



*Every Other Girl
in Bainsboro*

Laura Chowns

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A short story by Laura Chowns

To everyone who has ever felt alone on Valentine's Day and needed to lose themselves in cheesy romance stories about people and scenarios that only exist in the realm of fiction.

Dear Readers:

Once again, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to pick up one of my books. Every Other Girl in Bainsboro is a short story I wrote a number of years ago with inspiration drawn from online role playing and the dynamic relationship between a character and her best friend's brother.

I hope you enjoy this free short story, and as a favour to me, please hop onto goodreads (if you have an account) to rate and review it.

Thanks for your support!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laura Chowns', with a stylized, cursive script.

Laura Chowns

Delaney Duhn, known as Laney by her friends, had just turned twenty-one and in celebration of her birthday, her best friend Levi, and his brothers had taken her to The Euphoric Escape in Graniteville, Toleria, an hour and a half drive from their hometown of Bainsboro. The Euphoric Escape was a rite of passage for anyone coming of age, and even though Laney was not the type of girl who spent her nights in bars, the Ridells would not take no for an answer.

“Where did Finley go?” Laney asked as she slipped back into her seat next to her best friend.

She had left him with his older brother, Levi with a beer and Finley sipping on scotch. Now it was just Levi keeping their table warm. Rory had abandoned them earlier after downing a bottle of tequila. He was now on the dance floor and looked like a robot short-circuiting. The girls surrounding him didn't seem to mind much, Laney had noticed when she stole a glimpse of him through the crowd and laughed. Too bad they would be disappointed when they found out Rory was engaged to a future politician and completely faithful.

“Over there,” Levi nodded his head.

Laney turned her attention to where he was nodding and spotted Finley. He sat at the bar with a brunette. His body was angled towards her, one arm rested on the bar itself and the other pushed back some of her hair in a stereotype manoeuvre. Laney made a face and scoffed as she turned her attention back to Levi. This was typical Finley behaviour. He always managed to find someone flaky enough to go home with him wherever they went.

“Don't they have any respect?” Laney asked, mostly to herself, she didn't expect Levi to give her an answer.

It was a well-known fact that Finley Ridell loved women. He had to have one in his bed every night; otherwise, he seemed more cranky and irritable than usual. He liked women of all different flavours and women seemed to like him as well. If they didn't, he wouldn't have made such an excellent playboy.

“Finley? Yes, he respects women a lot, actually,” Levi replied to her question in defence of his big brother. Laney spared him a look of disbelief. “What? He does. He'd never take a woman home, or go home with one, who didn't want him and who wasn't aware that he would not be there in the morning,” Levi assured her. “That's respectful. They know what they are getting into.”

Laney rolled her eyes. “I'm not talking about Finley,” she huffed and picked up her cooler. Levi gave her a questioning look. “The girls, Levi!” Laney exploded, waving her arms dramatically so her drink spilled over the rim of the glass. “How can a girl willingly go home with someone they know won't call them back and only wants them for their body? I don't get it!”

Levi smirked. “That's because you're a virgin and have no idea what you're missing.”

“I'm what--?” Laney felt her face heat up in embarrassment. “You have no--” She could hardly get the words out and looked away from him. Levi laughed. She could hear him over the music but chose to ignore him. Her soft brown eyes fell on Finley and his brunette and she could not prevent them from rolling back into her head. This was awful. She should rescue that girl. “Look at them... ugh!” She had to turn away. When she turned away, Laney was met with Levi's grin, like he knew something she didn't. “What?”

“You're jealous,” Levi informed her.

Laney's mouth dropped open in utter bewilderment. Jealous? “Oh Levi, you've lost your marbles somewhere along the way if you think I'm jealous of Finley's flavour of the week.” That was completely absurd. Laney had no romantic – or sexual – interest in Finley Ridell! All he was, was the protective, and annoying big brother to her best friend. Nothing else.

“You're mistaken, Lane,” Levi continued. “You're not jealous of her specifically.”

Laney gave him a look that threatened him to tread very lightly on this delicate conversation he had initiated, otherwise he might end up wearing the drink she held.

“You're jealous of the situation because Finley willingly looks at every other girl in the room as a conquest before he'd ever considered you in such a fashion.”

Her brow rose curiously. “A conquest? Why would I even want Finley to look at me as some kind of conquest?”

Levi shrugged, keeping his boyish grin attached to his face while he eyed her. “Because no one ever does. When a guy looks at you, he sees the girl next door. The martyr. The nice, virginal girl who would be perfect to bring home and meet his mother.”

“How do you know what a guy sees in me?”

“Because I'm a guy and I've looked,” Levi admitted causing her to blush.

Laney was relieved that Levi was her best friend. If he'd been anyone else she would have been severely flustered by what he'd just admitted. Even the possibility that there had been a time when Levi looked at her as anything but a friend made Laney uncomfortable. It was too weird. He was her best friend, her brother.

“You're the girl a guy picks to settle down with, you're not the sexual fantasy. Finley has no interest in settling down so he'll never look at you as anything but an annoying little sister who is off-limits.”

Laney had tuned him out. Mostly, she tuned him out because what Levi was saying was preposterous, but also because the conversation was making her uncomfortable. Since she was only half-listening to him, her eyes wandered back to Finley and his brunette. She scoffed once

more and caught the end of what Levi was saying. “Well, this annoying little sister,” Laney emptied her drink. “Is going to go join Rory on the dance floor.”

“Suit yourself,” Levi leaned back in his chair to get comfortable as if he was about to watch a really good show. Between Laney and Rory, it was a competition over who was the better dancer. Rory could dance, but once he got drinking a little too much, those skills vanished. Laney had two left feet and after attending a few dances at their school as her date, Levi had learned quickly to watch his toes. Neither of them cared, his brother or his best friend. As soon as Rory saw Laney heading over to join him, his smile brightened and he grabbed hold of her hand.

“Laney ditch you?” Finley approached the table where he'd left his jacket. He'd been chatting up the feisty brunette for the last ten minutes and she was quite the tease. He'd left her only long enough to get his jacket and for her to let her friends know she was heading out. By heading out, they were heading back to her place. The night was young.

“Nah, she's with Rory.”

Levi pointed towards the dance floor. Finley followed the direction of his finger and found the pair of them. Laney looked like she was drowning in the lake the way she was flailing her arms about and required assistance instead of dancing. And then there was Rory the robot. Finley groaned and turned his attention back to getting his jacket. It was draped over the back of the chair he'd been occupying before the brunette caught his eye.

“I can't believe we let ourselves be seen with those two sometimes.” Finley shoved his arm through the sleeve and glanced at the two on the dance floor. Embarrassing, but she was kind of cute, crazy though. He shook his head and pushed his arm through the other sleeve. “I'm out of here,” he said to Levi once his jacket was in place. “I'll meet you guys at home.”

“Where are you going?”

Finley rolled his eyes. “You've been hanging around with her too much.” Wasn't it obvious where Finley was going? Feisty brunette at the bar. He was getting something tonight. Before he left, his eyes fell on Laney for another moment and a feeling of protectiveness caught him off guard. She was practically family. “Keep your eye on her,” he said to Levi. “She looks drunk and some sorry sot might try to take advantage of that. We both know she's not ready.”

Levi laughed. Finley made a valid point. With one final glance towards the dance floor, he headed out. Ellie, the feisty brunette he'd been chatting up, was waiting at the door for him. Her arms were crossed in annoyance as if he'd kept her waiting too long. Finley flashed her his most charming smile as he approached.

“Come on, darling, don't look at me like that,” he tossed an arm around her slender shoulders as they walked out. Her tiny frame moved into his side rather nicely. The feel of her body against his was a delight. He sure did like his women.

“I was almost thinking you were all talk, Ridell,” the brunette replied with a rather disdainful look.

Finley stopped in his tracks. He pulled her in so their chests met. His lips lowered just inches from her glorious mouth. “You'd be doing yourself a great injustice,” he assured her in a low growl. His blue eyes scanned her features in a hungry, lustful way. He was enticed, ready to take her slowly until she begged. Then he'd give in because he was a generous man.

Laney couldn't sleep once they had finally gotten home. They had spent the better part of the walk back to the car trying to convince Rory that he was too drunk to drive and that Misha would not be impressed if he turned up at her place at such an hour. It was a weeknight, and Rory was drunker than a sailor put to port for the night. Although he had put up a good fight, even fallen on his face in an attempt to retrieve his car keys back from Laney, she and Levi had managed to safely put him in the back of his car face-first on the seats. Levi drove home since he'd only had a single drink that he sipped on all night.

The house was dark when Laney slipped out of the guest room she'd been using during her stay with the Ridells. The floors were cold and creaked under her weight as she tried moving soundlessly. Levi would have made fun of her, but there was no motion of life coming from behind his door. She walked past it and down the stairs. Having been friends with Levi since they first started attending school together, Laney spent a lot of time at the house and knew which of the steps squeaked. Levi had made a point of showing her one summer when they were teenagers and sneaking out of the house. Laney avoided it, to avoid waking up the household as she ventured into the kitchen for a glass of water and then outside to sit on the front porch.

The outside light was still on. She knew Heather left the light on when her boys were out. It only went off when they were all safely home, unless they weren't coming home that night. The light being on meant that Finley was still out with that brunette but that he intended on coming home. Laney let out a frustrated sigh and sipped her water. She didn't want to face the melody that was Finley Ridell when he got home. Her only hope was to finish her water and return to bed before the playboy waltzed up the driveway. She wasn't jealous, regardless of what Levi said. She had no interest in Finley, they were barely friends. They tolerated one another because of their mutual affections for Levi. Tolerate. That was the reason she didn't want to still be sitting there when he got home.

A low whistle could be heard over the wind just as Laney was bringing the glass to her lips for another drink. The whistle came up from the long winding driveway and was followed by the sound of gravel crunching beneath feet. Laney looked up in time to see a familiar figure

coming towards her with a bounce in his step. "Just great," she groaned to herself and allowed her eyes to roll back then fall shut. Perhaps if she ignored him, he would go away, but not without a smart-ass comment or two.

"Hey Cricket," Finley greeted her when he neared the steps and caught sight of her. "Waiting up for me?" The question caused her to let out an aggravated sigh. Only Finley would come up with some egotistical and vain reason for her to be up and sitting on the front steps by herself when everyone else was asleep except him. She could hardly grace him with an answer so she gave him a look of annoyance, which did one of two things; caused the Ridell boys to pick on her more, or they had pity on her and tried to be sympathetic. Either way, she ended up being made fun of.

When she didn't answer him, Finley took a seat on the step down from her and stretched out his long, lean legs. Her eyes seemed to follow the motion without conscious effort, but she quickly caught herself and snapped them back to focusing on the glass of water in her hands. She brought it to her lips to drink once more but held it there without really wanting a drink.

"Are you ignoring me because I ditched you guys at the nightclub?" Finley questioned her. He reached over and plucked the glass from her hands to take a long drink. "Because we've been through this... if we're going to fight, you need to let me know so I can approve the fight or not." His eyes flashed to hers, they locked together for a moment. Laney sucked in a breath, hating the way he made her stomach churn and looked away from him.

"I'm not ignoring you," she replied. Her voice was a low whisper as she stared off into the trees surrounding the house. "I'm silently contemplating the best way to make you go away," she finished her thought then managed to look at him. He was grinning, that stupid grin he and his brothers shared that was super contagious. Try as she might, Laney couldn't stop herself from returning the grin.

Finley leaned back on his elbows. His arm grazed the side of her leg as he did so. "You of all people should know you can't get rid of me unless I say so." Laney made a face that he couldn't see because he was too busy staring up at the starry sky above them. "You're stuck with me, Cricket."

"I'm so lucky..." she stretched out her legs beside him, they barely matched the length of his but he was also sitting a step lower than she was.

Finley turned to look at her with a raised brow. "Don't sound so excited. You should be honoured," his eyes wandered over her for a moment making Laney feel uncomfortable. "I don't say those things to just anyone."

"Ha!" She hadn't meant to laugh so loudly, but Finley was a real piece of work sometimes and she couldn't help herself. He was so cocky and full of himself she wondered how he even managed to convince girls to go home with him every night. "I bet you whispered those same sweet nothings to that brunette you left with tonight too, didn't you?"

“Oh no... those sweet words are meant just for you,” Finley grinned and turned onto his side for a better look at her. Laney tensed. She didn't have a lot of experience in the dating world like many of the women her age, but she did know Finley Ridell better than any of the women he slept with. He had something brewing in his mind. She didn't like whatever he was thinking. She didn't even know what he was thinking, but whatever it was, she wanted nothing to do with it.

“Save your energy, Burly,” Laney pushed herself off the step to stand and snatched her water glass from his hand. “I'm not interested,” and she disappeared into the house without hearing his bid good night.

“Hello?” A voice called from the front door of the Ridell's house. “Finley? Levi? Rory?” Two out of three of the boys were getting ready for the big game that afternoon. Rory was passed out on the couch, still hungover from the night before and occasionally uttering his fiancée's name while he drooled. Laney was the only one in the house with access to the front door. She abandoned her spot in the recliner next to the couch and approached. The sight of their uncle Rod caught her off guard.

“Oh, Laney, what are you doing still here?”

“Still?” Laney questioned as if he expected her to have gone already. The plan was to drop her off at her apartment on their way to the game. Laney had no desire to go to the game with the Ridell's. She was no baseball fan. She could barely grasp the concept of the sport even if Levi insisted it was simple.

“I figured you'd be on your way home by now since you've never shown an interest in the family sport, no matter.” Rod expressed himself so elegantly that Laney wanted to punch him out. Of all the Ridell's she knew, he was her least favourite. “Are the boys ready yet?”

Laney turned back towards the living room. “Not exactly,” she waved her hand in front of the couch.

Uncle Rod chuckled. “Rory, rise and shine, sleepy head!”

“Ugh...” came Rory's response.

Laney couldn't hide her smile. “He drank an entire bottle of Tequila last night,” she explained. “I don't think he is going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Rory up yet?” Finley came into the room without his shirt entirely on. He was still pulling it over his head. His voice caught her attention and she looked up instinctively only to find her entire face turning red at the sight of his exposed chest. As Laney drew her eyes away, she

couldn't help but notice the way his jeans hugged his hips, nor how the shirt he adjusted over his stomach accentuated his biceps. There was a reason she called him Burly, but Laney seemed to be noticing it for the first time.

Finley stopped by the couch and tilted his head. He stared down at his sleeping, groaning, and drooling sibling before shaking his head. "Lightweight. I guess we need to find a replacement. Maybe Misha is available. We could show her a better time than that idiot."

"What about Laney?" Levi entered the room, having just overheard the end of that conversation. "You wanna come?"

"No way!" Finley exclaimed. "You remember what it was like going to games at school with her, don't you, Levi? She's a nightmare!"

"I'm standing right here..."

"Sorry, Cricket, but you know it's true. Besides, no girls allowed, remember?"

"You just suggested inviting Misha, she's a girl," Laney argued though she had no real desire to go to the game. She'd only go to make a point that she could sit through a game without being a pain in his ass.

"She's an attractive girl--"

"Who is engaged to your brother," Laney put in before he could finish that sentence. She knew whatever he had to say would further insult her. He'd make some comment about her being nothing but the girl next door, little sister, and add to her frustration with him. Finley would never find her sexually appealing. He'd rather have the unattainable Misha around to look at than have to answer Laney's questions throughout the entire game.

"Hate to break up this lovefest," Rod interrupted. "But if we don't decide now who is taking Rory's place and get going, we'll miss the opening ceremony."

"Fine!" Finley gave in. "Come, but I swear if you test my patience it will be the last nice thing I do for you."

"Just give me some popcorn and a brief synopsis, and I'll keep all my badgering to a minimum," Laney cheered internally for this small win.

Having never actually attended a baseball game, outside of their school games where Levi played and Laney went to show her support, she was not expecting the circus they stepped into. She experienced buzzing excitement all around her, enough to be contagious that she found herself smiling at the sights and sounds of people making their way to their seats. She didn't

have very long to take in everything. The moment they arrived, Finley was leading them through the crowd of people expertly dodging excited fans and greedy vendors hoping to make a couple of dollars.

Laney wasn't so fortunate. Lacking the height and leg length to keep up with Finley and Levi, she managed to get herself caught in the midst of fans trying to buy some kind of baseball attire to wear in support of whichever team was playing. Laney didn't even know what teams were competing or who she should be cheering for. Her logical conclusion was she should support Bainsboro because she was from Bainsboro and the game was being held in Bainsboro.

"Something for the game?" A vendor approached Laney as she was shoved forward by excited fans. Her brown eyes searched the vendor's inventory while she tried to politely come up with a way to decline. Though he did have a few comfortable looking sweaters, and even though it was warm, she loved a comfortable sweater. She was about to speak up but a gruff, annoyed voice interrupted her.

"No thanks," Finley caught her wrist and tugged her away from the crowd. "God, Cricket," he was shaking his head as he hauled her after him like a less romantic version of a knight in shining armour. Finley didn't shine or possess the mannerisms of a knight. Still... Laney had to mask the light smile that started forming over his annoyance. "Can't take you anywhere..." he was still muttering, his accent thicker the more annoyed he grew. "Keep your eye on her, would you Levi?" Finley shoved Laney towards his brother once they caught up. "I don't want to spend the entire game looking for her."

"Awe, Finley, it sounds like you care," Laney couldn't help herself from commenting. The look he threw at her was priceless. She loved getting under his skin, ruffling his feathers. Something was endearing about him. Especially when he was annoyed with her. Almost attractive even. Laney shook her head. She did not find Finley Ridell attractive. That was just Levi talking. He'd put the idea in her head when he'd accused her of being jealous.

"Don't get used to it," Finley muttered from behind as they began to ascend the stairs.

Laney climbed with Finley in front of her leading the way and Levi behind her. She was certain it was a manoeuvre so she didn't get lost again. Stick her in the middle. Though, how could she get lost or left behind on a staircase was a good question.

The Ridell family were big supporters of sports, especially baseball. They had several family members, including Levi, who played, and various other family members who participated in different ways, like Finley who did sports conditioning and coaching. The family had box seats allotted to them that were big enough to hold the entire Ridell clan and then some. Laney was about to comment on the size when she thought better of it. She'd only reinforce the reason why they didn't bring girls; specifically her, to games. Without a word, Laney sat in between Finley and Levi, again she was certain it was another way for them to keep an eye on her so she didn't get lost. When it was just the three of them in the box, she didn't foresee herself getting lost in the crowd.

“Snacks!” Levi suddenly shot up and left.

Laney leaned forward to catch Levi’s exit. Her stomach knotted in that weird way it had been doing since last night whenever she was alone with Finley. “Where is he going?” She couldn’t help herself. The question fell from her lips before she could stop it from being voiced. Besides, it wasn’t related to the game, and the game hadn’t started yet. Surely she was allowed to ask questions before the game started. Her eyes fell on Finley, he didn’t look too annoyed... yet.

“He’s likely tracking down a vendor selling peanuts,” Finley replied. He turned his attention to her and stretched his legs out to get more comfortable. Then he reached up and folded his arms behind his head. “We’ve got a few minutes, I’ll give you a choice, Cricket,” there was a small glint of humour in his eyes when he looked at her. “You can optimize your time and get all your questions out before the game starts...” She started to speak but Finley interrupted her with his second option. “Or you could give me a reason not to regret letting you tag along.”

Laney’s jaw dropped. Her eyes widened in disbelief. Was he being serious? She eyed him, intent on figuring out if he meant those words, but his face was so sober she couldn’t read him. When her eyes met his with uncertainty, his turned to amusement. Finley laughed.

“Relax, Cricket, that was a joke,” he assured her. His hands dropped from behind his head. The one closest to her landed on her thigh in a little pat, as if he was trying to comfort her. Sort of a “there, there” motion but instead of on her back like normal people, he patted her thigh. “So, what’s your first question?” Finley shifted onto his hip so he was facing her. Oddly enough, his hand didn’t shift with him. It remained on her leg.

Laney swallowed. “Umm...” she couldn’t think of her first question with his hand placed so casually on her leg like it was. She could push it away, giving him the obvious hint that she didn’t welcome his sudden touch. She knew Finley would be understanding and obliging but Laney wasn’t sure she wanted that. A small part of her was heating up with embarrassment and other unexplainable feelings with his hand there. She moved carefully, making it look like she was getting more comfortable and managed to dislodge his hand. “Who’s playing?”

“Bainsboro and Shawborg Point.” He didn’t even take notice that she had knocked his hand away. “We’re rooting for Bainsboro... do you know which team that is?” She shook her head. “The guys in the red and blue, but just to be safe, cheer when we cheer.” Finley winked at her. “I don’t trust your judgment.”

She made a face at him. A rebuttal was forming but before she could express it in words, Levi had returned. He was loaded down with snacks and drinks, enough to make a diabetic cringe. The smell of roasted peanuts filled the box, and they smelled heavenly. Levi plunked himself down next to her with a grin before handing out drinks to her and Finley.

“Chocolate covered peanuts for the lady,” he handed her a bag of them then reached around her to toss a bag of something into Finley’s lap. “What did I miss?”

“Finley was just reviewing the rules with me so I don’t make him regret my presence.”

“How’s that going?” Levi asked with a laugh, and then leaned back just as the preliminaries to the game began.

The evening after the game, Laney sat impatiently outside the apartment complex on a bench. She was waiting on Levi. Or Finley. Or Rory. It didn't matter which one came home first as long as one of them came home soon. She was getting tired of waiting and had things to do before she went to bed that night. And people were looking at her. Like, real people who lived in the building and knew she didn't live there. They were eyeing her as they went in and out of the double doors. Probably wondering why the blonde friend of the cute boy on the fifth floor was sitting outside the building. Laney had a key to Levi's place, but she didn't want to sit in his apartment and wait for him. What if Rory came home first? Or Finley? She needed one of the Ridells desperately, and didn't care which one.

Laney yawned, covering her mouth with a hand as she sat. She was ready for bed and wanted nothing more than her pyjamas and a large bowl of strawberries before she crashed for the night. Her bed. Laney closed her eyes and slouched on the bench letting her head rest on the back of it. The thought of her bed was so enticing she could almost pretend the bench was it. If it wasn't for the noise, the street lights and the Bainsboro nightlife, she might have fallen asleep.

“That's a good way to get yourself killed, Cricket,” came the rather annoying voice of Finley Ridell. She couldn't complain. She had wished for one of them without specifically asking for either of them to come home. Laney couldn't whine that it was her least favourite of the three brothers.

“I'm hoping someone takes pity on me and rescues me before my murderer strikes,” she replied, pushing herself off the bench and following him.

Finley was carrying a bunch of things under his arm. Files of some sort. He did athletic conditioning for baseball players, trained them up real good and worked on physiotherapy for permanent injuries. Those sort of things, or so she assumed whenever she heard mention of Finley's work. He wasn't a player like Levi, or real heavily into the family business of making and selling equipment like Rory, that much she knew, but he did work in the sports industry.

Finley gave her a look at her comment, mostly he ignored her and grunted back some response she didn't catch then proceeded to dig out his key to the front door. Laney practically skipped her way to the door after him. This was her way of suggesting to him how delighted she was

that he was home. She almost looked like a lost puppy excited for its owner to finally pick them up from the pound.

“I need your help,” Laney informed him as she followed him into the apartment building.

“I don't know where Levi is and Rory is likely shagging Misha,” came his answer immediately and Laney frowned at the back of his head when he stopped to collect the mail from the small gold-painted box.

“I'm not looking for Levi or Rory. At least, not really.”

“And I have never shown any interest in helping you,” Finley turned to face her with his blue eyes scanning her then shaking his head. “You're nothing but trouble,” he assured her as he started up the stairs. Laney followed him, causing him to groan from ahead of her. “Seriously, Cricket... I've had a long day. I just want a shower, a beer, and my bed. Go home.”

“I can't go home.”

“I'm going to regret this,” Finley sighed dramatically. “Why can't you go home?”

“You remember that guy I went out with last week... Adam?”

“Yeah, the rebound guy after your break up with what's his name,” he continued to climb the stairs with Laney following at impressive speed. They'd already climbed two flights of stairs. One more to Finley's floor.

“Myles,” Laney reminded him. She'd been dating Myles for months before he dumped her completely out of the blue. “I didn't think you listened to me when I talked.”

“Of course I listen to you,” Finley looked back with a wicked grin. “There's absolutely nothing physically appealing about you to distract me, so I have no choice but to listen to your nattering.”

“Thanks... I think,” she stumbled over it for a moment not sure if he was complimenting her or insulting her. A small part of her was insulted and it only added to what Levi had said about the Finley theory; that he'd never look at her as anything sexual. “Anyway,” she almost walked into Finley when he stopped to open the door to his floor. “I was heading home but he's at my house.”

“Whoa! I'm impressed, Cricket, one date and you let him go home with you?” Finley teased. He had to be teasing her. Laney flushed bright red at his comment and then slapped his arm. “Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Why don't you just ask him to leave?”

“Well... he's not actually at my house. He's outside my house waiting for me!”

“So, he's stalking you? Now you know how I feel.”

“I'm not stalking you. I can't be a stalker when you invite me over!”

“Correction. I invite Levi over. I've accepted that the two of you are a weird package deal and I have to learn to live with your crazy,” he shoved the key into the door of the apartment he shared with Rory. The lock clicked and the door opened. Laney followed him in. “I'm still failing to see why you need my help. You know you can just go sleep at Levi's for the night and go home in the morning. I doubt he will stand outside your apartment all night. You're not that special.”

“I can't,” she shook her head, deciding to ignore his insults. She was used to Finley's insults. “I have a meeting first thing in the morning for school and all my stuff is at home. I need to go home tonight but I can't go home alone.”

“I'm not going home with you,” Finley firmly stated as he tossed his jacket on the couch.

She'd watched him remove it and had been admiring the way his biceps rippled beneath the dark blue shirt he was wearing and had to swallow a sudden lump of lust rising in her throat. “Please Finley,” Laney offered him pleading eyes. The kind of eyes that made Finley feel sorry for her and won him over into doing whatever it was she needed. “Just walk me home, maybe he'll be gone and you can come straight back here.”

“And if he's there?”

He said it like he knew there was a catch. Laney chewed on her inner cheek nervously. “We'll just tell him you're my boyfriend, come up for ten minutes and hopefully he leaves by then. And then you can go home.”

“No,” Finley shook his head and spoke firmly. “You can stop with those sad doe eyes because it's not happening, Laney.” She knew he meant it when he used her actual name. Finley seldom referred to her by her name. He always referred to her as crazy, or Cricket, she couldn't remember why he'd even started calling her that. All the other girls got names like princess or sweetheart, and those were the girls he took to bed. Laney was different. “I'm no one's boyfriend and I'm not going to pretend to be, not even for you, understand? Wait for Levi or Rory and use those eyes on one of them.”

“I can't wait for Rory or Levi! What if they are out too late?” Laney argued masterfully in her opinion. “What if I wait and I don't get home until late and I sleep in and miss my meeting?”

“Ha! You're annoyingly punctual. That will never happen.”

“But what if it does? I sleep in, miss the meeting, and miss my chance at getting this loan to go to school. Suddenly, all my dreams are ruined and you alone could have saved me from my downward spiral into misery and depression, but you selfishly refused to protect your manly

reputation!” Laney may have laid on the guilt a little too thick, but she knew Finley needed a good dose of it if she was going to win.

“Just sleep here. I’ll wake you up early enough to get your things from home and make your meeting.” He headed towards the linen closet and the bathroom.

“I can’t sleep here,” Laney followed him, and then whispered with bright blushing cheeks. “Rory and Misha have sex on this couch.

“We clean it.”

“I’ll let you touch my boobs!” Laney blurted out in her desperate plea for help.

Finley turned to look at her from down the hall. His face screwed up in contemplation. For a very brief moment, Laney thought she had one. Then he shook his head and opened the bathroom door. “I’m not touching your boobs.”

“Why not? You’re a guy. Guys like boobs. I’ve got a nice pair and they can be yours for the low, low price of walking me home and possibly a little harmless, white lie,” she bargained. She was heating up with embarrassment at even making such a suggestion. And it was worse that it wasn’t working on him. Damn him for being too into himself to give just a little. “Or are you afraid you might like them?” She had to try since she’d gone this far.

His eyes fell to her chest briefly before he laughed. “Yeah, right. No thanks.” Finley continued into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

“You’re being impossible!” Laney yelled through the door. “Can’t you just pretend for fifteen minutes that you like me and help me out?”

“I do like you,” Finley called back. “But not that much.”

“Then pretend I’m that Audrey chick you’re always fooling around with and bringing to functions when you need a date.”

She heard him groan from behind the door. “You’re not going to leave me alone, are you? You’re going to pester me until I agree, right?”

“And when you get out of the shower, I’ll still be standing here waiting to pester you some more. When you go to bed, I’ll sit outside your bedroom door and fill your head with all the horrible things that might happen to me so you feel really bad and have no choice but to walk me home.”

“Fine,” he opened the door and looked her in the eyes. “But you owe me. Both boobs, no shirt.”

Her eyes bulged. “What?”

“No shirt, or the deal's off,” he grinned at her, obviously knowing how uncomfortable the entire ordeal was for her. He was milking her offer. She'd been desperate enough to offer it so Finley was taking it just to spite her. It was the perfect form of blackmail. “I'm not interested in any first base nonsense.”

“All right, fine,” Laney caved. “No shirt, but you better not tell anyone.”

“Like I'd want anyone to know,” Finley shoved his jacket back on and his shoes. “Come on, let's go.”

“There he is!” Laney pointed out as they approached the ice cream parlour. She lived above it in a cute little apartment with one bedroom. The apartment was big enough for her and the four cats she adored, but those were minor details. Right then, she had bigger problems to deal with. Problems in the form of a tall man with golden locks of hair, thick glasses, and a beautiful smile, named Adam.

“Remember the deal,” Finley reluctantly offered her his arm. “Both boobs,” he reminded, causing Laney to blush and avoid his gaze for a moment. She was already regretting that deal. Desperate times had called for desperate measures and she'd stooped pretty low. She took his arm carefully linking them like they had been walking the entire way arm in arm.

“Don't be a jerk, okay?”

“You said nothing about what kind of boyfriend I had to pretend to be, so you're just going to have to deal with what you get,” Finley retorted, then gave her a wink. “Unless you want to sweeten the pot a little?” He shrugged out of her grasp, only to replace his arm around her waist and tug her closer, letting his hand rest on her hip. His brows went up and the corner of his mouth was growing into an enticing smile. Laney was doomed as she gazed back at him. She understood for the briefest of moments why women fell under his charms. His smile was deadly.

“Be whatever you want,” she managed out as they walked closer to the parlour and the door that led to her apartment. She placed herself even closer to Finley's side. They had to be realistic here. She had no clue what she was doing and was relying on him to make the right moves to convince her former date that they were together.

“Laney!” Adam's voice rang out through the quiet, cool summer air. His eyes were bright behind his glasses and his beautiful smile caused her knees to tremble. She was glad Finley was holding her waist or she might have stumbled. However charming his smile was, it slowly faded when his eyes landed on Finley. He stuck out his hand. “Adam Carr.”

“Finley Ridell,” Finley shook his hand, not letting go of Laney's waist as he did so.

“How uhh... how do you two... uh... know each other?” His eyes flicked back and forth between them as if he was finally realizing how close in proximity they were to one another.

“We’re seeing each other,” Laney answered immediately before either of them could have a chance to intervene. She was worried about Finley. Worried he was going to be selfish, and a jerk, and mess this up completely. Laney didn’t want to hurt Adam, but she was not good at letting people down and had no experience turning a boy away.

“Oh? Oh... I didn’t realize...” Adam stammered. “Is it new?”

“Very,” Finley cut in before Laney could answer. She tilted her head up to give him a look. “But it was inevitable, wasn’t it sweetheart?” He squeezed her gently and Laney relaxed. Okay, he was acting normal and not too over the top. “She hasn’t been able to keep her eyes off me since we met,” Finley winked at the man standing before him. “Now I can’t get her to keep her hands off me... sometimes I prefer the eyes, you know what I mean?”

Laney’s eyes went wide at Finley’s comments. Her heart started beating rather fast. Her palms were getting sweaty. Her face was the colour of beets by now. It had to be. She lifted a hand to hit him in the stomach since his arm was tight around her midsection. “Finley!”

He groaned a little dramatically. “Sorry, sweetheart, but you know what you’re like,” he finished with a cough.

“Yeah... yeah...” Adam agreed, though Laney couldn’t tell if he knew what Finley meant or not. She wasn’t sure she knew what Finley meant. “I suppose I should go.”

“Probably,” Finley nodded.

Laney shot him a look but quickly turned her attention to Adam. “I’ll see you around then?”

“Yeah, sometime... good night, Laney,” Adam hastily bid her farewell with a glance towards Finley. “Uhh... nice to meet you, Finley.”

“You as well, Adam!” Finley’s smile was ear to ear as he returned the good night. Laney closed her eyes tightly, wishing and praying the worst was over for now. His grip tightened and tugged her to walk. Laney had no choice but to open her eyes. “How did I do? Pretty fantastic boyfriend, don’t you think?” He glanced over his shoulder at the retreating boy then released his hold on Laney when the coast was clear. She took the opportunity to distract herself by fishing out her key.

“You could have been less embarrassing,” she muttered and shoved the key into the door. “What was all that about my hands and eyes?”

He laughed. "Oh, you know, just some sexual innuendos to make him jealous. I think it worked, don't you?"

"I think..." but the words caught in her throat when she looked up at Finley. The look on his face wasn't familiar to her. It wasn't his lazy grin that was bursting with insults, it was something else. Finley Ridell was suddenly a complete mystery to her. "Forget it, come on," she waved for him to follow her up the stairs.

Through the threshold of her apartment, Laney heard Finley make a noise. She looked around at her orderly apartment with all the pink and frills and wondered if this was the reason he remained a bachelor. Would Finley be so miserable in a house full of frills he couldn't bear to let anyone close enough to risk it?

As soon as they were through the door, three cats appeared. Two came running to greet the humans while a third remained coldly staring from the couch as if uninterested in the humans who had invaded its home. There was a fourth, one Levi had dubbed 'little terrorist,' who didn't like males unless it was Levi.

"What?" Laney questioned him.

"Nothing... your place is nice."

Laney noticed that he was looking everywhere except at her. Maybe that was for the best. She still had to live up to her part of the bargain and the mere thought was starting to weigh on her. Laney set her things down on the table. One of the cats, Shadow, was rubbing himself against Finley's legs but he went unnoticed by the man in her apartment. She'd only ever had Levi in her apartment except for the time when Finley and Rory helped her move in. The place had been completely different then. He probably didn't remember. Laney cleared her throat.

"I suppose... we should..."

Her hands shook as she lifted them to the buttons on her shirt and fumbled with the first one. She was nervous. Levi may have been the only male who she was comfortable with within her apartment, but after tonight, Finley would be the only man to have touched her in a less than appropriate fashion. Not even Myles had gotten this far which could account for the termination of their relationships. She swallowed and stared down at her hands for a moment to gather her courage.

"You don't have to," Finley interrupted her mental preparation causing her to look up but his gaze didn't meet hers.

"We made a deal..." she reminded him though a large part of her was almost relieved he wasn't forcing her to go through with it. A smaller part of her was disappointed that he wasn't forcing her to go through with it. Realizing that there was a small part of her that wanted this, accepting that would make it easier to go through with. "You held up your end of the bargain," she

continued with a little smile forming at the memory of how tightly he'd pulled her to his side in front of Adam.

"Laney... I don't want to touch your boobs," Finley confessed, though even as he looked directly at her, his eyes fell to her hands where they toyed with the buttons on her shirt.

It was the second time he'd admitted he didn't want to. It hurt, that he didn't want to. It meant that Levi was right and Finley didn't want her at all. Finley was interested in any available woman out there except for Laney, and she could pretend all she wanted that it didn't bother her, but it did. Levi was right. She'd forever be the little brother's annoying best friend. She dropped her hands to her sides and left her shirt with one button undone.

"Why?" She felt a small amount of courage and curiosity, so she had to ask him. "Is it because you don't find me attractive?"

"Your personality needs a little work," he commented with a half laugh but it ended rather quickly with a sigh. "Look Cricket, I'm not going to stand here and boost your ego by telling you how attractive you are. If you don't know you're beautiful by now, you'll never know."

"You think I'm beautiful?"

Finley paused and looked at her. Irritation and discomfort flickered across his face. Those were emotions she was used to seeing for different reasons. Finley didn't like anything mushy or discussing feelings and here she was pushing him to do just that. As far as Finley was concerned, Laney knew he liked to believe the only feelings he had were primal, basic needs to mate constantly. He was straight and to the point, never dropping pretty words or bits of poetry to convince a girl to sleep with him.

"I have to go," Finley's invasive techniques were kicking in and he turned his back on her.

Laney felt her heart sinking. This was her one chance to prove she wasn't some innocent, docile little doe who was being stripped away from her parents. She'd forever remain Levi's pathetic best friend who needed saving, if she didn't take a stand now. She wanted to but was afraid of what might happen afterwards. What if she started something he wasn't interested in sticking around to finish and she got hurt? Laney was all about protecting her heart, but her heart wanted him. Or at least something inside of her did.

"Finley, wait!" Laney was going to do it. She was going to find her courage and own her life.

When he turned around, she stepped closer to him and placed both of her hands on either side of his face. She'd only ever kissed Myles, and Levi once for practice before going out with Myles. Her skills weren't exactly on par with his, but at least her message would get across. Laney kissed him. For a brief and terrifying moment, she allowed herself to be utterly vulnerable to the man who constantly harassed her, tormented her, and made her feel like she was useless, and at the same time drew a feeling from within her she didn't know even existed.

The kiss ended with her stepping back and averting her eyes to the floor like she was ashamed of herself. She expected him to leave. She expected he would walk out the door on her like she meant nothing, but she didn't hear his retreating footsteps. She looked up slowly to find him still standing there with his arms in mid-air as if they were still holding onto her, though she had stepped out of them.

"You really shouldn't have done that," his voice came in a husky tone.

He reached for her. His hands found their way back to her hips and pulled her towards him. Laney was tall enough that kissing him only involved a minor tilt of her head to reach his lips. This second kiss was not soft, or brief, like the one she had bestowed upon him. Hunger and lust existed behind his kiss, in the way his mouth pressed hard against hers and his tongue begging desperately to enter her mouth. He pushed, pulled and practically tore her lips to shreds in one single mind-blowing kiss as she'd never experienced before. Then he pulled away, leaving her gasping for air after the assault.

"Damn it," he cursed himself.

"What?" Laney quickly backpedaled. Had she done something wrong? Had she kissed improperly? Was he already dissatisfied with her inexperience that he was changing his mind about her? She couldn't take it. She couldn't come this close only to have him change his mind. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good at this," Laney apologized. It was probably unnecessary but she felt like this was her fault. "You don't have to... you can go. It's fine... I.. I understand. You don't want this."

"Oh Cricket," he sighed, shook his head, and reached for her waist. "You couldn't be more wrong."

Her eyes met his with surprise. "Wrong?"

"Very wrong." His lips found hers, this time a little softer than the ravaged kiss from moments ago. "I want you, so very, very much." He kept kissing her as he spoke and pushed her further into the apartment until the backs of her legs bumped into the arm of her couch. "Every inch of your mile-long, half-giant legs torment me." He left her mouth and started kissing her cheek and neck. His hands found their way to her bottom where they gripped tight onto it and hiked her up so she sat on the arm of the couch. He moved his hands to her thighs. His thumbs rubbed linear patterns over her jeans while his mouth found its way to the crook over her neck where it met her shoulder. He placed kisses along the edge of the open blouse she wore. All the while, Laney focused on breathing.

"Wait..." Laney practically sighed her request while his mouth continued to explore. She was quivering with anticipated passion and nerves. She didn't know whether to stop him or let him continue because she didn't know what she wanted. Him. She knew that but she wasn't sure if this was right. Was she ready? She had a feeling Finley could kiss her clothes right off and

she'd be nothing more than putty in his hands. God, she wanted him. She wanted those hands all over her but she needed to wait. "Finley, stop..." her voice shook and it was the sign he needed.

"You're right..." he let out a slow, calming breath and stepped back. "We can't do this. Levi was right."

Laney looked confused. "What does Levi have to do with us, doing this?"

"Nothing," he put more space between them, which Laney did not like. "It's you, and it's me. We're in each other's lives forever unless you and Levi have some weird falling out and stop being friends. If we do this, we're just going to screw up the dynamic."

"What? What dynamic? Finley, you're not making sense. It's just sex." Laney couldn't believe she had said that.

He groaned. "It's not, Laney. For you, it's not just sex, and for me, well... it might be just sex but I don't know and I don't want to find out. Can we just forget about this? Can we go back to making fun of each other and acting like we hate each other even though we're oddly fond of one another? We're good at that."

Moments ago, Laney wanted him ripping her clothes off and if she hadn't stopped him he would have. Now he was asking her to go back to the way things were before she knew how mind-blowing his kisses were and how badly she wanted him to strip away her innocence. She didn't know if she could do that. She'd never been kissed before, like Finley kissed her, and to pretend it hadn't happened was a huge thing to ask of her.

"Please...?"

Laney took a deep breath and nodded. "Thank you for walking me home and getting rid of Adam."

"You're welcome... Good night, Cricket."

Days later, Laney was just as confused as ever regarding her situation with Finley. She'd been hiding out in her apartment trying to pretend she had never kissed him, and that he hadn't returned that kiss with the full furnace blowing. She hadn't seen Levi, which was not like her. Unless they were in a fight, Laney and Levi spent all their spare time together. He'd be showing his face soon enough. She couldn't hide forever.

Laney needed advice. She wasn't flourishing with female friends who could offer her advice on boys and relationships. And she definitely couldn't bring her problems to Levi without revealing that the boy she was having problems with was his brother. Levi would be furious.

Laney didn't know if he would be mad at her or Finley more, but he would be mad. She could already hear his voice in her head fuming obscenities around her apartment if he showed up and found out.

There was only one source of advice that Laney could go to. Her mother. She hadn't called her mother in a while. It was high time she made that call, even if she conveniently forgot about her troubles and just caught up. Laney picked up the phone and stared at the buttons for a moment. She set it back on the receiver and walked away feeling like a chicken. She didn't get very far before she turned around and talked herself back into calling her mother. If nothing else, she might feel better telling *someone* about Finley.

She dialled quickly. The phone rang, metallic sounding, in her ear. Laney paced the apartment-sized living room, waiting for her mother to answer. When she did, Laney perched herself on the couch, the same arm Finley had propped her upon for his petting session before they both chickened out. She shook those thoughts away as her mother greeted her.

"Laney! I was wondering when you were going to call."

She felt the guilt cut through her. "Sorry, Mom. Things have been a little weird lately."

"Well, the last time I heard from you, you were taking steps towards getting over Myles by going out on a date. I assumed since you hadn't called the date went well and you've been busy getting to know this young fellow better, is that right?"

Laney felt her chest fall with more guilt laying heavily on it. She hadn't told her mother how horrible her date with Adam had turned out. Horrible might be the wrong choice of words. Boring. Boring was better. Her mother also didn't know about Adam showing up at her apartment unannounced. Or what happened after Adam left. She was a horrible daughter.

"Not exactly," Laney answered her.

"The date was a dud, huh? What happened? Tell Mama everything."

Could she? Could she tell her mother that her best friend may have suggested she was jealous of his brother's sexual prowess, and thus started making her think of him in a different light? Could she then tell her mother how Finley had made a few, minor, advances on her like his hand on her thigh at the baseball game? Could she tell her about the kiss? The mind-blowing kiss that had Laney waking up in a fit of passion at night dreaming about what might have happened if they weren't being so careful?

She had no idea if she could tell her mother these things but she needed to tell someone.

"Adam was boring," Laney began. "For someone with such a gorgeous smile, he sure doesn't know how to use it to his advantage."

Her mother laughed. “Laney, you have to look beyond the physical attributes.”

“He talked about his dogs... all evening. If I could remember, but I can’t because I lost track of them after the one called Zeus, but I think he told me about every dog he’s ever owned since he was old enough to remember owning a dog.”

“Oh dear, a man who likes his dogs way too much, that is a problem.”

She could sense the sarcasm in her mother’s voice and sigh. “It’s all he talked about. I brought up books, he talked about the dog in the book. I brought up sports and he replied with a story about a dog he owned that played soccer... it was bad, Mom.”

“I’m sorry, but you know, a dud of a date is better than no date at all. It’s the first step to getting over someone.”

“I am over him, Mom.” Because she was falling hard for someone who was no good for her.

“You are? Oh, honey, that’s fantastic! I’m so glad you’re not moping about your apartment because of some idiot boy who doesn’t deserve you. You have such a good heart, you’ll find the right guy eventually.”

Laney fell back on the couch, defeated. She definitely couldn’t tell her mother now, could she? All that about having a good heart and meeting the right boy was such icing on a sour cake, when Laney had a feeling the right boy wasn’t who her mother had in mind. Laney knew exactly what boy her mother thought was the *right* boy for her. It was not Finley Ridell.

“Your date was a dud, how did your meeting go?”

She’d forgotten about that. “It was good. They are going to give me the loan so I can go to school.”

“That’s great news! You’ll be so busy with schoolwork you won’t even have time to think about boys and suddenly, POP! The right one will fall into your lap!”

“Mom...”

“I’m sorry. I know you want to be Miss Independent and run your own life, but I want you to be happy and not lonely.”

“I’ll never be lonely. I have cats, remember?” Laney joked.

“Yes... your cats,” her mother groaned. She wasn’t a fan of cats. They were not an appropriate substitute for human contact.

“And I’ll always have Levi.” Unless he found out she wanted to screw his brother and took that news poorly. She should tell her mother. “Mom... I actually could use some advice, since we’re talking about my relationship status...”

“You’ve finally realized you’re in love with Levi?” Her mother exclaimed with obvious excitement in her voice even through the phone.

“Uh... no... it’s umm...” Laney stammered a little and then muttered his name.

“Who?”

“Finley,” she said a little louder but not loud enough anyone outside of her personal space might hear.

“Laney, you’re going to have to speak up. For a moment, I thought you said your boy troubles were about Finley.”

“Mhm... yeah. Because I did, and they are, Mom.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Laney waited.

“Mom?” Silence. “Mom?”

“Did you have sex with him, Laney?”

“What?” Her jaw dropped at how blunt her mother was being. “No, Mom, no. I didn’t have sex with him.”

“Good.”

Good? What did she mean by that? If she could think past the sexual desires, she’d know exactly what her mother meant, but Laney wanted Finley.

“He’s just no good for you, honey, you know that right?”

“No... I don’t know that actually,” she retorted, a little annoyed with her mother. And with Levi, because he’d said something to Finley that made him agree to stop kissing her.

“His reputation, Laney. Everyone in Bainsboro knows his reputation. He’s never had a girlfriend and slept his way through every girl he went to school with. He’s probably slept his way through every eligible girl in Bainsboro and you’re next on his list.”

“You don’t know that, Mom.” Except, they did know that Finley had slept with a large number of women since he began getting sexually active. Laney just didn’t believe he was incapable of settling down with the right girl. “Maybe things are different with me.”

“Oh honey, don’t do that to yourself. Don’t believe in the delusion that you’ll be the girl who tames the beast that is Finley Ridell. You’re just going to get your heart broken.”

She heard a noise at her door. “You know what Mom, I have to go. Someone’s at the door.” As she said those words the door opened.

“Honey, just promise me you won’t get involved with him?”

“I can’t promise that, Mom.” Levi entered the apartment while she was trying to hang up. He mouthed ‘your mom?’ to which Laney nodded.

“Hi Mrs. D!” Levi called.

“I’ll talk to you later, love you, Mom. Bye.” Laney hung up before she could receive any further advice about not pursuing her best friend’s brother. She faced Levi. “What are you doing here?”

“You’ve been MIA. I figured I’d pop over and see what kind of drama you were downward spiralling into without me.” Levi made himself comfortable on the couch. “Who is the fella?”

“There’s no fella,” Laney tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and hung up the phone.

“Uh-huh... and I didn’t just leave my brooding brother to find you hurrying to get off the phone with your mother because you probably didn’t like whatever advice you called her for.”

“Your brother is brooding? Which one?”

“Finley. Why do you call your Mom for advice? You never like what she has to say, especially when it involves boys,” Levi reminded her.

“That’s because the only solid advice she gives is don’t do that and date Levi already,” Laney replied with a roll of her eyes. She flopped next to him on her two-seater couch. “Why is Finley brooding? Did some girl turn him down?”

“Don’t think so. He’s usually not bothered by the few who do because there are tons more that don’t.” Levi rose from the couch to walk to her fridge and opened the freezer. “Where’s all your ice cream?”

“I ate it...?”

He laughed. “That bad, huh? Who is it? Myles still? Or the rebound guy? What was his name?”

“Adam, he was a complete dud who showed up here unannounced, so I chickened out and hid outside your apartment building waiting for you to come home.”

“You did? When? Why didn’t you just let yourself in?”

“Oh... it was the night before my meeting and I needed to be at home. Finley got rid of him for me,” she said casually. She couldn’t lie to Levi. He knew her too well.

“He did?” Levi closed the freezer because the ice cream wasn’t magically appearing. “That was very charitable of my brother who never does anything unless he’s getting something out of it.”

Laney rolled her eyes. “You know we do like each other beneath all the bickering we do. I’m like a little sister. You said so yourself.”

“I did, but I was just talking out of my ass to ruffle your feathers since you were already on edge,” he sat back down empty-handed and sighed. “Want to go downstairs and get ice cream?”

“Girl trouble?”

“No. I’m emphasizing your need to eat ice cream and you have none because you’ve been eating it too much. Or is it sympathizing?”

“Doesn’t matter. If I eat any more ice cream I might barf.”

“So you do have boy troubles. I’m assuming it’s Myles then if the rebound guy was a dud. Unless there’s rebound to the rebound guy you haven’t told me about while you’ve been cooped up here in isolation.”

“It’s not Myles...” Laney sighed. She needed to tell him. This was her best friend. She told Levi everything. “And there’s no rebound for the rebound guy.” She inhaled deeply. “It’s... I... I might be the reason your brother is brooding.”

“I know.”

Her jaw almost dropped as she stared at him in disbelief.

“He’s brooding, you’ve been MIA since your meeting with the loan department, both things happened around the same time so I kind of suspected they were related. What happened?”

Laney scrunched up her face. “I kissed him.”

Levi burst out laughing. “That’s what your panties are all in a twist about? Because you kissed him? What happened after you kissed him? You guys didn’t.... you know...”

“No, we did not.”

Levi kept laughing. “No wonder he’s brooding. Finley doesn’t get turned down very often.”

Laney waited. The expression on her face was not amused by his laughter. Weren't best friends supposed to be supportive? They were not supposed to laugh at their counter's heartache and embarrassment. Laney was embarrassed. She'd offered herself to Finley, chickened out, and now had to pretend she wasn't feeling some kind of attraction to him so their lives can remain normal. It was frustration and Levi was laughing at her.

"Are you done?"

He paused, like he was recognizing the look on her face. "Shit. Laney, I'm sorry. What happened?"

The seriousness in his voice opened the floodgates. Laney started to cry out all her emotions. "I don't know! I feel so stupid! It's not like I'm in love with him or anything."

She felt Levi's arms come around her and buried her face into his chest.

"My brother is an idiot," Levi reminded her with a soothing caress to her backside. "If he can't see that you're the best person in the world then that's his loss. And you'll find someone better, who appreciates what a warm heart you have."

Her crying turned to a chuckle. "Did you get that out of one of those greeting cards?"

"I might have, but that doesn't make it less true." He paused. "Here's what we'll do. We'll have a movie night. You, me, Rory, Misha, and Finley. You'll wear something so hot that my moron brother will be cursing himself. And you'll remain completely out of reach all night just to torture him."

"I can't do that. I have nothing that hot to wear."

"Come over tonight anyway, you need to get out of this house before your cats think you died and try to eat you alive."

"Okay."

Levi settled on the couch next to her. His body was still vibrating with sporadic chuckles. "You shot him down...."

Finley wasn't feeling himself lately. He went out at night but came home alone. He went to work and didn't bother flirting with any of his co-workers or clients in the innocent way he often did. His game was all messed up. He didn't want to admit that he knew exactly why and who had messed him up. He couldn't stop thinking about her unless he forced himself to focus

on a task. There were very few tasks that required that much focus to forget how damned adorable and broken she had looked when he left her apartment after they'd kissed.

It was just a damned kiss! Finley had kissed plenty of girls and not one of them had left him feeling so antsy. He had unrelenting energy and nothing he did seemed to spend it. No amount of physical labour or workouts seemed to spend that energy and every day it seemed to get worse. He'd already ran that morning. He'd lifted weights. Now he was banging pots and pans around his mother's kitchen as he willingly helped her put away her dishes.

"Careful," Heather Ridell took the pan he had out of his hands. "That was your great-grandmother's and they don't make them that solid anymore."

He relinquished the pan and sat down at the table frustrated. "Sorry, Mum."

"What's wrong, dear? You haven't been yourself in days. Are you fighting with Audrey again?" she asked while putting the pan safely into the cupboard.

"No..." he mumbled. "Laney." Finley knew there was no point in lying to his mother. She always saw through their lies no matter how airtight they thought they were. Besides, Finley was the worst liar.

"You fight with Laney every ten minutes," Heather dusted her hands on her apron and faced him. "Oh..."

He looked up. "What?"

"Oh honey, I had a feeling this day would come."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, honestly, I wasn't sure which one of you it would be, but I had a feeling it would happen to one of you."

Finley was extremely confused. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mum."

"Laney, dear," she replied. "I'm talking about Laney, just like you were."

He spread his hands out, palms up, and stared at her as if to say, 'well, what about her?'

"You had a fight with Laney and you're sitting in my kitchen moping about it. I can't recall you ever moping about a fight with a girl because there's never been a girl you've cared enough about to mope over."

"I'm not moping. And it's her fault. She started it."

“If you’re not moping around my kitchen, what are you doing?”

“Avoiding,” Finley smirked at his mother. She glared at him. His smirk faltered and he let out a defeated sigh. “Okay, I might be moping... a little bit.”

“Because....”

Because... I kissed her. And it was friggin’ fantastic!” Finley dropped his head to the table. “And now everything is messed up, and it’s her fault because she kissed me first.”

“Really, Finley? You’re going to play the blame game and put it all on her?”

“Well, what am I supposed to do, Mum? Kissing Laney changed everything. She’s not some random girl I met at the Euphoric Escape who I might never see again.” He looked up and glared at her.

“Exactly.”

“So.... motherly advice would be great right now.”

“You don’t need my advice, dear. You know exactly what you need and want. You always have.”

“Ugh...” Finley rested his forehead on the table again. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“You are. You wouldn’t have kissed her if you weren’t.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just like I’ve always known one of my boys was going to be undone by her womanly charms, you’ve always known she was your future. You’ve spent so much energy on every other girl who wasn’t Laney,” she explained. “Girls who didn’t challenge you the way she does, or call you on your bullshit, but you’re twenty-six years old now and you’re bored of all these girls who don’t mean anything to you.”

He sighed. “What’s my next step?”

She turned her head towards the kitchen door. “You should talk to your brother.”

Finley looked up to see Levi standing in the doorway. He started to say something but his little brother stopped him.

“Just don’t screw it up. I don’t want to pick sides. I have two brothers but only one best friend so you might not win,” Levi grinned at him.

“Levi!” their mother scolded him.

Finley laughed.

“She’ll be at my place tonight. Come over, and I’ll conveniently forget to rent a movie.”

Laney stood in the mirror and frowned. It was just movie night with Levi, and she shouldn't care how she looked, but there was always a chance that Finley or Rory might show up when she was at Levi's. If Finley showed up unannounced, Laney wanted to look her best. She might have told Levi she had nothing hot to wear but she had to wear something that was more than her usual yoga pants or jeans with a blouse or sweater. She opted for her black leggings and her burgundy, off the shoulder, long top to wear. It was comfortable and gave her a little bit of confidence. Besides, if she didn't leave now she would convince herself to switch into her pyjamas and crawl back into bed.

Laney grabbed her jacket, keys, and purse before heading out.

The short walk to Levi's gave her time to obsess over what she would do if Finley turned up. What would she say? How would she act? A dozen different conversations ran through her head until she reached the door of the apartment building and bumped right into Levi. Laney paused and gave him a confused look.

“Forgot snacks,” he admitted. “Go ahead up, I'll be back in a few minutes.”

“I can come with you.”

“Nah, go on up. It will give you time to rearrange all the pillows just the way you like it before I flop down on them and mess up your system,” he insisted. “Door's open. I thought I would be there and back before you talked yourself out of coming and back into coming.”

“Haha,” Laney sarcastically laughed, they both knew he was right.

“Five minutes.”

Laney nodded at his retreating back. Typical Levi. He always forgot something but he usually didn't exclude her from a trip to the store for snacks. She headed for the stairs with growing suspicion. It made no sense that he would insist on her staying put while he ran for snacks. If she went with him she could have picked out her snacks. Levi was up to something and she had a good idea what it was.

Laney paused on the stairs. She considered turning around and going back down. If she was right, and Finley was up there waiting for her, Laney didn't know if she was ready to face him.

Anger rose in her. Anger at Levi. She was certain she had made it clear with her “nothing hot to wear” comment that she wasn’t interested in seeing his brother.

She continued up the stairs regardless of her conflict. The least she could do would be to hear him out. If she didn’t like what he had to say she would have the satisfaction of storming out dramatically. With her decision made, Laney continued to Levi’s apartment with purpose. Outside the door, she composed herself before entering the apartment.

“Hello!” Laney called out as if she expected Levi to be home.

“Laney?” Finley’s voice came from the kitchen before he appeared looking more breathtaking than ever.

Laney groaned inwardly. How was she supposed to even pretend to be mad at him when he looked that good? She tried not to show that she was admiring him as he paused in the hall, but he didn’t share the same decency. Finley’s eyes were on her so intently that Laney felt like she was center stage in a crime scene.

“Le-Levi's not here?” she stammered while trying to keep up an act of normality.

“He’ll be back soon,” Finley replied.

Yes, Laney thought, as soon as we’ve had ample time to make up. “Oh... I’ll just go then. I can come back another time...”

“I thought you two were watching a movie?”

“We were, but we can do it another night...” Laney turned to leave with her resolve faltering.

“Laney, wait!” Finley insisted. “Stay. Levi will be back shortly and then I’ll go, if you want me to. He left to give us a chance to talk.”

“I know why he left...”

“You don’t want to talk then,” Finley sighed. “I get it. I don’t think I would want to talk to me either. I wasn’t very sympathetic.”

“You said you didn’t want to ruin the dynamic of our group. I get that and agree. There’s nothing left to talk about, Burly.”

“I know I said that, but the dynamic is already ruined. It was broken the second you unbuttoned your shirt. I should have stopped you, and shouldn’t have let you kiss me.”

“Why? Was I that bad of a kisser?”

Finley chuckled. “Not at all. You were great. I haven’t stopped thinking about it since... or you...”

“The dynamic is ruined, and I don’t want to go back. I can’t go back, Cricket,” Finley continued while taking a step closer. “I’ve been suppressing my feelings for you for a long time and that kiss was like popping the cork on a bottle of champagne. The cork never fits back in the same way again and the champagne loses its fizz.”

“I don’t want to put the cork back in.”

“What are you saying?” Laney asked. She was quietly trying to process all his metaphors that she couldn’t quite understand what he was trying to tell her. “In English, please.

“I’m saying that I think I’m in love with you and I want to explore this new dynamic we have.”

“Okay...” Laney said after a moment.

“Okay...?”

Laney laughed. “Yes, okay. I want to figure this out too!”

Finley let out a sigh of relief. “Could I kiss you now?”

“Please, do.”

He took her in his arms. It was more exhilarating than the first time. Laney tilted her head up and his lips slowly touched hers in a gentle caress. She could feel the heat of his kiss igniting her soul from the tips of her toes to her heart swelling in her chest.

“Ahem,” Levi cleared his throat behind her. “I have snacks. Should I put them away for another day?”

“New dynamics,” Finley whispered against her lips before parting.

Laney laughed. “Keep the snacks out, Levi.” She gave Finley a peck. “I’ll see you later.”

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