



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.
