



LYING SEASON

AN EXPERIMENT IN TERROR NOVEL

KARINA HALLE

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BOOK FOUR IN THE EXPERIMENT IN TERROR SERIES

∞KARINA HALLE∞



\m/ Metal Blonde Books \m/



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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For the dogs of my life, Duke, Ellie and Muffin

CHAPTER ONE

“Tell me about the accident, Perry.”

I barely heard what the doctor said. I was busy staring out the window of his office, watching the leaves of the oak tree outside waver in the spring breeze. It wasn't quite five o' clock but the sun was already setting, creating a harsh orange glow behind the buildings of downtown Portland. It caught the edges of the tiny symmetrical leaves, making each one look like they were tinged with flames, that slow burn towards the middle.

But they weren't on fire, were they? No, they only looked like it.

“Perry, where are you?”

I tore my eyes away from the window and gave Dr. Freedman the nastiest look I could muster. His skinny, narrow face was aglow with the fiery light, but like usual, I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He had that stupid noncommittal look of a psychiatrist; that

patient, patronizing stare that never gave anything away. All of that was scribbled away on his notepad.

"Where the fuck do you think I am?" I sneered at him.

He merely nodded and looked down at his precious notepad. "Just checking, Perry."

"You're always saying my name," I said, and looked back at the window. The sunset's flames had turned each new, green leaf into a burst of crimson. I could figure out why he was always saying my name; I guess shrinks thought they had to constantly remind their patients who they were. Well, I knew who I was. What I didn't understand was why I was there. Why I was *really* there. No pretenses.

"So, tell me about the accident," he said, careful to leave out my name this time.

The accident. The accident. Always this Goddamn "accident."

A strand of my neon blue hair fell down in front of my face and I examined it carefully. It looked dry and brittle; the bleach job I did a few months ago had done nothing but damage the core. That was the first thing my mom had said, "Not only do you look like a punk, but you've ruined your gorgeous hair forever." I was glad it hurt her more than it hurt me. It was her fault that I was here. Not some accident.

I looked through my hair; it created a gauzy blue curtain and I liked the fact that I couldn't see Dr. Freedman clearly through it. It made it easier to deal with him.

"You tell me about the accident, doctor."

He nodded again to himself. I wished he was the one on fire, not the leaves outside.

"Who is Jacob?" he asked.

I flinched. I didn't know why.

"Jacob is a friend of mine. Well, he was a friend of mine."

"Why is he no longer your friend?"

“You know why. He turned creepy. After the party...”

“After the party? Last time you said he got ‘creepy’ before the party.”

“Did I?” I asked absently.

“How did you first meet?” he continued.

The last time I was here, he asked me the same question. I don’t know why I always had to repeat myself and I didn’t understand his fascination with Jacob. It really wasn’t that interesting.

I took in a deep breath, letting him know how annoyed I was with my sharp exhale and told him the story. Again.

“Jacob was...”

Jacob was a skid. Jacob was 18-years old. Jacob failed the 12th grade probably a million times. Jacob had a really tall black Mohawk that was held together by numerous packages of Knox Gelatine. Jacob always wore a studded denim vest with a black D.O.A patch on the back. Jacob was kind of always D.O.A himself. He was always in trouble with the police, with his parents, with his schoolmates or with his friends. And he thrived on this trouble. He’d wear black lipstick to school and try to kiss the jocks. Jacob was always asking to get beat up. He was a martyr to the skids and I’m pretty sure he thought he was a martyr to humankind. But the truth is, even though there were parts of me that admired him, that respected his nature to piss off authority, to be true to himself, and be fearless (there were even parts that found the black lipstick to be sexy), Jacob was just kind of an idiot.

“Were you in love with him?” Dr. Freedman asked, so casually, as if the topic of love was as important as whether I preferred chocolate ice cream or vanilla.

“No,” I said adamantly. That was the truth. I barely knew Jacob. Like I said, I admired him a bit and when he talked to me, at first anyway, I would get giddy about it. But I got giddy when any guy looked my way. It was so easy to overlook the fat girl.

“But you liked him enough.”

“I guess,” I shrugged. I liked him enough when it was from afar. And I guess I liked him enough the first time he really talked to me, away from his friends and the rest of the skids.

I was walking home from the bus stop one day. Normally I would have taken my car to school but my parents had confiscated it from me. Something to do with drugs, I don't know.

Anyway, I was walking home, listening to my MP3 player, when a tall, spiky shadow appeared beside me. It was long because the nights were longer then and it was just getting dark enough to put me on my guard.

I could tell the person was speaking to me but I couldn't hear them above the music. I don't know why people have to talk to you when you've got headphones on; I mean, come on.

Finally I looked over and saw it was Jacob. I stopped, surprised and pulled out my earphones.

He was dressed as he always was. A true skid.

“What are you listening to?” he asked.

“Alice in Chains. *Music Box*,” I replied, rather proudly, thinking he might approve.

“They're all right. I mean, they were all right. Kind of a shame about Lane though. That fucker is irreplaceable. But he was too smart for the band anyway.”

I wasn't sure what was so smart about Lane considering he died because of drugs, but I hadn't been too smart either. Then I noticed Jacob's wrists. They were wrapped in thick bandages.

“You said Jacob had tried to kill himself?” the shrink asked me, his words cutting through my memory.

“That's what they said. Everyone at school,” I told him. “Earlier that week, there were rumors that Jacob had killed himself. Killed himself over some girl. Some even say he burned himself in a car. Lit the fucking car on fire. And I never saw Jacob at all that week, so I

believed it. But then there was no news of a funeral or anything, no news anywhere really, so I started to think it was just a rumor. One probably started by himself, another martyr cry or something. He'd often disappear from school for even weeks at a time."

"But the wrists told you otherwise."

"Well, d'uh."

But even though I had proof in front of me that Jacob had tried to commit suicide, I didn't want to bring it up with him. It seemed in bad taste. And even though I liked that he was speaking to me, there was something about him that had me a bit on edge. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that it was getting dark and I was walking alone with only my schoolbooks to protect me. Maybe it was the fact that he seemed a bit on edge himself, more so than usual. Either way, it was enough that I thought I should start taking self-defense classes one day.

"And then what happened, Perry?"

I shrugged. "He walked me home. We talked a bit."

"What about?"

"That day? It was just music. He went on about Lane, then Sid Vicious, then some dude I had never heard of. Then he said goodbye to me about a few houses down from my house."

"Did you know he lived in the area?"

"No. And I still don't think he does. I mean, he never did."

"You think he's still alive?"

I gave the doctor an odd look, confused. Where was he getting that information from? "Of course he's still alive. Why wouldn't he be?"

I could tell the doctor wanted to say something else but he stopped himself and said, "What did you guys talk about the rest of the time?"

I sighed and racked my brain back. I couldn't really remember all that well. I think most of it was nonsense. I mean, the dude had walked with me for three weeks straight, we talked about a lot of things

and I still had trouble remembering what happened yesterday. Still, there was something Jacob kept mentioning to me that the doctor would have loved to know. But it would only egg the doctor on and I'd be back for another session. I knew enough about psychiatrists at this point to know how they worked.

I gazed out the window again, letting my thoughts float away. Yes, the leaves were now certainly on fire. In fact, all of Portland looked like it was ablaze. If I looked hard enough, there was a strange shimmer to the horizon, a weird, warpy air that I had seen before. But the shimmer wasn't in the distance, it was close to me. It was like a mirage that stood between me and the window. And beyond that mirage was a raging fire that quickly turned the trees outside to tinder and the buildings into a merciless inferno.

It wasn't real though. I knew that much. It wasn't real *this* time. But when it happened the other day, at Adrianna Gee's house, it had been real. The flames were real that day. And had Jacob not been there when the whole party went up in flames, and those...*things*...came out, I wouldn't have been sitting in Dr. Freedman's office. I wouldn't have been anywhere.

And to think they called it an "accident."

CHAPTER TWO

“Hey! Miss Muffin Top! Anyone home?!” Brock Alma’s booming, domineering voice shot across the field like a rocket.

I took my face off the mud and fastened my eyes on Brock with the last ounce of strength I had left.

I opened my mouth to answer him but then thought better of it. The last time I talked back to him, I, well, ended up where I was, doing fifty push-ups in the gooey brown mud. And these weren’t girly push-ups either.

I swallowed hard, battling my urge to be a smart aleck, and pushed myself up into the last final movements, my hands slipping beneath me, my chest and arms screaming and shaking.

“I said,” Brock continued, satisfied with my non-response, “once you’re done the push-ups, I want you to run around the field twice, then you can come back and join the rest of the group.”

At that, my arms gave out from under me and I was eating mud again. At least it was on the fiftieth.

What was I, a pariah? I had been doing this stupid boot camp for two weeks now and from the very first session our trainer/psycho drill sergeant Brock (how perfect of a name is that, by the way – it’s like Bastard + Jock = Brock) had it in for me. We had been meeting in the afternoons every other day and every other day I had to do more push-ups than everyone else in the class. Now I know I was paying someone to torture my ass but I definitely wasn’t paying someone to single me out.

That said, I did have a hard time controlling my mouth around him. The other trainer, Michelle, was sweet but firm, kind of like a less threatening Jillian Michaels, but Brock knew how to push my buttons and he pushed them good.

I rolled over onto my back, not caring how dirty I was getting and slowly got to my feet, my thighs aching beneath me. We were in a field in eastern Portland, the site of our twisted fitness sessions, rain or shine. Since it was the end of November, the shine thing rarely happened and it was cold. It didn’t matter though. Despite Brock picking on me, the cardio circuit drills in sleet and thunder, the days where I couldn’t even walk up the stairs to my room, I was almost done with the boot camp. One more day and it would be over and I would be walking away stronger, more confident, and just the tiniest bit slimmer.

And it wasn’t just the boot camp I was doing. See, ever since I returned home from D’Arcy Island in one ragged, bruised heap, I’d decided to take things into

my own hands. If I was going to be doing the Experiment in Terror show with my partner Dex and putting myself in dangerous situations, I was going to need to prepare myself for anything and everything and in as many ways as possible. And until recently, I hadn't been prepared at all.

From being thrown through windows to riding bucking broncos to being attacked by wild "animals" to being attacked by potential rapists to being clubbed over the head and locked in a floating coffin...well, these aren't your ordinary work hazards. In fact, if I think about it too much, it really starts to scare me. And sooner or later, my good luck, or whatever it is that's keeping me in one piece, will run out. I know this.

Once upon a time I had taken some training in self-defense and I've had karate and stuntwoman classes but it's just not enough insurance against the unknown.

And so, as soon as Dex dropped me off at my house after the last "adventure" two weeks ago, and after seeing my parents' faces when they saw what an absolute wreck I was, I promised them, and myself, that I was going to "man up." So I signed up for a quick boot camp, I went back to the firing range that I used to frequent a couple of years ago and I took three private, refresher Karate lessons. None of these were cheap, of course, and with my sparse salary coming in only from Shownet, and only sporadically at that, plus the fact that I was now paying rent to my parents, it swallowed the last of my paycheck from my previous receptionist job. But I knew it would be worth it, if not right away then somewhere down the line.

But as I finished up my two laps around the field and felt the fire building up around my heart and the stiffening pinch in my chest, it did seem like a waste of

money. Once again, why was I paying someone to put me through pain?

I stopped and caught my breath for a quick second, ready to return to the group of chubby college students, single moms and frail yoga flowers before Brock called me Miss Muffin Top again (such an endearing nickname), when I noticed they were done and everyone was staggering back to their cars. Looks like I wouldn't have to join them on burpees and mountain climbs after all. Class was over.

Relieved as hell, I turned toward my motorbike Putt-Putt, which sat off in the park's parking lot. *One more day*, I thought.

"Muffin Top!" I heard Brock bark.

My shoulders sank and I reluctantly looked in his direction. He was walking over to me, his strong legs rippling in the dying afternoon light. What now? Private after-class torture sessions?

I crossed my arms and gave him my best "you've got to be kidding me" look, feeling the first waves of chilly pre-winter air nipping along my sweaty body. Even with the sweater and jacket I had back at Putt-Putt, it was going to be a cold ride home.

Brock stopped in front of me and smiled uneasily. I wasn't used to seeing him smile; maybe that's why I thought it looked strange on his face. Not that he had a bad face; he was handsome in that broad-necked, tanned way that most fitness buffs were. But whenever he was barking at me, it was accompanied by a grim, overseer look.

"What?" I asked. "Class not dismissed for me?"

He scratched the back of his head, his Adam's apple pulsing in and out. "One more class..." he said and I suddenly got the impression that he was shy,

like a boy trying to make conversation in the schoolyard.

“Yeah,” I said, eyeing him suspiciously. “Thank God.”

He looked embarrassed and said, “Sorry if I’ve been pushing you too hard.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to figure him out. All that was missing was for him to twist his toe into the mud.

“As you said, it’s just one more class,” I told him, feeling the situation growing strangely awkward. The breeze swept in and I eyed Putt-Putt again, wanting to get warm and go home.

“I watch your show, you know,” he said.

I looked back at him, surprised. “You do? My show? Experiment in Terror?”

“Yeah. Seen every episode.”

Not that that said a lot since there had only been, like, five of them. I was always shocked when I found random people who watched it.

“You knew who I was from the start?”

“I sure did. I didn’t want to say anything in case it embarrassed you.”

I burst out laughing. “You’ve been calling me Miss Muffin Top for two weeks straight and running me ragged till the cows come home. And you didn’t want to embarrass me.”

“Hey, you’re not Miss Muffin Top anymore, right?” he asked, smiling again as he reached over and grabbed my love handles with one of his strong hands. It was brusque and off-putting and my body tensed up, my instincts greased and ready to go. He was right

though. A lot of extra chub I had carried around my waist was now gone. I hadn't been this streamlined in...well, ever.

Still, I stared down at his grabby hand, unimpressed. He took it back and shrugged. "Anyway, I just wanted to say I'm proud of you. You've changed a lot in two weeks and I hope this will go far...in the future. I knew you needed to get on top of your game, I could see it on your face, I could see it in the show, especially that last episode...on the island. It scared me, if you can believe it, and I thought it must have scared you and I figured you could use an extra push."

"I see," I mused. I wasn't sure what to make of that. I looked back and tried to pinpoint if at some moment it seemed like he was trying to convert me into a UFC champion or something. I couldn't see Brock as anything more than just another ego-tripping trainer who liked to make unfit women's lives a living hell. In fact, it sounded like he was trying to sell me on signing up for another class.

"Would you like to go to dinner sometime?" he asked sweetly.

I almost laughed again but I'm glad I didn't. One glance at his face and I could see he was sincere. My 'roid monkey boot camp sergeant was asking me, Perry Palomino, out on a date. The question caught me so off guard that I didn't even know what to say. I didn't even know how I felt about it.

OK. That's a lie. I did know how I felt about it. It felt wrong. Not because Brock was a bad guy, a bad-looking guy, or because I knew we'd probably have nothing in common. It felt wrong because my heart wasn't in it. My heart wasn't intrigued. My ego, sure, that was poking its head about inside, ears pricked and raised. But my heart...it belonged to someone else. Someone who wasn't mine.

It's funny. Even though it had been two weeks since I last saw Dex, that time had done nothing to erase my feelings about him. The island had done something to us. At least, it had done something to me. If I thought I was head over heels for him before, this time I was so far gone it's like I fell into my own grave. Head over heels and down a hole. Bury me with dirt, stick a stake into my heart, and call it a day.

"I'm sorry," Brock said, his expression turning down. "I didn't mean to be so bold."

I shook my head and tried to wipe off the look on my face, which probably looked pained. I certainly felt pained. My heart ached in a different way than it had just minutes before, when it was suffering from cardio onslaught.

"No, don't be sorry," I said, trying to smile.

"You have a boyfriend, of course," he said.

My smile fell slightly. "No. No I don't."

Because, of course, Dex was just my partner. Sure I was in love with him, sure he told me some things on that island that melted my heart, sure I still had tingly images of him with his head between my legs and felt his grip on my hips. But there was always Jennifer Rodriguez, his stupid fucking girlfriend who never seemed to be going anywhere. I had hoped that perhaps after her pregnancy scare, after Dex confronted the fact that he wasn't ready to be a dad, and after, well, he kinda (perhaps regretfully) cheated on her with me, that she'd be on her way out. I still held out for that hope – it's not like that's the kind of thing we'd discuss on the phone anyway – but as far as I knew, she was still in the picture.

"Oh," Brock said, and I realized how awkward I had just made it for him. What was wrong with me, anyway? A cute, buff meathead was asking me out for

dinner and all it was doing was making my head spin and my soul hurt. That wasn't right.

Without thinking, I reached over and grabbed his beefy forearm.

"I'd love to go for dinner with you," I said. This wasn't true, but I said it anyway.

He must have seen that on my face because he hesitated and then said, "Really, I can handle rejection, I-"

"I mean it," I said quickly and started feeling like maybe I *did* mean it. "You just caught me off-guard. I'm not used to being asked out."

He gave me a disbelieving look. "Oh, please, I have a hard time with that."

I shrugged, not wanting to get into it. "It's true but anyway, thank you, I'd love to. Just promise me you'll stop with the nicknames."

He agreed. I already had one nickname and that was enough.

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"Hey, kiddo."

It was Dex on the phone. We had gone from texting and emailing each other whenever we had something to say, to calling each other every now and then, sometimes just to talk. At least our relationship had progressed in that way.

After I had arrived home from the boot camp and took a hot shower to wash the mud off and ease my aches and pains, I roamed the house looking for my sister, Ada. For once, I was miffed that she wasn't at

home. Not that she was home all that often, especially since she started dating this guy Layton, who was two grades older than her (my sister is 15), but I needed to talk to her. I know this sounds stupid coming from a 23-year old, but I wanted her advice on boys. What happened with Brock had simultaneously torn me up and excited me and I needed to vent to someone about it. I had become more and more dependent on Ada as a friend instead of viewing her as just a sister.

Which was great, but on this night it left me feeling fidgety. And talking to Dex wouldn't help either. Though Dex was my friend in every sense of the word, and I trusted my life to him, he was the last person I could vent about this to.

Regardless...

"Hey Dex," I said, cradling my phone against my ear. I didn't just say it though, I *smiled* it. I was sitting cross-legged on my bed, thumbing through an old issue of *Guitar World* magazine, looking for inspiration and an excuse to use my electric guitar that sat forlornly in the corner of my room.

"How was *The Biggest Loser*?" he asked, the amusement flitting along the trough of his deep voice. It was his nickname for the boot camp, despite the number of times I told him there were no real fat people in the group.

"It was...interesting," I said and suddenly didn't want to say any more about it.

"That guy still riding you hard?"

I snickered. I couldn't help myself.

"What?" he asked, never one to like being left out of a joke.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to hide the smirk in my tone. “Only one more class, then I’ll be buff enough to kick anyone’s ass.”

“You already were buff enough to kick anyone’s ass. I don’t think my nose will ever be the same.”

Oh, that’s right. I ended up punching Dex right in the nose while we were on the leper island. I could barely remember what it had been about; there were a lot of things about the island that I had tried to block out (not his head between my legs and his grip on my hips, however), but all I knew was that it had been a long time coming. I still felt bad about it, in a vague way, but it wasn’t keeping me up at night. Dex liked to bring it up occasionally, just to keep me on my toes.

“What can I say, you’re an easy shot. But I don’t think the rest will be like you.”

“The rest? You’re planning on going around and punching more people in the face?”

“People...ghosts.”

“From Ghostbusters to Facebusters?”

“Something like that. Anyway, I feel better and that’s the point.”

He was quiet for a second. Then, softly, he said, “I know, kiddo. Don’t think I wasn’t thinking about it myself. If you hadn’t done it, I would have suggested it. You’re right, about what you said before, that we won’t always be so lucky.”

I didn’t like getting into touchy subjects like this on the phone. It made me want him too much.

“Well, perhaps you oughta be taking some sort of self-defense class or something,” I suggested lightly.

“I don’t need self-defense. I have you,” he said. I could almost hear him grinning over the phone. “Anyhoo, I have some good news.”

I didn’t spend much time wondering what it was before he announced, “We got it.”

“Got...it?”

“Permission. From the mental hospital. Riverside. They said next week, Tuesday and possibly Thursday, they’ll let us in to film.”

Since returning from D’Arcy Island, Dex had been trying nonstop to get one of Seattle’s oldest mental institutes to open their doors to us. The Riverside mental hospital was reputed to be one of the most haunted places in Washington State. So far, many ghost hunters, including some with bigwig TV shows, had tried to film the hospital and were turned down. Understandably, considering that the hospital was at least 30% operational. It was a dying, costly breed but it still housed some people who needed the strictest mental care.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“I can be pretty persuasive,” he said. Yeah. Persuasive, pushy and annoying.

“Uh huh.”

“And, again, I think because we’re small and on the internet we’re kind of reputable. They know this isn’t the Hollywood treatment; we aren’t sensationalists. I’m still not sure what exactly we are allowed to film but it’s still great news. I’ve been going fucking mental over here over this.”

It sounded like he was making a pun, but I knew he wasn’t. It was a spooky slip of the tongue. Not only was Dex on medication for his so-called mental condition (which I was starting to call “Deximia”), but I

recently learned he had been in a mental hospital himself. Ever since he brought up this mission of his to secure us a chance to film in Riverside, I had wanted to bring up the whole mental institute thing. You know, how is this a good idea considering your past (and present) and all that, but I couldn't find the right way to say it. And again, something I didn't want to get into over the phone with him.

But if digging up his past bothered him, for once he wasn't showing it. Perhaps he felt a need to prove something to me, or himself. That he was over it. That it was in the past. I just hoped he knew what we were getting into.

Still, I repeated, "Mental?"

"Yeah," he said without missing a beat. "Fucking mad as fucking madness. Jimmy has been breathing down my neck about what our next plans were but I just felt – no, I just *knew* – that eventually the people at Riverside would cave in and let us. That's why I didn't want to book us anywhere else. Fuck, I didn't look anywhere else."

Jimmy was his boss. Well, our boss. And he was very good at breathing down Dex's neck. Luckily, I never had to deal with the jerk, only through Dex.

"Well, gamble paid off then."

"Paid in spades and worked out perfectly. Next Friday is the Shownet Christmas party and I figured you'd come up to Seattle for that anyway."

That was presumptuous of Dex, as usual. Granted, I still didn't have a full-time job, so it wasn't like I wouldn't be able to take time off or anything. It's just assuming I'd go all the way to Seattle for a Christmas party, one that I hadn't been officially invited to. I still didn't feel part of this whole company, even though they were the ones playing my meager salary.

“Perry?”

“Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking,” I said, scrunching up my forehead with my hand. “Are you sure I’m invited?”

“To the party? Don’t be a tard, kiddo. Of course you are. I just invited you.”

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t know, I just don’t feel like I belong to your whole work thing. And I haven’t gotten an invitation in the mail or anything.”

“Ah, jeez. Come on. You do belong to the whole work thing, and if there’s any reason that you feel like you don’t, it’s because you haven’t met anyone else but me. And Jimmy that one time. And I swear, the rest of the crew is so much nicer than Jimmy and I put together. We’re the rats of the whole bunch.”

That was probably true. “But...”

“Also, everyone knew I would be the one inviting you. Everyone expects you. Everyone wants to finally meet the famous Perry Palomino, the reason I have a broken nose.”

“Oh, Dex, you didn’t,” I stammered, feeling my heart drop.

“Didn’t tell them you punched me in the nose? I told *everyone* you punched me in the nose. It’s a good story.”

Oh fuck. My face flushed red with heat. I had already been worried what people at Shownet thought of me and now they thought of me as a partner puncher.

“I bet Jenn wants to kill me,” I whispered.

“Uh. Well, no. She laughed and said I must have deserved it. And I did. And everyone is really, really jealous of you, Jimmy especially. And I wouldn’t be

surprised if you ended up getting some special plaque for it.”

I shook my head, despite the fact that he couldn't see it over the phone.

“So, it doesn't matter. You're coming. And it would be better if you could come a few days earlier too. Say, Sunday night.”

“Well, how long is Shownet going to cover the motel costs, cuz I can't afford anything right now.”

“Motel? No, you'll be staying with us.”

My breath froze somewhere in my throat. I had to cough to get it out.

“Us?”

“Yeah. Forget about a motel. We have the spare room. You'll stay with me, Jenn and Fat Rabbit.”

“Who the fuck is Fat Rabbit?”

“Fat Rabbit is our dog.”

This was all too much. I wasn't sure what to focus on, the fact that I would be staying with Jenn and Dex, or the fact that they had a dog. A dog called Fat Rabbit.

“When in God's name did you get a dog, Dex?”

I heard him scratch his chin scruff over the phone. “Hmmm, maybe a week ago. I sold my old apartment, got a new one. And the new one allows dogs. And now we have a spare bedroom, perfect for guests like you. You'll be our first one.”

“I need to lie down,” I managed to say, and did just that. I lay back onto my bed with a pillowy thunk. Dex explained that his old apartment in the Queen Anne district had been for sale for a while. Someone finally bought it and they snapped up one in Belltown, right

beneath the monorail. And all this time, Jenn had wanted a dog but they weren't allowed pets. Now that they were, Jenn went and bought some sort of white French Bulldog that apparently looked like, well, a fat rabbit.

I didn't know what was more disturbing. The fact that all this happened and Dex never said a word of it to me or the fact that they got a dog together. Sure, there was no kid on the way, thank God, but a dog was a huge commitment.

And now I had the chance to see it all up close.

Still, I couldn't turn Dex down. If I did, he'd think something was up. And honestly, as much as the idea of living with Jenn and Dex made me want to vomit (for real, the bile was making its way up) and cry, I couldn't afford to be in a motel, not after all the money I'd spent in the last few weeks.

I did have to turn down Sunday night though. Because that was my date with Brock.

"I'm sorry...what?" Dex said after I told him.

"I have a date," I repeated.

He burst out laughing. The anger steamed up inside me.

"What's so funny, asshole?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, kiddo. It's not funny, it's just surprising. Who is it with?"

"Brock. My boot camp trainer."

He started laughing again. Howling, actually. When he calmed down long enough he sputtered, "The 'roid monkey?"

"He's not a 'roid monkey!" I said defensively, even though I had called him that earlier. Ugh, I definitely

talked to Dex too much. “And so what, why can’t I go out with him?”

I was hoping Dex would say something that would make me think he was jealous in some way. But no.

“You can go out with whoever the hell you want to, kiddo. But you’re a hard rock chick and he’s a jock. And those two types don’t mix.”

“Dex, this isn’t high school. Grow up.”

“Some things don’t change.”

“Oh, so were you a fuckface back in high school too?”

Pause. I knew he was taken aback at my ferocity.

“Yes. And a skid and a bit of a punk.”

“Well, so was I,” I reasoned.

“It’s too bad we didn’t go to high school together,” he said. “We would have made a good couple.”

I swear, I was this close to hanging up the phone. Or throwing it against the wall.

But Dex continued, smoothly, “Listen, if this date is important to you, Perry, then by all means go on it. Come up on Monday. We’ll figure something out.”

The weight behind his voice made me reconsider whether the date was worth it or not. What if it was more important for the show for me to be there earlier? What if an opportunity came along? I could always go out with Brock when I got back.

“It’s nice to see you have a social life for once,” he added.

And that comment made all the difference.

“Monday it is,” I growled into the phone.

CHAPTER THREE

When the night rolled around, I still hadn't had a chance to talk to Ada about my boy woes. The night before, she had come home after I had fallen asleep, something she had been doing more and more often now that she was dating Layton, and was off to class in the morning.

I couldn't even catch her after school because she went straight to a friend's house and then jettisoned home before we all went out for our dad's birthday dinner.

My dad is a fellow Scorpio like myself, bringing up the end of the spectrum, which still leaves him full of scorpion sting but with none of the passion. At least, none of the passion that I understand. I'm pretty sure the only thing my father feels passionate about is convincing his wavering theology students of the "truth." That and really good Chianti.

Naturally, his birthday dinner was held at a really old, authentic Italian restaurant just outside Portland,

a place he and his brother Al had been coming to since they were young boys. It was no Olive Garden, I can tell you that much.

I half-expected that Ada would have brought Layton with her, but I guess when you were in the tenth grade, bringing your boyfriend to your dad's birthday bash wasn't something you took lightly.

It was for the best. I know nothing would ruin my dad's birthday more than having his teenage daughter's older boyfriend there but from the glances I stole of Ada on the drive over there, I could tell she was a million miles away and already pining for him, her bright blue eyes swimming in the early darkness. I felt pity for her and her young love for exactly three seconds before reality slammed into me and I realized I was no better than she was.

With family being such an important factor to Italians like my father, I knew that my Uncle Al was going to be there, as well as my nephews Matt and Tony. I hadn't seen those three since the whole lighthouse incident in late summer and I had been itching to see them ever since. It felt like years ago when I had first met Dex in that fateful tower, when my life had twisted around on itself and changed its course.

What I didn't expect was that Uncle Al had brought a special guest with him to the dinner party.

"Her name is Marda," my mom told Ada and me as we got out of the car and walked towards the restaurant. Mom looked elegant as always and not the slightest bit cold in her lacey caplet that barely covered her toned arms.

I struggled to keep up in my heels, not used to dressing up for any occasion, plus I was dealing with overused leg muscles.

"Al has a girlfriend!?" I cried out. I was happy for him, of course, Al seemed like such a lonely bachelor since his ex-wife left him, but it was still surprising. He didn't go out much, except to play the occasional

poker game, so I wouldn't even know where he could meet any women. It's not like he'd be at the grocery store, pushing his cart around with the bananas facing a certain way (I had read this is what some singles in grocery stores did. A certain type of fruit in one direction meant you were single. I think melons and bananas were probably all you needed).

My mom gave me a funny look, probably because of the very unladylike way I was walking. "Yes, Marda is his new girlfriend. You should ask him how they met; it's mostly your fault."

My fault? I hadn't played matchmaker since my high school days and that was only because I was the fat, helpful girl who had attractive friends, but before I could ponder that any further, we entered the restaurant to cheers and applause from the waiters and kitchen staff (no one does birthdays like an Italian restaurant) and the sight of Al, Matt, Tony, and a petite blonde woman (Marda, I'm guessing) standing around a Chianti-strewn table.

And then my eardrums were blown out. Drunken exaltations (noting at least one bottle of wine was empty), hugs, cries, slaps on the back and loud hellos were exchanged among the Palominos at deafening levels.

I gave Matt and Tony one big hug at once, happier to see them than I originally thought. There was something about those twins, their goofy demeanor with an underlying wholesomeness, that made me miss the person I was when I last saw them. Everything seemed so simple then.

I pulled back and peered at them. They looked different somehow. Cleaned up (I'd say fresh-faced if Matt didn't appear to be suffering from some bad acne) and maybe the slightest bit older.

"You guys are starting to look like men," I said, and grabbed both their biceps for show. There still wasn't much there.

“So are you!” Tony exclaimed with a smile that made him look momentarily younger. He then grabbed my arm, which was now bare after the hostess took our coats away.

I looked down at it and blushed. I know I had lost some weight but it had only been two weeks since I started the sessions, and though my arms were stronger, they certainly didn’t look much different. It would be a long time before I looked like Sheryl Crow.

“Thanks, I think,” I said to them just as Uncle Al came over and picked me up in a bear hug.

“Perry!” Al exclaimed joyously, his voice muffled into my shoulder.

“Hi Uncle Al!”

He put me down and gave me the once over. A wash of concern came across his wrinkled brow.

“You’re looking beautiful, you’re as tiny as ever,” he said, but I didn’t quite believe him.

“But?” I prodded him.

“But nothing.” He smiled and put his arm out for Marda, who came slinking under it with a shy expression.

“Perry, meet Marda,” he said, squeezing Marda’s slight shoulders. She was a very lovely, sweet-looking lady with small, sparkplug eyes and a long porcelain face, roughly my uncle’s age (late forties). A good match for Al, who wasn’t quite as robust and hard-faced as my father.

We shook hands quickly, her grasp warm.

“Quite the grip you’ve got there,” she commented, taking her fair hand back and looking at it.

I blushed. I was always the person assigned to open any tough pickle jars. My small but durable hands were probably freakishly strong now thanks to the boot camp. Push-ups really did work every part of your body.

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“She’s my lady friend,” Al boasted, squeezing Marda closer into him and kissing the top of her head.

The relationship couldn't have been more than a month old, so it was extra endearing to see Uncle Al acting like this with someone.

But before I could ask them how they met (after all, I apparently had something to do with it), my father demanded everyone sit down. The birthday boy was starving and thirsty. A deadly combination.

I took my place next to Ada and the twins, with the "adults" on the other side of the table. I gave Ada a quick smile but she was staring dreamily into her glass of water. My sister was still the top of the pops when it came to her fashion blog and an occasion like this was a prime excuse for her to dress like someone who had just fallen ass backwards off the catwalk. My black knee-length dress (the only dress I really had) looked fine on me, I guess, but it wasn't a backless cashmere dress with embroidered details like Ada was wearing. I was actually surprised she hadn't asked me to take a picture of her like she did every other day when she was wearing an outfit "for the blog." But Ada wasn't herself these days, anyway.

While I pondered that over, the conversation around the table turned to pleasantries and news stories. The twins told me about this ATV they bought and I pretended to listen while I picked at my pseudo-healthy chicken Marsala. I was watching Marda and Al with interest. They were sharing bites of their food between each other, pouring each other wine. A bottle of red. A bottle of white. And I was instantly reminded of Billy Joel's "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant." The memory poked at my insides a little bit until I winced it away.

There was no denying it though; there was a lot of love at this table tonight. It didn't take long for my mother to pick up on it and say, "Would you look at this! You won't find dopier, more love struck people than my two daughters and their uncle."

“Me?!” Ada and I both protested at the same time, then consequently glared at each other in that, “yeah, you” look that we did so well.

“Caught red-handed,” Al said, squeezing Marda’s hand. “And it’s all thanks to Perry.”

“Yeah, what’s the deal with that?” I asked, happy to have the conversation turn over to him.

“Well Marda here works in property insurance. I had to file a claim after you blew up the lighthouse.”

I loved how, even though I barely had anything to do with the lighthouse blowing up (what, it’s not like *I* set it on fire or anything), everyone still referred to me as the person responsible for its demise. OK, so it would probably be standing today had I not gone poking my nose into its business but then Al wouldn’t have met Marda.

“See, something good has come out of it,” I pointed out, directing most of that toward my father, who just shook his head to himself and poured himself another large glass of wine from a reedy Chianti bottle.

“Of course,” Uncle Al said. “It’s not just the good fortune of meeting my lovely Marda here either, the boys have been happier too, haven’t you?”

Matt and Tony shrugged but even I could now see they looked a bit...relieved. Maybe it wasn’t that they looked older, it was that the ominous, overseeing lighthouse was no longer on the edge of the property, taunting and teasing them with its evil secrets. They looked, well, happier. Al was right.

“And you wouldn’t have your little ghost show either,” he added. “A lot of good has come out of it.”

“You must tell me about this show, Perry,” Marda piped up in her soft voice, leaning against Al and fixing her attention on me. “I haven’t had a chance to watch it yet. Al says it would keep me up at night.”

Matt looked at me. “We’ve been telling all our friends about it. That shit is fucked up.”

“Matthew!” Al admonished.

He shrugged unapologetically and looked back at me.

“That last episode was f...sick. What was the deal with the deer? That scared the shit out of us!”

“Matthew!” Al again.

With the attention now turned to me, my cheeks flared a beet red. I still have trouble coming to terms with having myself on the internet and I was suddenly grateful that Brock hadn’t told me about knowing who I was until the very end.

“I honestly don’t know,” I told him, trying not to look at the rest of my family, who I knew were looking at me with their usual disbelieving eyes (except for Ada but I could tell she wasn’t even paying attention to me). “We woke up in the middle of the night and like a whole herd of deer were gathered around our tent. We never even saw them after that.”

“Weird,” Matt said. “You said on the blog that a lot more happened but that footage was all lost at the bottom of the sea.”

“Oh, how convenient,” boomed my dad, sounding more drunk by the moment. My eyes flew to him, enraged. *It’s his birthday, let him have this*, I thought, trying to bury the urge to yell at him.

“It’s true,” I said through gritted teeth, trying to keep focused on Matt’s curious face.

“Well, what happened?”

Too much for me to tell. After Dex and I returned back home, after I got my wrists patched up because of my altercation with the rose garden, and Dex had his raccoon wound stitched up, we decided to show everything we shot (that still remained with us and not on the Super 8 at the bottom of Haro Straight) and leave the rest up to the viewer’s imagination. Normally, I would have written a lengthy blog entry telling the entire story, elaborating on the stuff that the cameras couldn’t pick up on. But this time...I just couldn’t do it.

I think a part of me was afraid that the more I admitted what happened, the more that this “Anonymous” person would come on the blog and comment on what a liar I was. Yep, I knew the hater I had was still lurking around on the internet somewhere, waiting for me to say the wrong thing. And this time, at least, I knew that others would agree with her (Dex seemed adamant that it was a female).

What happened to Dex and me on D’Arcy Island seemed like more than a bad dream. If I told anyone what actually happened, how a psychotic, cross-eyed midget from a 1900s mission turned me against Dex, how we were hunted down by zombie-like lepers, and how I nearly drowned saving a child who was already dead...well, it sounds so unbelievable even I think it over in my head. There was a reason why I blocked most of it out. Except for that second night, when we awoke to the wails of an insane ghost and my need for Dex overtook everything else. And when I say need, I mean lust. That was purely my fault.

I gave Matt a small smile, knowing the blush was deepening up to my hairline.

“A lot happened that I can’t even remember. I’ll tell you the rest one day.”

I shot a look at my parents, who were exchanging wry glances with each other. Well, let them think what they want. I was happy to know that at least the twins gave me more than the benefit of the doubt.

“Apparently, Perry thinks she needs to work out now to fight ghosts,” my mom said after she tore her eyes away from my dad’s increasingly red ones.

I bit my lip, not sure how to answer that without sounding like a loon. I knew from my mom’s voice that she was treating the whole thing like it was a joke.

“But if that gets your weight down, I’m all the more for it,” she had to add.

“So,” Al said, shooting my mother a wary look and then smiling at me as if he was apologizing on her behalf. He didn’t need to. I was used to that shit from

my mom. It's probably why my father and Ada didn't even notice. "If you don't mind me asking, how do you plan to defend yourself from...uh...ghosts?"

I knew Al didn't believe in ghosts per se (though he did believe in "Evil"), hence the gentle yet skeptical tone he was using, but he still seemed sincere in his questioning. Marda was watching me expectantly too.

I tried to answer as diplomatically as possible. "I just think it's good to be prepared. It's not so much the ghosts as it is the situations we are in."

"Is that how you got this?" Matt asked, pointing at the scar on my wrist that sat beneath the purple Silly Bandz bracelet.

"That...was a lively rose bush," I said, knowing how stupid that sounded.

"So you've been going to the firing range so you can shoot gardens?" my dad scoffed. He had never been very supportive of the whole gun use thing. Not that I had a gun or ever planned to get one.

I stared him down. "As I said, dad, it's good to be prepared."

"How do you kill ghosts anyway? You obviously can't shoot them," Marda said, somehow managing not to sound the slightest bit patronizing.

I honestly didn't know. I had always wondered that myself.

"I'm not really sure. I don't think you can; I mean they are already dead and everything. I think you can trick them though."

"How do you mean?" Tony asked, leaning forward past Matt so I could see him.

"Well," I started and wondered how best to explain without sounding crazy. I decided I already sounded crazy and went on, keeping my eyes on the wax that was dripping off the candles in the center of the table.

"When we were on the island we had to escape this ghost named Mary. She had stolen one of Dex's knives and was about to sever the rope that connected the sailboat to the shore."

I looked around me to see how everyone was reacting so far. My dad rolled his eyes and got up, going to the washroom or perhaps outside to get fresh air and wonder where in God's name his daughter came from. My mom was watching me with worried, fearful eyes. The rest, including Ada now, were glued to my every word.

"I didn't know what to do," I continued. "I didn't even think. I just grabbed the flare gun out of Dex's backpack and shot it at her."

The twins hollered simultaneously.

"You're fucking joking!" Matt cried out.

Even Al looked too flabbergasted to get mad at his son's use of language at the dinner table.

"No, I wish I was. I just fired it. She was maybe only ten feet away."

"And did that...kill her?" Marda asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so. She was already dead, so how could it? But what I think it did was trick her. My theory is that most ghosts don't really accept the fact that they are dead. I think they spend most of their time wandering around in another dimension, living in denial. I don't know. Anyway, I think all that did was make Mary think I killed her, at least long enough so that we could get away. It at least knocked her ass off the cliff and that's all we needed."

"Why the hell didn't you write about this?" Matt said, shaking his head and reaching for his glass of wine.

I laughed.

"Why? Because...who the hell would believe me? I sound like a lunatic, I know I do."

"You sound like your grandmother," my mom said in the coldest tone I'd heard from her lips in a very long time.

Al gave her another look, this one fully loaded. Something was going on but I couldn't read into it, not across the table in this busy Italian restaurant. My mother rarely spoke about my grandmother. She died

when I was very young and I only saw my grandfather when we went on family trips to Sweden.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said to her, trying my hardest to not sound defensive.

My mother looked down at her manicured fingers for a second before taking a tepid sip of water. “Your grandmother lied a lot, that’s all.”

I smiled at her though there was nothing pretty about it.

“I’m not lying.”

She didn’t say anything else but she didn’t need to.

Trying to dissipate the tension, Tony spoke up. “Too bad you don’t have one of those boxes from Ghostbusters. You know, some way to contain them.”

“Yeah,” I agreed absently, still keeping my eyes on Al and my mother. “But we’re still trying to figure this whole thing out. Learning as we go.”

“You and this Dex fellow,” Al said, noticing my gaze, and for once I was glad to talk about Dex.

“Yup. Going up to Seattle on Monday to film the next episode at the Riverside Mental Hospital. Then on Friday there’s a Christmas party for work. ‘Tis the season.”

“And is your work going to be paying for your hotel this whole time or are we going to have to help out?” my dad asked, returning to the table just in time. It’s like he has some radar that alerts him when someone mentions anything money related. Or touches the thermostat.

“No.” I glared at him despite my promise to play nice because it was his birthday. “I’m staying with Dex and his girlfriend.”

It’s like a collective breath was held above the table. Everyone froze. Finally Ada started coughing on her water.

“Are you insane!?” she yelled and grabbed my hand. I pulled back, surprised at her outburst. Aside from when Al and Marda had asked her about Layton, she had been silent the entire dinner.

“Possibly?” I answered.

My mom reached over and tapped Marda on the arm gently. “She’s in love with her Dexter partner.”

Marda nodded knowingly while I exclaimed, “No I’m not!”

I swear everyone at the table rolled their eyes in unison.

“And his name isn’t Dexter!” I sat back further in my chair and crossed my arms. “Whatever, I’ll be fine. I have a date on Sunday night anyway. With another man. Who isn’t Dex.”

Another gasp at the table. This was the longest dinner ever.

“Don’t act so surprised,” I muttered.

“Who with?” Ada asked.

“My bootcamp trainer, Brock,” I said, ready for everyone to laugh the way Dex had. Surprisingly, everyone looked impressed.

Finally my mom said, “Now this guy sounds like a keeper. Imagine how skinny you’d get around him! Maybe then you could do a fitness show instead.”

There was no use in saying anything. I swallowed my indignation with the last few gulps of my wine and soon the conversation flowed to the local college basketball team and other things, leaving me locked in my head with thoughts that went nowhere.

CHAPTER FOUR

I'd like to say that I escaped my dad's dinner the other night with no other humiliations or poignant conversations, but that wasn't the case.

At the end of the night, when everyone had had too much wine and had stuffed themselves to the gills, I was accosted by Uncle Al as I was heading back from the bathroom.

"Perry," he said, placing a gentle hand on my arm. "Could I have a word with you?"

I nodded quickly, knowing that there was something on Al's mind for most of the dinner but not knowing what it was.

He led me past the kitchen and to the backdoor that let out into the staff parking lot, surrounded by overstuffed garbage cans and a few stray cats hanging around. I crossed my arms against the cold and watched as Al stuck a moldy doorstop into the door so it wouldn't lock behind us.

“Are we allowed to be back here?” I asked, eyeing a tabby warily.

“This place is like a second home to me,” Al said jovially.

“Are you planning to off me?, I jokingly asked. “Because this is looking like a Sopranos set-up.”

“Nothing like that, I just wanted to give you some advice.” He walked forward a few feet and stopped. The yellow light above the door obscured his face, making him look more and more like a mobster. I knew he was just my Uncle Al but it frightened me how overactive my imagination was these days.

“Perry...” he started and then trailed off. I couldn’t see his expression in the dark but I could tell his eyes were probably closed and his forehead was scrunched up dramatically. “I worry about you.”

Oh, here we go again.

“Not in the way your mother worries about you,” he said quickly. “Just...in a fatherly way. I’m sure if Daniel” (my dad) “wasn’t tipsy right now, and wasn’t so bullheaded about you, he’d be telling you the same thing.”

I shivered against the chilly breeze and took a step away from the shadowy garbage bins. “Sorry, it’s freaking freezing out here.”

“I know, just give me a minute. Just...listen to me. I don’t want you to say anything until I’m done and then we can go inside. You can get all defensive in the warmth.”

I eyed him suspiciously, totally unsure of what he was going to say.

He reached over and pressed his finger into the space above my heart. I looked down at this finger and looked up at him, confused.

“I think you going to Seattle, you staying with Dex and his girlfriend, I think...”

It’s a bad idea, I thought.

“I think it’s a good idea,” he finished. I looked at him, surprised. He put more pressure on his finger. He

continued, his voice grave, "You've got this hole in your heart, Perry. I can see it on your face. You're so beautiful, bella, you really are, but you look so...sad. You've got this hole, I can see it and it is bleeding out slowly. It's clotted only by hope. This hope, based on maybes and what ifs, is killing you. This pin is small and it moves quietly. You need a knife. Get over it. Face the finality of it all and move on."

I was speechless. I stepped back a foot so his finger was no longer above this so-called hole in my heart.

"Are you saying you want my heart to be broken?" I asked incredulously.

"It will heal. And you'll be stronger for it. Much stronger. If you go, you'll get hurt. But it'll be worth it in the end."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I couldn't believe it and I didn't want to believe it. Yeah, I knew that going to Seattle was going to suck in many ways but it was just another thing to "man up" about. I'd get through it. But I didn't see how my heart was going to be broken. I knew Dex was with Jenn. I knew they had their new apartment and their Fat Rabbit. I knew every night he was going to go into their bedroom with her and...

"See," Al said. I didn't want to meet his eyes. I knew the expression on his face.

"Can we go inside now?" I asked meekly.

Al put his arm around me and ushered me toward the door. "You'll be fine. It'll be a learning experience. And when you get back, it'll all be over with. You'll be bled out and all the better for it."

And then we went back into the restaurant and joined the rest of the party in saying our goodbyes.

But I had been unable to stop thinking about what Al had said. Did I really keep on loving Dex because there was always that chance of "what if?" What if he broke up with Jenn or maybe if he fell in love with me anyway, or...so many scenarios to even list.

I was even thinking about it as I got ready for my date with Brock on Sunday night. It didn't help that Ada had brought it up.

"So what are you going to wear to the Christmas party?" Ada asked, watching me apply mascara in our bathroom mirror. Rob Zombie blared from the tinny CD player and a half-drunk glass of wine sat on the ledge, my medicine for calming my electric pre-date nerves.

I looked down at my dress, the same black dress I had worn at my dad's birthday dinner. I figured it would look nice for Brock too.

"This one," I said.

She gave me the most unamused look. It caused me to put down my mascara and say "What?"

She shook her head. "You are absolutely hopeless. This dress? You look straight out of a Donna Karan ad."

"Is that bad?"

"It's fine if you're going to work. In 1994," she snarled. "Perry, this pains me to say this but your body is way too good for this. How the hell are you going to win over Brock or Dex in this?"

I had to turn around and face her at that. "Win over Dex?"

"What are you wearing to the Christmas party?" she asked again.

"This!" I yelled, pulling at the skirt of it.

"Hold on," she said and left the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Hold on? Hold on to what? I looked at myself in the mirror and straightened out the dress. There was nothing wrong with it at all. It was boring, sure, but black was flattering and it matched my hair. It hid my boobs and hips and covered up my thighs. I had a nice face, I knew that, so if that's the only thing Brock noticed, that was fine with me. Besides, he knew what my body looked like' he had been berating me as I ran

around in Lululemon pants for weeks. I was Miss Muffin Top. I wasn't fooling anyone.

As for Dex...well, like it or not, Dex had seen me naked, so again, I wasn't about to fool him. And I didn't want to anyway. I had never dressed up for Dex and I wasn't about to start doing it at the Christmas party.

OK, so when I wore that low-cut red top for the shoot at D'Arcy Island, that was a teeny bit for him. But, whatever.

The door opened again and Ada flounced in with something satiny in her hands. She locked the door behind her and thrust a dress in front of my eyes.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's what you are wearing to the party."

My eyes narrowed at her. It was involuntary. I know my sister often meant well, but there was no way in hell I could ever fit in her clothes and she knew it.

Picking up on that, she sighed with keen exasperation and said, "It's not my dress. I mean, I was sent it as a sample, someone wanted me to wear it on my blog. But it's way too big for me. I was going to hold a giveaway for it, but I thought maybe you'd like it."

I gave it the once over. It was strapless and a satiny, almost iridescent, teal blue. A very lovely color actually. But still. My first instinct told me to distrust it. If it wasn't a statement-making concert tee, it wasn't "Perry."

"At least try it on," Ada said, physically opening my hands and placing the dress in it.

"I don't want to wear this tonight, it won't be appropriate for a first date."

"Fuck tonight," she scoffed. "I know tonight's just a distraction. This is about Friday. Dude, nothing matters. You're going to go to that Christmas party looking like a million bucks and you're going to show that stupid whore who's the boss."

I couldn't help but laugh at Ada getting all jealous and protective. She looked as worked up as anything, her feverish expressions causing her smudgy makeup to settle beneath her eyes. I didn't have the nerve to tell her that it wasn't the point of the trip, that I didn't have a chance in hell, and that I was, according to Uncle Al, heading straight into heartache.

"Don't pretend," she said, coming closer. "Just put the damn dress on and I'll tell you the truth."

I sighed and pointed at the door. "Well at least give me some privacy."

She didn't budge. "You're going to have to get used to people seeing you naked," she teased.

"I'm already used to it," I answered without thinking. Her eyes widened.

"What!?"

"Get out, let me change," I told her, opening the door and pushing her out of it.

"But, but," she protested and I locked the door in her face.

"Perry!" She pounded on the door. "What do you mean? Who has seen you naked!?"

"Ada, shut the fuck up!" I yelled back, knowing that was the last thing my parents needed to hear.

She shushed up as I quickly stripped out of the black dress and shimmied into the teal one. It was too tight for my liking and I couldn't zip it up all the way by myself but...

I reached over and opened the door. Ada's eyes bulged comically.

"Holy shite, where the hell do you get your boobs from?"

I rolled my eyes. "Can you just zip me up?"

She nodded quickly and ran it up the rest of the way. I sucked in my breath and the extra few inches of support made my breasts prop up even more.

Ada was speechless for once. I took a step back from the mirror and tried not to be too critical. The color made my skin glow and my hair seem like rich

ebony. The darker edges around my light blue irises looked saturated, like the teal color was leaking into them. It was shorter than I would have liked but at least my waist looked small. My breasts weren't obscene or anything, but there was no mistaking them. I turned to the side and eyed my butt and hips. Again, no mistaking them. They were both out there for the world to see, like it or not.

"You look like Joan Holloway," Ada breathed. She apparently watched *Mad Men* like the rest of the world.

"Thanks. A compliment, right?" Although I found Christina Hendricks sexy, it didn't mean my waifish 15-year old sister did.

"Of course you dummy," she said, now turning her attention to my feet. "Are you wearing those clunky black things you wore the other night?"

"You mean the only heels I have? Yes."

She rolled her eyes again. "Hold on."

I wasn't holding onto anything. I was finding myself not only liking the dress but liking the way I looked in it. Wasn't this what Uncle Al was warning me about, with all the maybes and what ifs?

I shook my head in an attempt to snap out of it. I admit, I did want to go to the Christmas party now looking like a million bucks. It wasn't to win over Dex. I knew him well enough that the way I looked wouldn't change anything. But I did want to show to everyone else that I wasn't some fat, dumpy, stupid ghost show host. I knew Miss Anonymous wouldn't be there but I still knew that everyone would have read those comments and I needed that one extra push that no, I wasn't like that at all. Miss Anonymous, what a stupid, jealous bitch, she doesn't know what she's talking about.

Ada came back in with a computer printout in her hand.

I took it from her and peered at it. "What's this?"

"I got a gift certificate. Fifty bucks at the designer shoe warehouse. I'm sure there's one in Seattle. Go

and get yourself a sexy pair of shoes when you're there."

I looked over the printout and it confirmed what she was saying.

"Ada," I began.

"No," she said, closing my hand over the gift certificate. "I have enough shoes."

"You're just too good for discount shoes," I said with a smile.

She smiled back. "You know me too well. Now go break Brock's heart. You'll need it for practice."

And with that, she shut the door behind her, leaving me with the gift certificate in my hand, wondering when my sister had become 23 and myself 15. At least, that's what it felt like.

~~

The date with Brock went better than expected. He picked me up (I wasn't about to ride Putt-Putt in a dress, nevermind the helmet hair) in his Honda Civic and took me to a trendy bar in downtown Portland, with a smashing view of the Willamette River.

He was a perfect gentleman. He laughed at my jokes, paid for the food (despite my insistence), and he looked quite handsome in his grey dress shirt, a nice change from his jock outfit.

We talked about a lot of things, though I tried to keep the conversation focused on him. Only near the end did he start asking more and more about the show and ghosts. He was a believer, which was good. The last thing I wanted was to be with someone who just wanted to pick my beliefs apart. That would be akin to a Catholic going out with an atheist.

No, Brock was fine. And he was a good kisser, too, as I found out on my parents' front stoop. He didn't seem to want anything more and anything less. It felt good to taste someone else's lips, to feel someone else's feelings, especially ones so transparent.

But as I was saying goodbye to him, I had a heavy, sinking feeling in my heart.

For one, there was the fact that he liked country music. The minute he admitted his love for Rascal Flatts, I knew we would never be. And then there was the simple, sad, ugly truth that he wasn't Dex.

I tried my hardest to ignore that feeling the entire date. I tried so hard. But at every awkward pause and every glance at the clock on the wall and every quick slurp of wine, all I could think about was that if this were Dex sitting across from me...everything would just be OK.

And that thought made me sad as hell. It's like that first date you take in order to move on. Full of false promises and lies you tell yourself, the lies that you'll find someone else, someone better. At some point, those lies become truths. But I needed that to happen sooner, rather than later.

So as I was saying good-bye to Brock, and my heart had no real interest in seeing him again, the logical side of my soul kicked in. I asked him if he wanted to go out again when I got back from Seattle, and he said yes. He even looked a bit surprised; maybe he was smarter than I thought and had been picking up on mixed signals from me. I knew I had been sending them.

I watched him get into his car and waved at him as he drove off. Even if I wasn't all that excited about a second date, I knew it needed to happen. I needed to move on. I needed, more than anything, to prove Uncle Al wrong.

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