now.”

I tense, but Lance merely smiles, looking completely unperturbed, completely confident that his girl is, well... *his*.

And now I’m wondering if that moment was all in my head. If everyone in the room thought Parker was singing to them.

The thought depresses the hell out of me.

I feel someone staring at me and glance up, surprised to see weird Eryn studying me with those intense black eyes of her. And then she gives me an almost imperceptible nod. One of understanding.

Of sympathy.

She knows.

I look away and am trying to figure out if there’s a good way for me to call it an early night, when Lance elbows me. “Dude, let’s go fetch everyone another round. I’ll buy, but need an extra set of hands.”

It’s quite possibly the last thing I want to do: spend one-on-one time with the guy sharing Parker’s bed every night.

But then I see Parker making her way back toward the table, and I realize between dealing with Lance and facing Parker when I’m still feeling like an emotional wreck, the first is my better option.

Only I’m wrong about that. So wrong.

Lance *does* order the drinks, but that’s not why he wanted me to come with him.

“Hey, come here a sec,” he says, gesturing toward a less crowded part of the bar. I glance at the bartender, but, seeing as she has seven drinks to make, I’ve got absolutely zero reason not to cooperate with Lance’s weird demand.

But I should have thought of a reason. I should have thought of *all* the reasons.

Because Lance, the stupid asshole who once dumped Parker, pulls a small red jewelry box out of his pocket and, after glancing around to make sure nobody’s paying attention to us, opens it.

Somehow I was hoping it was earrings or a stupid pin, or something.

Instead, it’s my worst fear staring back at me.

“Do you think she’ll like it?” he asks, having to shout over the crowd, and it strikes me how weird this is. What kind of douche carries around an engagement ring to karaoke bar?

An engagement ring.

Parker’s getting married.

To Lance.

“I’m not going to do it tonight or anything,” Lance explains. “I don’t know when...I just wanted your opinion first. You know her better than anyone.”

Damn right. I do.

And fuck, she’s going to love that ring. It’s a perfect (huge) diamond with a circle of smaller diamonds around it. It’s classic but with plenty of sparkle.

The dude *nailed* it.

And I force myself to focus on the important thing. Her happiness.

I look at him. “She’ll love it.”

He breathes out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, man. You don’t how nervous I was to tell you about it. I don’t think I’ll be this nervous when I ask her dad for permission. Hell, I should be asking *you* for permission.”

“No,” I say, glad the loudness of the bar makes it impossible for him to hear the catch in my voice. “She’s your girl. She’ll always been your girl. I just watched over her for a while.”

I no longer care about making a polite excuse, or what everyone will think about the fact that I ditch the bar without so much as a goodbye.

I go straight home and fill out every one of those Seattle business school applications.

And then I mail them. Every last one.

Chapter 31

Parker

Lance “hid” the ring in his underwear drawer.

I mean, leaving aside the cliché of it, does he really not register that I do all of the laundry? As in wash it, dry it, and *put it away*.

Of course I was going to find the damn ring!

But in the end, it doesn't matter.

Doesn't matter whether Lance was hoping I'd just stumble across the ring in the least romantic proposal of all time, or whether he's just oblivious.

In the end, finding that red jewelry box was the wake-up call I needed.

Not just a wake-up call that I can't marry Lance, because I've known that for weeks.

No, finding that box made me realize something even more disturbing:

I've been using Lance.

I've been lying next to him night after night, trying to remember how to be in love with him, when really my every thought and every dream was consumed with someone else.

Of course, I don't tell him this last part when I break up with him.

Instead, I sit him down when he gets home from work and quietly, kindly tell him that it's not working out.

The irony isn't lost on me.

I didn't intend to, but in the end, I dumped him in the very same location he dumped me months earlier.

And to his credit, he handles me breaking up with him with more dignity than I did.

He doesn't even look surprised, and because I know him well—almost as well as I know Ben—I narrow my eyes.

“Lance.”

He looks up.

“You don't exactly look crushed,” I say with a faint smile. “Particularly considering I found a certain key piece of jewelry in your dresser drawer.”

He groans and leans forward until his forehead touches the kitchen counter. “I'm an idiot.”

“Because you were going to propose when we've barely connected? Haven't even had sex?”

He snorts. “I know. I was going to return it. I just...”

I prop my elbow on the table, then put my chin on my hand. “You just...”

“I thought that buying that ring...committing to you, would make me forget—”

I sit up straighter. “Oh my God. You've still got a thing for Laurel.”

“No!” He sits up. “No, I...fuck. I don't know. I haven't seen her but I keep thinking about her. Wondering...”

I smile then, a bittersweet kind of smile, and stand. I lean forward and impulsively kiss the top of his head. “You should tell her.”

“She's got a boyfriend.”

I lift a shoulder. “Tell her anyway. I think we *both* know that it's possible to be dating one person and thinking of another.”

He searches my face. “Ben?”

I swallow.

Nod.

Lance blows out a breath. “I knew it. That song at karaoke...that was for him, wasn’t it?”

My eyes fill as I remember that moment. It seems strange that it was just the night before, because I feel like I’ve had a lifetime to reflect on it.

I can’t stop thinking about what it felt like to pour my entire heart and soul into the lyrics of that gorgeous, heartbreaking song.

My heart still feels the ripping agony of telling Ben how I felt even if he didn’t *know* I was telling him.

My heart freezes as a thought strikes me. What if Ben *did* know?

If Lance caught on, why wouldn’t Ben?

Oh God. What if *that’s* why he vanished last night?

We all assumed he’d picked up some girl at the bar, and I’d *hated* that scenario, but I hate this one a lot more. What if Ben figured out what I was trying to tell him, and *ran*?

Lance stands and walks me to the door.

I pick up the overnight bag I’d left by the front door in anticipation of this precise moment. The moment when I walked away from the guy I once thought I’d marry.

“Bye, Lance.”

He leans forward, kisses my cheek. “Bye, Parker.”

And just like that, it’s over.

It’s over and I’m okay with it.

Well, not okay. Because there’s a huge hole in my chest—a hole that has nothing to do with the guy I’ve just broken up with.

The smart thing to do is to go to my parents’. Or Casey’s or Lori’s.

Or even a hotel.

I need to think things over. To figure out my game plan.

I get in my car and drive to my parents'. I make it all the way to their driveway, but not out of the car.

I put the car in reverse.

Retrace my route back to downtown, but this time, I'm not going back to Lance's place.

I'm going *home*.

Chapter 32

Ben

I used to be pretty good about picking the noncrazy girls out at a bar.

But I must be out of practice, because the girl currently dancing on my coffee table—even though no music is playing—is all-out *nuts*.

“Demi, honey,” I say, keeping my tone as calm as possible. “How about I call you a cab?”

The only response I get is a shirt in the face. *Her* shirt.

“Christ,” I mutter. So not in the mood for this.

“I wanna dance!” she hollers. “Come dance with me, Blake!”

I scratch my cheek. I swear to God she didn’t seem this weird in the bar. A little hyper maybe, but not loony bin.

I’ve just been so damn desperate to lose myself in someone else. To get rid of the ache that seems to have taken up permanent residence in my chest.

“I’ll dance with you if you get down from the table,” I lie.

She does this sort of saucy hip wiggle, and her fingers drop to the fly of her jeans. She wiggles her eyebrows as she unbuttons it, and I realize I’m about to be subjected to a nonconsensual striptease.

A knock at the door saves me from having to watch as she slowly turns around, bending over as her tight jeans start to make a downward trek over her ass.

“Please let that be John,” I mutter.

I’m obviously going to have to physically remove this girl from my coffee table, and an extra set of hands will

be majorly appreciated.

It's not John.

"Parks! Hey!" I say, registering that my chain of emotions is something like panic, joy, and then confusion.

Confusion, because I know pretty much all of Parker Blanton's expressions, but for the life of me, I don't recognize the one on her face right now.

"Um, everything okay?" I ask.

Then I jolt forward as a candy-scented female comes careening into me from behind. Demi's bra is still on, thank God. Her pants are not.

"Who's this?" the surprise stripper chirps.

Parker's smile is wide and friendly as she fixes her gaze on Demi. Uh-oh. *That* face, I know.

Poor Demi.

"Hi, I'm Parker." Her voice is friendly.

Demi's nose wrinkles. "That's a boy's name."

"Mmm," Parker says in a considering tone as she comes in and sets her bag down by the front door. A big bag. I wonder where she's headed. "Is it? What's your name, darling?"

"Demi!"

"Well, Demi." Parker links her fingers together and gives Demi a polite, professional look. "I'm really sorry to ruin your evening like this, but my brother...he's not well."

For the first time, Demi's tireless smile wavers. "Your brother?"

Parker gives a head nod in my direction and I hide a grin. "He's supposed to be in rehab for sex addiction. Seems he got out."

Demi gives me a nervous look. “I like sex.”

“I’m sure you do, dear,” Parker coos. “But see, Ben here, his tastes are a bit...singular.”

Demi licks her lips, nervous now. “Like...handcuffs?”

Parker’s laugh is just the tiniest bit condescending. “Oh, sweetie. No. He likes *dolls*.”

I stifle a laugh. Barely.

But Parker’s just getting started. “He likes to have them watch while he’s, well...rutting. Likes to brush their hair. Likes to line them up right next to him while he—”

“Thanks, sis,” I interrupt. “For making sure I get back to rehab.”

Parker pats my chest. “It’s the least I can do, bro. I *knew* something was amiss when they said you’d left Polly behind.”

Parker glances at Demi. “Polly’s his favorite doll. He was allowed to take one with him to rehab, providing he didn’t do anything, well...weird.”

By now Parker’s talking to Demi’s back as the younger girl makes a beeline for the living room, and comes back in record time, her jeans on but still unbuttoned as she scrambles to pull her shirt back on.

“Thanks a lot, ma’am,” Demi says as she brushes past Parker. She ignores me altogether.

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” Parker says with a smile. “You need a cab?”

“Nah, my friends are at the bar just around the corner.”

“Okay, then,” Parker says with a little finger wiggle. “Bye-bye now!”

Neither of us move after she shuts the door behind Demi.

“I know what that was,” I say finally. “Payback for that time I told that one girl that *you* had a doll collection—”

But Parker’s not interested in memory lane, because she interrupts me.

“Talk or mute?” she asks.

“I, um, what?” I ask, confused at the sudden appearance of our old game. Generally we do it only when the other person clearly has something on their mind.

And while I definitely have stuff on my mind, it’s nothing that I can talk about—

“You’re not deciding whether *you* talk or mute,” she explains. “You’re deciding whether *I* talk or mute.”

What the hell?

“Why would *I* decide whether you talk or not?” I ask.

She meets my gaze steadily. “Because there’s a very, very good chance you’re not going to like what I have to say.”

I’m not really loving the sound of that, but...

“This something you want to get off your chest?” I ask warily.

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

I blow out a long breath. “Then tell me.”

She opens her mouth, then seems to lose her nerve, because she shuts it. “Can we do this in the living room?”

“Um, okay,” I say, because she’s already walking away.

“And I could use a drink for this!” she calls.

Do I need one? I wonder quietly to myself.

“You should get one for yourself, too!” she calls again.

Great.

I dig around behind some embarrassingly old leftovers until I find a bottle of prosecco left from when this used to be Parker's fridge, too.

I pop the cork and dump hefty pours into two coffee mugs.

As I pour, I wonder if I hadn't left the sparkling wine in the fridge for precisely this reason.

A hope that she'd come home.

And here she is. And I'm glad to see her, I am. It's just...I almost wish she hadn't come over.

Because all I can think about is begging her to stay.

But we have to get through whatever big announcement has her all wound up and pacing around the living room like a caged animal.

I hand her a mug and she stares at it for a moment, but doesn't move to take it.

"Sorry it's not crystal," I say. "This is a bachelor pad now."

"Obviously," she says. "Demi seemed...um, partially clothed."

I take a big sip from my own mug. It's not my favorite drink, but my beer supply is low and I need the booze.

"For the record, I didn't know she was crazy when I brought her home," I say.

"Uh-huh."

The skepticism in her tone says she clearly thinks I'm still sleeping my way through Portland, and I open my mouth to refute her, but think better of it.

The last thing an almost-engaged woman needs to hear is that her best friend is still hung up on their last sexual encounter.

I freeze as a horrible thought occurs to me.

Suddenly, I know *exactly* why Parker is here.

I know why she's so tense.

And I know why she thinks I won't want to hear what she has to say.

Because I don't. I don't want to hear it.

I don't want to hear that Lance proposed. I don't want to hear that she's going to get married to someone else.

"Mute," I say a little desperately. "I want you to mute."

Her eyes flicker. "But you said—"

"I changed my mind. I don't want to hear it."

I know it's selfish. Of course I know.

And *eventually* I'll hear, and I'll congratulate her and I'll even toast her wedding, but I just can't hear it right now.

I can't hear that the girl I love is going to get married to someone else.

I love her.

I swallow and turn away from her, squeezing my eyes shut.

I love her so much.

"Ben, wait," she says, coming toward me. "I won't talk if you don't want me to, but at least tell me why you changed your mind—"

I spin back to face her, and my pain must be all over my face because her eyes widen and she takes a step back in surprise.

And all of a sudden, it becomes too much. She's too damn beautiful, and I care too damn much.

"Talk or mute," I say roughly.

"But you just said—you're confusing me, Ben."

“Me,” I say. “We’re talking about me now. Do you want *me* to talk?”

A little line appears between her eyes. “Do *you* have something you want to get off your chest?”

It’s a nearly verbatim replay of our earlier conversation, except with the roles reversed, and suddenly I lose patience with all our stupid word games and how we’re tiptoeing around each other.

“Sit down,” I say.

“You’re being weird,” she says.

She moves toward the couch anyway, but then I change my mind about her sitting, and my hand snakes out, grabbing her arm and pulling her around so we’re face-to-face.

We’re both breathing harder than the situation calls for. But maybe that’s not true, because the bomb I’m about to drop on her is a big one.

“Parker, I—”

“Don’t go to Seattle,” she blurts, interrupting me.

“I—what?”

She moves closer, her eyes full of panic. “Don’t go to Seattle.”

I shake my head. “I already turned in the applications —”

“So? You can do more applications *here*. To Portland schools.”

This so isn’t what I want to be talking about right now, but I suppose it’s as good a segue to what I have to say to her as any, so I go with it. “I can’t stay here, Parker.”

“You have to,” she says, her voice breaking. She reaches out her hands toward my chest then yanks them

back so they're cradled against her own chest. "You can't leave me."

My heart breaks, even amid my confusion. "Parks—"

"Or I'll go with you!" she says. "I mean, I'll have to come back to Portland, like, all the time because of my mom, but I could live with you in Seattle some of the time, and—"

Something is wrong. She isn't acting right.

I grab her hands, holding them still. "Parker. Sweetie. What's wrong? Is it your mom? Has she taken a turn for the worse?"

Her eyes are overflowing with tears. "No. She's the same. Prognosis is the same." She licks tears off her lips, and my heart breaks all over again.

What is going on here?

I take a deep breath. "Did Lance—"

"We broke up." She's talking faster now.

My first reaction is relief. Deep, soul-wrenching relief. For *me*.

Followed quickly with pain for *her*. I hate that I have to watch her go through this again. No wonder she's so worked up. She just got dumped.

And yet none of this makes sense. Why would he go from carrying a ring around to breaking up with her in twenty-four hours?

"Did he say why?" I ask.

"Why what?"

"Why he broke up with you?" I say, keeping my voice as gentle as possible.

"You're not getting it!" Parker jerks her hands back from mine and takes a step back, only to come right back toward me, closer this time.

She meets my eyes. “Don’t mute me, Ben. Please don’t mute me. Let me say this.”

My heart begins to pound.

With fear. And hope.

When her hands come toward me again, they’re shaking, and she hesitates slightly before resting her palms lightly against my cheeks.

“Lance didn’t break up with me,” she says. “I broke up with him.”

I don’t breathe. *Can’t* breathe. “Why?”

Her eyes roam over my features as though searching for something. “You really don’t know?”

My heart is pounding in earnest now, but still I don’t move.

“I don’t think—” I break off, having to clear my throat. “I don’t think I could bear it if I was wrong.”

“Last night, after I sang to you, where did you go?”

My hands lift, covering hers. “So you *were* singing to me?”

Parker’s eyes manage to roll despite the fact that they’re watery. “Of course.”

I hesitate, unsure of how much I should tell her, but it’s too late for either of us to go back now. “Lance had a ring,” I say slowly.

“I know. I saw it.”

“He showed it to me,” I tell her. “He asked my permission or some shit, I guess.”

“Did you give it to him?” she asks.

“What?”

“Did you give him permission?”

“Of course,” I say.

Her eyes go carefully blank, and her hands drop as she takes a step backward.

“No, Parks...you don’t...I thought you loved him. I thought you *wanted* to marry him.”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t. I don’t.”

I close my eyes, hardly daring to hope.

“Parker—” My throat closes, and I have to clear it again. “Why did you come over here tonight?”

“Because I made a mistake,” she whispers. “Because I promised my best friend that if we slept together, that I wouldn’t fall for him. I promised him that nothing would change. That we could go back to where we were.”

She glances at the floor before looking back at me. “But I *did* fall for him. And I don’t want things to go back to how they were.”

I open my mouth, but happiness is getting in the way of words, and I can’t seem to make a single noise.

“If you’re going to reject me, do it quickly,” she says. “Like when you ripped off that Band-Aid after my tetanus shot last year. Just end the pain fast—”

I put my hands on her face. I cup her head.

And I kiss her.

The kiss is rough and desperate and I pour every last drop of my feelings for her into it.

I pull back slightly, searching her face to make sure she’s getting it, but she still looks confused, so I kiss her again, more slowly this time.

“Ben?” she says when I pull back.

“You recently pointed out that I haven’t had a serious girlfriend for as long as I’ve known you,” I say roughly. “Don’t you want to know why?”

She hesitates, then nods.

I gently kiss her mouth before continuing. “It’s because I fell in love with this incredible girl my freshman year. Only I didn’t know how to be in love, so I did the only thing I could to keep her close. I became her friend. I became her *best* friend, and buried all of my own feelings so deep that I didn’t even recognize them, because *her* feelings were all that mattered, and she wanted this other guy.”

I take a deep breath and force myself to continue. To be brave like she was. “But when I touched you, Parker... I slipped up. All those long-buried feelings bubbled up and...you get what I’m trying to tell you, right?”

She wipes her eyes. Nods.

I smile at her. “Those sure as hell better be happy tears.”

She smiles back. “The happiest. I love you, Ben. I should have said it the second I came in the door.”

I laugh. “You probably should have. But *I* should have said it all those years ago.”

She leans against me, her finger tracing the shape of my mouth as though memorizing it. “Tell me now.”

I bend my knees a little so we’re eye level. “I love you, Parker Blanton. I’ve loved you for the longest time.”

Her answering smile is my everything.

“I love you, too, Ben Olsen.”

“New house rule,” I say. “You have to say it every day.”

“*I* make the house rules,” she says, tapping a finger to my mouth. “And I decree that *you* have to say it every day.”

I wrap my arms around her, lifting her off the floor. “Does this mean I get to see you naked again?”

She laughs, and I love the sound of it. “Depends. Are your sheets clean?”

I sling her over my shoulder, ass in the air, and move toward the stairs. She slaps at my back with her palm. “That wasn’t an answer.”

I grin as I take her up the stairs.

My sheets *totally* aren’t that clean.

Turns out, she doesn’t care.

Epilogue

Parker

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

“Ooh, I know!” I say, pointing excitedly at the karaoke book. “We could do this Disney song.”

Ben gives me a disgusted look. “We could. I could also hang myself with the cord of this microphone—”

“Well, *you* pick a song then,” I say impatiently.

“Would you chill out?” he says, flipping through the ten trillion pages of the song list. “We have, like, four people in front of us.”

“Not if we cut.”

“That only works if it’s you and Lori trying to cut in front of a group of horny dudes. And seeing as Lori has her tongue down Drake’s throat, I don’t think she’s going to be singing anytime soon.”

“God, I can’t believe she’s getting *married* on Saturday,” I say as I look over to where my friend is making out with her soon-to-be husband.

Yep, that’s right. Lori is marrying a guy she’s known for less than a year.

I’m a bridesmaid, along with her sister, and...wait for it...Eryn.

The girl is still a total weirdo, but one of my favorite people ever now that I’ve trained her not to say *everything* that’s on her mind.

“How about this one?” Ben asks, nudging me.

I glance down. “Um, no. Also, to save us time in the future, *every* time you want to do a duet version of ‘Baby

Got Back,' it's always no. It was no back when we were just friends, it was no when we were friends with benefits, and it's no now that we're..."

I break off and he raises his eyebrows. "Now that we're what? Lovers?"

I wrinkle my nose. "I was going to say boyfriend/girlfriend, but that seems woefully inadequate, huh?"

He tugs me toward him, wrapping his arms around me, and I give a happy sigh because every day I think I can't love him any more, and every day I wake up loving him so much it takes my breath away.

"How about we're best friends...in love," he says.

I kiss him happily. "That's cheesy."

"Does it ever bother you?" he asks thoughtfully. "That we spent all those years preaching to the world about how wrong they were about guys and girls not being able to be just friends, only to find out that we were the blind ones?"

"Does it bother *you*?" I ask.

His lips nuzzle my neck, completely oblivious to the fact that we're in a crowded karaoke bar. "Not a bit. Never been so happy to be wrong."

Our kiss gets a little more passionate than either of us plans on, and a couple behind us clears their throats loudly.

"We'd like to see the book when you're done," the guy says in a pointed voice.

Ben shoves the book at him without ever breaking contact with my lips.

When we finally break apart to breathe, my eyes scan the room as we continue to wait our turn for the stage.

I spot my parents, who are not only turning a blind eye to the fact that Lori and her boyfriend are making out right in front of them but also seem to be doing a little snuggling of their own.

“I can’t *wait* until my mom gets up here,” I say.

“Yeah? I don’t think I’ve ever heard her sing. She as good as you?”

“No, she’s terrible. Totally tone deaf. But it’s on her bucket list, so...”

Ben’s hand rests against my back, softly, comfortingly, and I let the gentle touch soak up some of my sadness. My mom made it past the six-month mark, so that’s positive. But she’s still sick. Really sick. The cancer’s still eating at her.

But we’re exploring other treatments. More aggressive ones. She’ll get better. I know she will.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into coming out on a school night,” Ben says around a yawn.

“Oh, womp womp, Grandpa.”

And then I give him another kiss on the cheek, just because I’m proud of him. Ben got accepted to several business schools in Seattle *and* Portland.

He settled on here. Right where he belongs.

“Hey, go with those girls,” I whisper. “See if they’ll let us go first.”

“On it.”

He heads off, and then is back by my side in a record two minutes. “Done. We’re up.”

“Nicely done!” I say, impressed. “I didn’t even see any of them give me the stink eye when you pointed at me.”

“Why would they give you the stink eye?” he asks innocently.

I give him a look. “You didn’t tell them I was your friend, did you? What *did* you tell them about me?”

“I just told them the truth.” Ben holds out a hand to help me onstage before tugging me close.

“Yeah?” I ask. “And what’s this truth?”

His kiss is sweet, as is his response:

“I told them we were best friends.”

TWO YEARS LATER

*Mr. and Mrs. James Blanton
request the pleasure of your company
at the marriage of their daughter
Parker Eleanor*

to

*Mr. Benjamin Robert Olsen
at Seaside Lodge, Cannon Beach, Oregon
on Saturday, the Eleventh of August
at 2:30 in the afternoon.
Karaoke reception to follow.*

For anyone who's ever fallen in love with a friend.
I know firsthand that it can work out quite well. Right,
Anth?

Acknowledgments

Every now and then, a story comes upon an author, seemingly out of nowhere, that absolutely must be told.

Some characters and some types of stories don't care that the author has a million other projects already in flight. These characters and ideas don't care that they're not in vogue with current genre trends. Don't care that they will cause a dozen different people (author included) to have to scramble to make them happen.

Blurred Lines and its characters are such a case. Ben and Parker came to me on a random Wednesday back in 2014, and despite the fact that I was knee-deep in existing projects, I stopped everything I was doing and started writing.

A couple hours later, I had the first four chapters (the exact same chapters you read here) and sent them off to my agent, with an urgent plea for her to get them out into the world.

My agent (the incomparable Nicole Resciniti) didn't even flinch.

Nicole, thank you for coming through.

Days after my "fit," Nicole sold it to Sue Grimshaw at Loveswept, which is where the thank-yous must come in.

Without getting too much into the complicated world that is publishing timelines, it must be said that the team over at Penguin Random House made this a book in record time. They didn't have to, but they must have sensed my Total Crazy about it, because they more or less bent time to do this for me.

I know I thank them in every book (because they deserve it!) but they deserve it extra hard here.

To Gina Wachtel, Kim Cowser, Katie Rice, Lynn Andreozzi, Daniel Christensen, and, most especially, Sue

Grimshaw, please know that I'm sending hardcore gratitude your way. I feel so lucky to be a part of your team.

BY LAUREN LAYNE

Sex Love & Stiletto

After the Kiss

Love the One You're With

Just One Night

The Trouble with Love

Redemption Series

Isn't She Lovely

Broken

Crushed

Oxford Series

Irresistibly Yours

I Wish You Were Mine

Someone Like You

Other books

Blurred Lines

Good Girl



PHOTO:
ANTHONY
LEDONNE

LAUREN LAYNE is a *USA Today* bestselling author of contemporary romance novels. Prior to becoming a writer, she worked in e-commerce and Web marketing. In 2011, Lauren and her husband moved from Seattle to New York City, where she decided to pursue a full-time writing career. It took six months to get her first book deal (despite Lauren's ardent assurances to her husband that it would take only three). Since then, she's gone on to publish several books, including those in the bestselling Sex, Love & Stiletto series, with more stories always in the works. Lauren currently lives in Chicago with her husband and their spoiled Pomeranian. When she's not writing, you'll find her either at happy hour, running at a doggedly slow pace, or trying to straighten her naturally curly hair.

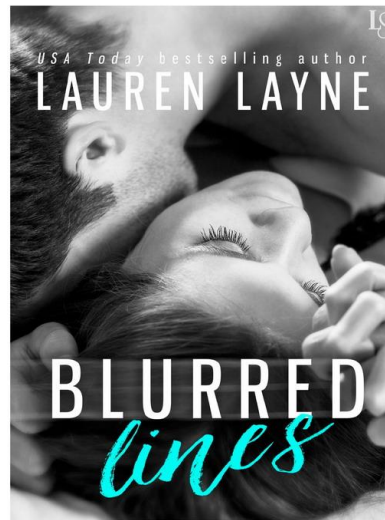
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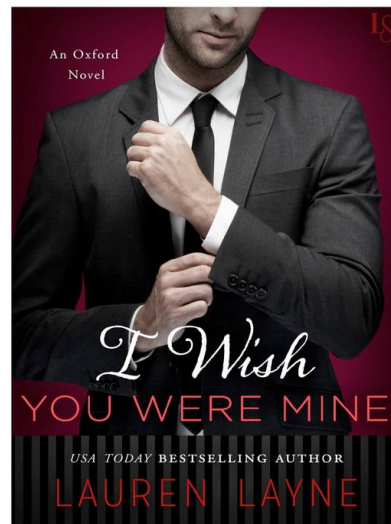
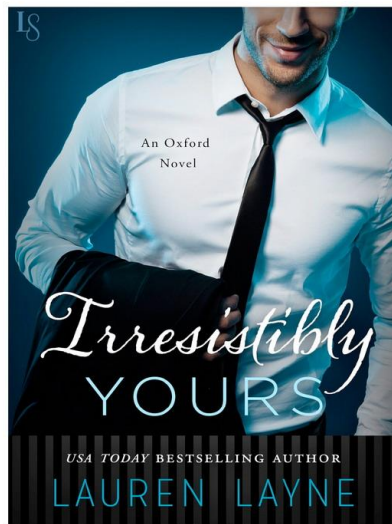
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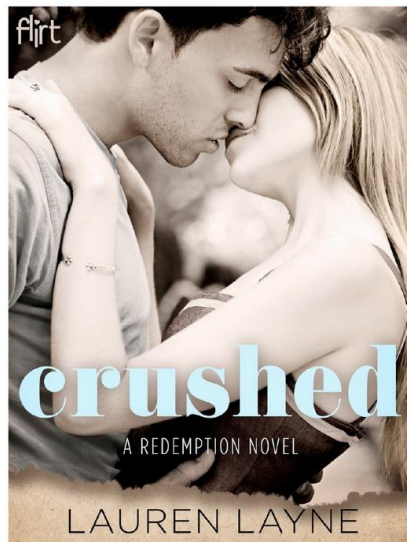
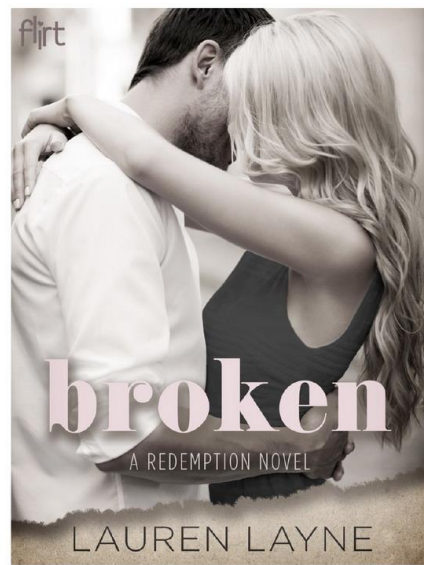
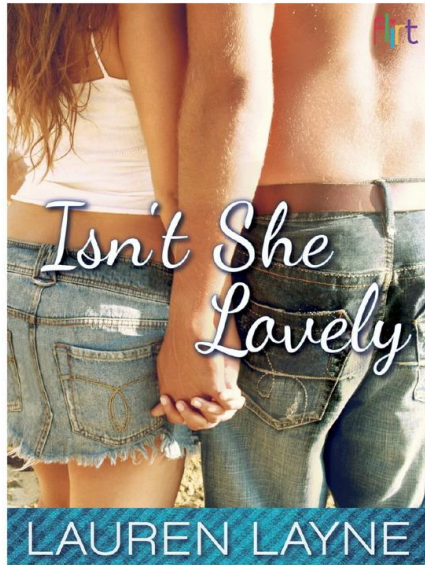
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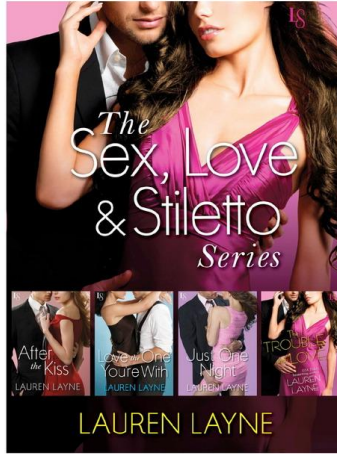
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THE SEX, LOVE & STILETTO SERIES



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Irresistibly Yours

by Lauren Layne

Available from Loveswept

Chapter 1

Cole had been watching the brunette for the better part of three innings.

Which was just *wrong* on a couple levels.

For starters, it was a rare woman that could come between Cole Sharpe and baseball. Or between Cole and *any* sport, for that matter.

And at Yankee Stadium in particular, the game came first. *Especially* a game in which the Yankees and Blue Jays were tied 1–1 in a rivalry for the top spot in the American League East division.

Cole's eyes should have been glued to the field. Not only because the Yankees were *his* team—he'd been a die-hard fan since his Little League days—but because Cole was a sportswriter. Come tomorrow morning, Cole would be expected to know the details of every single at-bat.

And yet...

His eyes shifted once more to the narrow figure of the brunette as he took another sip of beer.

There was something about her and yet nothing about her? She was utterly, completely, unremarkable.

And that was the *other* reason Cole's fascination with the woman made no sense.

Cole loved women almost as much as he loved sports, but *this* woman?

Nothing about her demanded a second look. Cole liked 'em curvy, but this one was slim to the point of being skinny. There was no noticeable definition of her waist through her Jeter jersey. No womanly flare of her hips.

Plus, Cole preferred blondes, and this one's messy ponytail was just a couple shades lighter than black.

As for her face? Well, he hadn't seen it yet. Not fully. But she'd turned her head only once in the third inning, giving Cole a quick glance at her profile. The upturned nose was cute enough, but the rest of her features were hardly so arresting as to explain why he continued to stare at her.

It took Cole another half inning to realize what it was that had captivated him: For the first time in his life, he was seeing a woman who was more absorbed in a baseball game than he was.

Tiny Brunette, as he'd started thinking of her, hadn't lost interest in the game once. Even between innings, when the rest of the stadium was refilling on beer and peanuts, she merely scribbled like crazy in a little notebook she kept in her lap.

It was like clockwork. The third out would signal the swap of the players on the field, and Tiny Brunette's attention would dip toward the damn notebook.

Her left hand would sneak around to twirl her ponytail around a finger while her right hand busily wrote...

What?

What did she write in that notebook? And just why did he want to know so badly?

Normally Cole would just ask. The seat beside Tiny Brunette was free. Everyone else in the suite was there more for the networking and the free food and booze than the game. It would have been so easy just to plop down beside her, strike up a conversation. Flirt.

But for some reason he was hesitant.

Cole told himself it was because he didn't want to interrupt whatever it was she was so diligently working on, but there was an unfamiliar fear too. The fear of rejection.

Because *nothing* about this woman signaled that she'd be interested in having a conversation with him.

And that would be a first.

But before Cole could make the call on whether or not to die curious about that damn notebook, or risk rejection by Tiny Brunette, his best friend and co-worker was holding a fresh beer in front of his face.

"You look like you need it," Lincoln Mathis said, sipping the foam off his own beer.

"How would you know?" Cole said. "You've been chatting up Jonas Leroy's wife for the better part of four innings."

"Had to," Lincoln said with a little shrug. "She was bored. Her husband's completely preoccupied with whatever's going on with that baseball down there."

"As he should be at a *baseball game*," Cole said pointedly.

Cole didn't know why he bothered. His friend was already back on his cellphone, not the least bit interested in the game.

Lincoln Mathis *looked* like the type of man that would enjoy sports. Tall, athletic, well-muscled from early morning gym sessions. Carelessly styled black hair and friendly blue eyes that screamed *guy's guy* just as loudly as they did *lady's man*.

But much to Cole's dismay, he'd never been able to get his friend to invest more than a passing interest in sports—*any* sport. Lincoln was always happy to tag along to a game when booze and women were involved, but ask him who he thought this year's MVP would be and he'd say Babe Ruth without the smallest hint of irony.

Still, tonight Cole couldn't exactly lecture Lincoln for not paying attention, when he himself was having a hell of a time keeping track of the score.

Once more, his eyes found Tiny Brunette, who was... yep. Writing in her notebook.

“Hey, Sharpe. Do you know where they keep a fire extinguisher in here?” Lincoln asked, looking around the luxury suite of Yankee Stadium.

Cole tore his gaze away from the woman and her damn notebook. “What for?”

“If you stare at that girl any harder, she’s going to burst into flames,” Lincoln said, jerking his chin at Tiny Brunette.

“I wasn’t staring.”

“Don’t insult our bromance,” Lincoln said cheerfully.

“Keep running your mouth and we won’t have a bromance.” Cole forced himself not to look at the woman again.

“Hey, if you’ve got a crush on the wee lass, you can tell me,” Lincoln said, taking another sip of beer.

“I don’t have a crush. And wee lass? Really? You’re Scottish now?”

“Sometimes. Chicks dig the brogue. You should try it on your girl over there.”

“She’s not my girl. She’s just...” *Interesting*, Cole finished silently.

“Good,” Lincoln said, clapping him on the shoulder. “So you won’t mind that she left.”

Cole’s eyes flew to the seat where the woman had been sitting, annoyed to see that his friend was right. She was gone.

“It’s just as well,” Lincoln said. “We have bigger things to focus on. Say, like how we’re going to annihilate the bastard who’s out for your job.”

“It’s not my job,” Cole said, carefully keeping the tinge of bitterness out of his tone.

“Not yet,” Lincoln said. “But it will be. Taking your competition out of the picture is the only reason I’m at this barbarian event.”

“Remind me never to take you to a hockey match,” Cole muttered.

Still, he appreciated his friend’s loyalty. And Lincoln was right. Tonight wasn’t about petite female baseball fans and their damn notebooks.

Tonight was about Cole’s professional future.

The key to that future? *Oxford* magazine.

Oxford was the country’s top-selling men’s magazine, where Lincoln—and most of Cole’s other closest friends—worked.

But more important, it was also where *Cole* worked.

Well, sort of.

He would work there. Just as soon as he found the asshole who was after his job.

Cole wasn’t going to pretend that he didn’t have a competitive streak. It was a prerequisite for someone whose bread and butter came from knowing the nuances of professional sports.

But it was rare that Cole felt a personal investment in a competition. But tonight? Tonight, it was definitely personal. Cole was the competitor.

The prize?

The title of senior sports editor at *Oxford*.

The magazine was finally getting a real sports section. Their token two-page spread on fantasy football squeezed in between cologne reviews and the proper way

to wear a tie clip was being expanded to a multipage, multitopic sports section.

A section that needed an editor.

Cole was the right man for the job. The *only* man for the job. Not only had he been writing for *Oxford* as a freelancer for years, but the editor in chief, Alex Cassidy, was one of his closest friends.

When Cassidy had come to Cole and explained that he wanted to make *Oxford* a serious contender for the *Sports Illustrated* readers, Cole had been damn sure that Cassidy was offering him the job.

Hell, Cassidy had been begging him for months to join the team, and Cole was finally ready—ready for a steady paycheck.

Ready to belong to something.

Because although Cole wasn't exactly dying to buy a house in the 'burbs and settle down with a nice girl, it wasn't just about Cole.

It was about Bobby, and the fact that Bobby's care was getting more and more expensive. His brother needed more than Cole's occasional freelance checks could provide.

Cole wasn't just ready for this job. He *needed* it.

And that's when Alex Cassidy had dropped his bomb: The job wasn't Cole's for the taking.

So goodbye to Easygoing Cole. Hello, Gladiator Cole.

Because, really, what the *fuck*?

Cole hadn't minded that they'd had to publicly post the position. He understood there were HR boxes that had to be checked. But never had Cole thought there'd *actually* be competition. Not only were the *Oxford* guys practically his family, but Cole was the best damn sportswriter in the city.

His application should have been a formality. Their request that he update his résumé and submit a portfolio should have just been a matter of documentation.

The position was his, damn it. Cole *was* the *Oxford* sports section.

Except he wasn't. Not yet, anyway.

Cassidy had called him yesterday to inform Cole that he was a finalist.

A fucking *finalist*.

Pissing Cole off even further, Cassidy wouldn't tell him who his competition was. Cole had named every worthwhile sportswriter in the city, but Cassidy wouldn't so much as grunt in confirmation.

Damn Cassidy and his unshakable professionalism.

His friend hadn't completely left him in the lurch, though.

Cassidy had pointedly mentioned to Lincoln that the other candidate had been invited to the Berkin's Hospitality Group's reserved suite at tonight's Yankees game.

Lincoln had, of course, told Cole.

So here they were, trying to sniff out the competition.

It was the only reason Cole would be caught dead in the luxury suite. Cole *hated* the luxury suites.

This wasn't what baseball—or any game—was about. Baseball was about the peanuts, the rowdy crowds, the overpriced beer. It was about the sound of a fastball smacking against the catcher's glove, the satisfying crack of a wooden bat when a rookie pinch-hitter really got a hold of one.

For Cole, watching baseball was about sitting with his brother in the stands, watching Bobby's face go positively ecstatic every time they did the wave, and the way his

brother never, ever got tired of the seventh-inning stretch.

That was baseball.

And Cole wanted nothing more than to be an anonymous part of the rowdy crowd, preferably on the third-base line, watching the Yankees, hopefully, trounce the Blue Jays.

Instead, he was stuck here with a bunch of fools who wouldn't recognize a baseball if it line-driven them in the ass.

Adding insult to injury, it was all for nothing. There was no sign of his competition. Cole knew every decent sportswriter in the city, and none were here tonight.

It was possible, he supposed, that Cassidy was considering some out-of-town jock for the position, but a quick scan of the room showed only familiar faces, all corporate bigwigs.

"Let's get out of here," Cole said to Lincoln, downing the rest of his beer in three gulps.

"You don't want to at least wait for Cassidy?"

"Nah, I'll catch him tomorrow."

Before Cole turned to leave, he couldn't resist one last look at the seat where his Tiny Brunette had been sitting.

He paused when he saw that she'd returned, and, incredibly, the woman had just gotten more appealing to Cole.

Her face was turned to the side just slightly, her notebook now on the open seat to her right instead of on her lap, and she wrote furiously with her right hand, while her left hand held...

A hot dog.

Be still my heart.

Apparently, Miss Glued-to-the-Game had managed to tear herself away long enough to get a good old-fashioned hot dog. Mustard only, from the looks of it. Personally, he'd have added some ketchup, but still...a woman who'd so unabashedly eat a hot dog?

He had to talk to this woman, risk of rejection be damned.

Cole was beside her before he'd even fully committed to the decision to move, ignoring Lincoln's snicker behind him.

Up close, she was even smaller than he expected. Narrow shoulders, no chest to speak of, skinny little arms.

He had yet to see her face full on, thanks to the cap pulled low on her forehead, and suddenly he wasn't sure what he was more desperate to see—her face or her notebook.

He cleared his throat. "Hey."

Not exactly his best opener, but it sufficed to get her attention.

Tiny Brunette's pen stopped its furious scribbling, and her jaw paused in its steady chewing of the hot dog.

Slowly her face lifted to his, and Cole had the strangest sensation of the breath catching in his chest as he waited to finally meet this woman's eyes.

And, *wow*. What a pair of eyes they were.

If the rest of her was tiny, her eyes were enormous by comparison. Huge and dark brown and friendly.

Damn, she was cute.

Not gorgeous. Not beautiful. But she had the girl-next-door, *Wanna-grab-a-pitcher?* kind of appeal.

She also wasn't Cole's type. At all. He liked 'em blonde and leggy and seductive.

Still...that damn notebook.

“Cole Sharpe,” he said, sticking out a hand.

Her eyes widened just slightly, and for a second he thought maybe she'd recognized his name, but then she smiled, and it was pure friendly curiosity.

“Hi!” Her voice matched the rest of her. Girlish and guileless.

Cole found himself oddly enchanted. She was so... different.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing with his chin toward the seat beside her.

“Of course!”

Cole started to reach for her notebook under the guise of making room for himself, but she pulled it onto her lap before he could touch it.

Damn.

He sat and allowed himself to fully satisfy his curiosity, taking her in now that he could see her face-to-face.

The Yankees cap still shielded the top part of her face, but he could clearly make out a pointed chin, small nose, and those big, gorgeous brown eyes. As far as he could tell, she wasn't wearing a speck of makeup, which allowed a light dusting of freckles to display loud and proud over her nose and the tops of her cheekbones.

Cute. Definitely cute.

And already, she was refocused on the game.

Cole's eyes narrowed slightly as he realized that he'd been the only one doing any staring. *Her* attention had returned to the field, almost before he'd sat down.

What was this bullshit?

The lack of female appreciation was unusual enough—and uncomfortable enough—to make him slightly

peevish. So instead of doing the decent thing and letting her watch the Yankees' starter reclaim his spot on the mound, he talked to her.

At her, really. She still wasn't looking his way. Not even to check him out.

"First game?" he asked.

Brown eyes flicked to him, barely. "What?"

"First baseball game?"

That got her attention. For the first time, she seemed to really look at him. Her eyes drifted over him slowly before returning to his gaze, her tone just slightly annoyed. "No. Not my first game."

"Ah," he said, already mentally maneuvering a backpedal. "Bad assumption by me. You were just so into the game...."

"So you figured I must be trying to figure out how it all worked?" she asked. "That I must be trying to understand why some of the field is green and some is brown, and whatever could those white squares on the dirt be, and why-oh-*why* are those men running toward the white squares, but only *sometimes*..."

"All right," Cole said with a laugh. "I'm an ass. You know baseball."

Her smile was quick and easy, and he was relieved to see that she wasn't one of those snippy, hold-it-against-him-forever types. "I know baseball."

Is that what's in your notebook? Baseball stuff?

She took a huge bite of her hot dog, completely unabashedly, and Cole hid a smile, pretending instead to be fixated on the game.

Hell. When had he ever had to *pretend* to be fixated on the Yankees?

“You were partially right,” she admitted, after swallowing.

He glanced at her. “Oh yeah?”

She grinned. “This is my first *Yankees* game.”

“I knew it,” he said, matching her grin full-on. “I knew there was something virgin about you. But tell me, how can a baseball fan like you never have made it to Yankee Stadium until now?”

“Well...” she licked a spot of mustard off her finger, but not in the slow, deliberate way that most women he knew would have done it. “It’s a long way from Chicago.... ”

Cole tore his eyes away from the way her lips were closing around her thumb, sucking off that mustard. “You’re from Chicago?”

“From there, yes,” she said. “But let’s just say that as of two weeks ago, I’ll be spending a lot more time here than at Wrigley.”

“Ah. You’re new to New York.”

“Quite.”

“How do you like it?”

She hesitated. “It’s...intense.”

“Meaning...we New Yorkers are scary as hell?”

She smiled. “Well, it’s not as hostile as I’d been warned, but yeah. We Chicagoans are a bit more openly friendly than you New Yorkers.”

“I’m friendly,” he countered.

Tiny Brunette laughed. “No. You’re just incredibly charming. And a smidgen good-looking.”

He gave her his best bedroom look. “Am I?”

She smiled. “You know you are.”

Their eyes held for a moment, and Cole was startled to realize that this was the most relaxed—the most him—he'd felt around a woman in...hell...he didn't know how long.

Mostly he was used to throwing out a couple of witty lines, a few slow smiles, and watching women counter with moves of their own.

There were no moves with this woman. She merely *was*.

Cole realized he didn't even know her name.

“So tell me, as a Chicago baseball fan, are you Team Cubs fan or Team White Sox, Ms....”

“Pope,” she said. “Penelope Pope. And both.”

Cole's subconscious realized that Penelope Pope was somehow exactly what this woman's name should be. Perky and alliterative. His consciousness, however, latched on to another fact. “Both?”

It was not a typical answer. Most people had *one* baseball team, even if you were from a city with two teams, as Penelope was.

She shrugged. “Baseball's not about who wins. It's not even about who's playing. It's about the game. The consistent flow of it, the smack of the ball against the glove when you're lucky enough to be sitting along one of the base lines, instead of stuck up here in this stuffy box —”

He stared at her. The words so closely echoed his own thoughts from just moments before that he wanted to kiss her.

She might just be his dream woman.

“That explains the hot dog,” he said.

“What?”

He nodded his chin at the last bite of hot dog, left mostly ignored in her left hand. “The hot dog. You’re in a luxury suite in Yankee Stadium with a whole buffet of gourmet foods, and yet you went and fetched the most basic hot dog you could find.”

She grinned. “Guilty.”

Cole turned his body all the way toward her now. “Tell me, Penelope Pope, what brings a Cubs and White Sox fan all the way to New York, where you’ll face a whole new dilemma of choosing between the Yankees and the Mets...”

Tiny Brunette never got to answer.

The shadow of someone coming up behind their seats caused them both to turn. It was Alex Cassidy, *Oxford’s* editor in chief, looking down at them with a semi-amused, semi-worried expression.

“Cassidy,” Cole said. He lifted an eyebrow and silently added, *Nice of you to show up.*

“Sorry I’m late,” Cassidy said, not really sounding sorry at all. “I got held up.”

Automatically, Cole’s eyes scanned the luxury suite until he found the pretty woman he knew was likely to be somewhere around here....

Yup, there she was.

Emma Sinclair, Cassidy’s long-ago runaway bride, whom with he’d recently reconciled, was surreptitiously wiping smudged lipstick from the corner of her mouth.

His eyes returned to his boss, this time looking closer....

“Third button, dude,” Cole said wearily.

The always-polished Cassidy glanced down and, without so much as wincing, fixed the misaligned buttons of his shirt.

Cole should have known. A naked Emma Sinclair was the only thing that could throw Alex Cassidy off his rigid timetable.

But Emma and Cassidy's sex life was where the predictable part of the evening ended, because Cole was absolutely *not* prepared for Cassidy to reach out a hand to Tiny Brunette, a polite smile on his usually impassive face.

"Alex Cassidy. I'm so sorry I'm late, Ms. Pope."

Cole glanced between the two of them. They knew each other?

"Not a problem," she said, turning an easy smile on Cassidy. It was the exact same friendly smile she'd given Cole, and it very much made Cole want to punch his friend in the mouth.

"It's refreshing to see you two playing so nicely," Cassidy said with a droll look at Cole.

He narrowed his eyes at his boss, not sure what he was missing but certain that he was missing something.

Cassidy answered Cole's silent question with his usual professional businessman smile. "Cole, this is Penelope Pope."

"We've met...." Cole said slowly.

"Excellent. So then you know that this is the late-stage applicant we had for the sports editor role at *Oxford*?"

Very slowly, Cole turned toward Tiny Brunette and took in her friendly smile, even as he took in the *Sorry-not-sorry* glint in her eyes.

This was his competition. *This* was the person standing between Cole and the job he so desperately wanted.

"I should have been more thorough when I introduced myself," she said sweetly. "Penelope Pope. *Sports*

editor.”

Plus side? At least now Cole knew what was in her damn notebook.

The down side? *Everything else.*



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