

# THOSE THREE LITTLE WORDS

An illustration of a man and a woman. The man, on the left, has brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark grey suit and brown shoes. He is holding a long, thin black object, possibly a sword or a cane, horizontally across his body. The woman, on the right, has long blonde hair and is wearing a bright pink strapless dress and black high heels. She is holding a white rectangular object, possibly a book or a box, and looking down at it. The background is a vibrant pink with a subtle pattern of thin white lines.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN  
QUINN

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*For Megan*

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## Prologue

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ELI

I'm a fun guy.

Some might say . . . neat.

A solid, trustworthy good time.

If you're looking to have an amusing night out, I'm your man.

No drama.

No worries.

Just good old-fashioned fun.

I learned from a young age that life is short, and you have to fucking enjoy every second of it. So my rule is to say yes.

Say yes to as much shit as you can.

Hornsby, want to go to the pub down the street and get wasted with the locals?

Of course.

Hornsby, do you want to go skinny-dipping in the coach's pool—when he's home?

Absolutely.



Hornsby, do you want to fly to Vegas on our day off and run up the poker tables?

That's a hell yes.

Living in the moment, that's my motto, and up until now, that motto has served me well. It has taken me places I never thought I'd go. It has presented me with opportunities I never thought I would have.

But . . . and that's a big but, a huge one.

This time, my yes has come back to bite me in the ass.

You see, it all happened on my birthday. We had an off day, high from a big win against the Calgary Barnburners. It was Valentine's Day—yes, I'm a Valentine's baby—and we went to the best singles bar in the city that would be crawling with women.

The drinks were flowing.

The conversations were engaging.

And I was by no means calling it a night anytime soon.

That's when she walked into the bar.

In a hot pink dress that clung to every inch of her curvy body, she styled her platinum-blond hair into long, silky waves, and the lipstick staining her gorgeous lips matched the color of her dress. There was no doubt about it—she was a total smokeshow.

Every guy she came within a ten-foot radius of paused what they were doing to give her a very blatant once-over.

Unmistakably the hottest girl in the bar.

And as she sidled up next to me, unaware of my presence, it felt like the music stopped as she gently placed her clutch on the bar top. Casually, she leaned toward the bartender, her manicured nails drumming along the wood top as she sweetly asked for a gimlet with two lime wedges.

I was entranced.

I was hooked.

I was stolen for the rest of the night.

My mind wanted one thing.

Her.

She had my attention, and no one would steal me away.

No one would stop me.

Because in all honesty, I've had my eye on her for a while, ever since I met her two years before.

And that night . . . it was my chance. All excuses, all restrictions, they were tossed to the curb as I laid down the best tool at my disposal to get her to talk to me: it was my birthday.

And fuck, did we have a night. I can still remember the way her dress slid off her body as I held her in my arms. I can still vividly recollect that her lips tasted of lime and danger. And I can still smell her intoxicating perfume floating around me as I drove into her, one pulse after the other until we both came at the same time. *Multiple times.*

It was one of the best nights of my entire life.

But it had to end because we agreed it would be a one-night thing. So that morning, she slipped away undetected, and we both went back to our daily routine. Eat, sleep, and breathe hockey.

Was it the best birthday present I could ask for?

Absolutely.

Did she fulfill my every goddamn fantasy?

More than I could ever have imagined.

And if she came up to me and asked for more, would I oblige?

I would be hard pressed to say no.

Unfortunately, this isn't a fairy-tale story of how my one-night stand turned into a romance for the ages, though.

Nope, that would be far too easy. This story, well . . . it exposes me as the man that I am. The man I feel to my very core. This is the story of how I wear the title "Ultimate Fuckup," because not only did I accidentally get the girl in the hot pink dress pregnant . . .

But I broke bro code.

Because the girl in the hot pink dress is the sister of my teammate . . . and best friend.

## Chapter One

---

PENNY

**TikTok Question:** *If you had a daughter or sister, which one of your teammates would you want her to stay away from?*

**Silas Taters:** *Ah, Hornsby for sure.*

**Halsey Holmes:** *Hornsby.*

**Levi Posey:** *Is that even a question? Hornsby.*

**Eli Hornsby:** *Are the guys saying me? Of course they are. \*shakes head\* Honestly, I'd probably say myself as well. Me or Taters.*

**Silas Taters:** *Hornsby said me? That fucker. Too much of a dick bag to say himself.*

**Pacey Lawes:** *Who do I want my sister to stay away from? All of them. They're all idiots. They know they're not allowed anywhere near her. But if I had to pick one person in particular? That's easy. It would be Hornsby. There is no way in hell I'd ever allow him to even look at her in that way. Ever. And he knows that.*

"WHY ARE we going to this bar? You're not even single," I say to my best friend, Blakely, as I pull on the hem of my dress for the twentieth time since we climbed out of the Uber. The dress was cute on the hanger. It was cute on me when I stood still in front of the mirror. But now that I'm walking the streets of Vancouver, nothing about this dress is cute. It keeps riding higher and higher on my thighs. It would be the ultimate success if I skate away from this night without showing off my underwear.

"Yes, but Perry is out of town, and it's fun being your wing-woman."

"I didn't even want to go out tonight," I say. "It feels ridiculous to go out on Valentine's Day as a single person."

"It's not ridiculous." Blakely loops her arm through mine and pulls me in close to her side. A half a foot taller than me, Blakely is a five-foot-ten beauty with chestnut-brown hair, emerald-green eyes, and a smile that only falters when she's been wronged. She's my work wife, best friend, and skin-care expert who's determined never to look a day over twenty-one. "The best time to go out is when you're single because you can hook up with someone just looking to fill a void."

"Ah, yes, because being someone's void filler really screams good time," I say sarcastically.

"Could be a good time if you allowed it to be. Don't you think it's time you start dating? You got the promotion you've worked so hard for, so it's time you relax and have some fun." She is right. I've worked my butt off for the past two years, and there have been many long days and few party-filled nights.

"I don't need a man to have fun."

"Facts," Blakely says. "But getting out of your apartment is necessary. And I didn't want to pull this card on you, but best friends have needs too, you know, and coming out with me tonight is a need."

"Wow, you're going there?"

"Of course, I am. I can't have you grouchy tonight. We need to have fun. Can you do that? Have fun?"

I sigh dramatically. "I think I can manage such a thing."

“Good. Now, when we enter the bar, I want nothing but good spirits from you. And if you just happen to meet a guy, so be it, but that won’t be our end goal. Our end goal is to just have fun, maybe do some dancing, and of course people-watch as they navigate this romantic night as singles.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say as we reach the bar that Blakely has not stopped talking about.

According to her, on Valentine’s Day, the place is decked out in red with balloons, streamers, and singles ready to mingle. Not to mention appetizers are passed around by catering staff, the music is “fire,” and it’s an exclusive invite list, so not just anyone can join the party.

It sounded like fun when she told me, and now that I’m committed, short dress and all, I might as well enjoy the night. I started as an intern for the Vancouver Agitators and worked my way up to the in-house social media coordinator, specializing in TikTok. And I love my job so hard.

I get to hang out with professional hockey players and make them keep up with TikTok trends, troll fans on our social media accounts, and watch my brother play the sport we’re both in love with.

So I might as well celebrate, let loose, and have some fun.

When we reach the door to the bar, a very large and gruff-looking man holding a clipboard greets us. His brow is turned down, and as we draw closer, he slowly takes us in. “Name,” he says in a brusque tone.

“Blakely White and guest.” She bounces on her heels and smiles at me, clearly excited about our night out.

The bouncer looks through the names on his clipboard, and just when I think he can’t find my friend’s name, he makes a slashing mark across his paper and then steps aside while releasing a velvet rope.

“No smoking inside. Eat as much as you want. Have fun,” he says in such a monotone voice that I wonder how many times he’s said that already this evening.

Hand in hand, Blakely and I enter the bar, and I’m immediately struck by the hundreds of balloons pressed against the already low ceiling. Different colors of pink and red, the balloons are the main focus of the decorations,

but they don't deter the observing eye from the crepe streamers hanging from one end of the bar to the other and the glitter scattered all over the floor. The balloons alone would be a nightmare but attach the sweaty, dragged-around glitter from the floor, and that doesn't scream good time to me.

But despite the nightmare craft paper clinging to my shoes, the dimly lit atmosphere is filled with peppy music and brimming with boisterous laughter. Not to mention, some suits in here are catching my eye. This might be entertaining after all.

"Over here," Blakely says as she moves us toward the back of the bar, past the drinks and appetizers being passed around, and through a throng of people. "I'm hoping some high-top tables back here are free that we can sit at."

She weaves us through the crowd and around a corner to a much larger room where high-top tables with stools are scattered throughout the space, and the noise is a few octaves lower.

"Ooo, I see a table. Go grab us some drinks, and I'll claim squatter's rights."

The bar is crowded, so I'm not surprised when I receive an elbow to the ribs and a bump to the shoulder on my way to get our drinks.

When I reach the bar, I lean on the slick black top and observe the liquor choices, debating what I should go with just as a female bartender steps up in front of me. "Killer dress," she says.

"Aw, thank you." I glance down at said dress and then back up at her. "It's rolling up my thighs like that's what it was made to do. Could not be more annoying."

She winks at me. "My guess is, that dress will do you some favors. What can I get you, hon?"

Little does she know, I have zero interest in getting involved with anyone tonight. Maybe a little flirting, since there are some options here, but nothing serious.

“Uh, my friend always orders a Malibu Bay Breeze with a cherry, so I’ll get that for her, and I’ll have a gimlet with two lime wedges.”

“Coming right up,” the bartender says. She moves around, grabbing clean cups and plucking the correct liquor bottles while eyeing her pours. I’d never be able to bartend, trying to remember the intricacies of every drink ever mentioned while keeping the intoxicated patrons happy. Way too much for me.

“Gimlet, huh? Never would have pegged you as a gin drinker,” a husky, deep voice says, coming up to my side.

I know that voice.

I think almost everyone in Vancouver knows that voice.

Turning to my right, I come face to face with Eli Hornsby, the best defenseman in the game of hockey who just happens to play for the team I work for, the Agitators. But more importantly, he’s Mr. Prince Charming, the sexiest hockey player in the league, and the . . . horniest. He’s easily the most attractive player on the ice, a flirt, and the object of every hockey fan’s affection—even the men. He’s menacing with a stick in his hand but will captivate you with his charismatic smile—a smile that still contains all of his teeth. And of course, one of my brother’s best friends.

“Hornsby, wh-what are you doing here?” I ask, a hitch in my voice, because not a moment goes by when I’m not intimidated by this man and how insanely hot he is.

Also, I’m a little shocked to see him here. A singles bar on Valentine’s Day doesn’t really seem on brand for him. Then again, he is the biggest player on the team, so he might be out and about on his night off, trolling for someone to hook up with.

Now *that* seems on brand.

“Oh, you know, just celebrating the day I was born.” He leans against the bar and takes a sip of the beer in his hand. Casual, in control, and I’m sure aware of how good he looks in his navy three-piece suit.

I don’t know anyone, and I mean ANYONE, who wears a suit better than Eli Hornsby.

I've posted a few slow-motion videos of him walking into the arena, highlighting him as the best dressed on the team. His signature cigarette pants paired with no socks and dress shoes is what grabs everyone's attention, not to mention the way he fills out his suit jacket, his biceps tugging on the fabric when he brings his to-go cup of coffee to his lips.

He's a thirst trap I have no problem posting.

But now that said thirst trap is standing in front of me, staring into my eyes, I feel my nerves spike with the urge to either pet his chest or run to the toilet to throw up. Two very opposite reactions, but two very accurate ones.

As casually as possible, I place my hand on the bar and attempt to lean into the wood, mirroring his relaxed position. But where he is the quintessential poster child for how to act appropriately in social settings, I am praying to Cupid himself my dress doesn't curl up like an old-fashioned window blind and slap me in the face while simultaneously flashing my underwear to the hot hockey player.

Oh God . . . what underwear did I put on today? Why can't I remember such an imperative detail?

"Are you, uh . . . okay?" he asks, bending at the knees to look me directly in the eyes.

Oh crap, I haven't said anything.

"Yes, fine. Just great." I snap my fingers aggressively at him. "Oh, that's right. Today is your birthday. I posted a TikTok about it."

"Yes," he says, eyeing me suspiciously. Probably trying to decide if he should be wary of approaching fingers of the snapping variety. "You posted a boomerang video of Posey slapping me in the ass with his hockey stick."

I did. It was really funny. I chuckle to myself, a snort begging to be let out, but someone is looking out for me because I'm able to keep it together. "I thought it was a fitting tribute since the fans seem to enjoy your recent bromance."

Levi Posey, the team's bruiser. Large, bulky guy with the biggest heart of gold. He's an absolute demon on the rink, but outside of the arena, he is as soft and gooey as they come. The most sensitive on the team, who has a



penchant for bologna sandwiches and slapping Hornsby on the ass with his stick before the start of every game. It's become a treasured tradition among the fans.

"We share one milkshake, and everyone thinks we're practically engaged." Eli rolls his eyes.

Ahhh, the milkshake. It was the most precious thing I've ever seen. Eli and Levi were at a Children's Hospital event together, and they were given a milkshake with two straws. Locking eyes, they held the drink together, and each took a straw into their mouths. The show they put on was public relations gold. The media team has used it as much as they can. It was even a Top Ten on ESPN.

"It was damning. You are now forever connected at the hip."

"Could be worse." He grins. Ooof, that smile. My hand that's not on the bar rattles by my side from one glint of his pearly whites. "I could have been caught sharing a milkshake with your brother."

"Pacey would never share a milkshake with you," I say, and before I can stop myself, I add, "He would claim you have some sort of infectious disease he doesn't want to contract."

Pacey, my brother, is the star goalie for the Vancouver Agitators. He's the heart of the team and has some of the quickest reflexes in the league. Recently, like . . . a few months ago, he fell in love with a girl named Winnie who just happened to stumble into him during a rainstorm. Long story, but he was bewitched immediately. I don't blame him because she's all kinds of cute and fun. I love hanging out with her, and I'm hoping we're going to hear wedding bells very soon. I've told Pacey many times that he needs to propose. He claims he has plans but is waiting for the right moment. My guess is after the season, when the guys go to Banff, Canada, for some relaxation, Pacey will propose. He's a sentimental guy like that.

But hold on a second. My mind wanders back to what I just said. Uhh . . . did I just tell Hornsby—to his face—that he was diseased? Infectious. Not worthy of milkshake sharing? What on earth was I thinking? I'm pretty sure most of America would want to share a milkshake with him. I mean, I would

share one. But here I am, acting like a toddler parroting their parents by repeating what Pacey has said to me.

“I’m not diseased.” Eli’s face scrunches up. “Your brother likes to make up lies so he has a chance to live up to my beauty,” Eli says, making direct eye contact with me and batting his eyelashes foolishly. “But for the record, I don’t have any diseases. I just want to clarify that.”

I hold up my hands. “Hey, what you do on your own time is your business.” But I know a lot of what he does on his own time involves women.

Many long nights.

And always short goodbyes.

The bartender sets my drinks down and then glances back and forth between Eli and me. She smirks and says, “Shall I put your drinks on the hockey star’s tab?”

Normally, I’d say no because I don’t like to blur the lines with work and my free time, but for some reason, and out of an attempt to match his teasing, I smile at Eli. “Yes, I’d love that.” Then I smirk at the bartender. “Thank you.”

She winks. “Of course.”

Well, now that I have boldly put my drinks on someone else’s tab, it’s time I take off before I sweat through this dress. I start to walk away when Eli steps in front of me, blocking my retreat.

“Uh, if I’m paying for your drink, the least you can do is talk to me a little longer. Don’t you think?”

Uh . . . talk with him longer. That would actually be the last thing I’d want to do. Why, you ask?

Because he intimidates me. Because coming out tonight was supposed to be fun, and even though Hornsby is a great guy, I just don’t feel super comfortable around him. This is going to sound really bad, I realize that, but he’s just too . . . pretty. I’m not in his league—not that he would ever be interested in me—but I like to keep my interactions with him to a minimum, especially since he’s a giant flirt. I don’t need my little romantic brain thinking that this overtly attractive alpha male is the least bit interested in

seeing me naked. Nope, it's better to let ourselves down easy and not even jump into that realm of thinking.

Therefore, we need to find his friends and scoot him over to their company, not mine. "Did you come here alone?"

"Posey came with me, but he took off within five minutes, claiming he had an upset stomach. Frankly, I think the whole singles bar thing really freaked him out."

Now Posey is someone I could hang out with. Yes, he's handsome, but he's also slightly more down to earth. A sparkling glint doesn't bounce off his teeth every time he smiles like it does with Hornsby.

"Aw, why? He's so loveable. There's potential for him to find a really nice girl."

Hornsby's brow creases. "He finds enough girls. That's the problem. He doesn't like all the attention."

I give him a look of disbelief. "This coming from the biggest player on the team."

His eyebrows shoot upward, nearly kissing his thick hairline. "You think I'm the biggest player?" He points at his chest, feigning shock. Is he kidding? I don't think he's the biggest player. I know he is. Everyone knows it. The team, the management, the fans. It's no secret that Hornsby gets around. I asked Pacey once if Hornsby ever felt bad about going from girl to girl, and Pacey said no because he's always upfront and honest with them. They know what they're getting themselves into with him—one night and that's it.

Call me crazy, but that kind of attitude—one night and that's it—smells distinctively of universal player status.

And I'm ready to tell him that, to stamp him with my label, when his beautiful eyes short-circuit my brain, turning it into a pile of useless, wrinkly mush.

"Uh, ahem . . . I'd like to say . . . well, ooo, is it hot in here?" He shakes his head, smiling. "Yeah, didn't think so, but as I was saying, I well, I heard, you know how everyone talks, that you are, uh, that you . . . well, that you are easily the biggest player on the team." The drinks in my hands feel like

they're about to slip out of my grasp and crash to the floor as my palms sweat like they're trudging through the depths of the Amazon.

"Says who?"

Isn't it obvious?

"Everyone." I grimace.

He brings his drink to his lips, studying me the entire time, his uncaring disposition rolling off him carelessly. To have that much confidence, I couldn't even imagine. "You shouldn't listen to other people's opinions."

"Are you saying it's not true?" I roll my teeth over the corner of my lip, and his eyes immediately fixate on the movement.

When his gaze connects with mine again, he says, "I'm saying it's not currently true."

Okay . . . good to know.

I honestly don't know what to do with that or where to go from here. I just want to have a drink with my friend. So, to let him off the hook, I say, "I don't know what you're trying to prove, but you don't need to prove anything with me. I'm not allowed to put players' personal lives, as in hockey players, not the philandering kind of player that you have been described as tonight, on TikTok unless approved, so your extracurricular activities are safe with me."

There, maybe he just wants some reassurance that his horny ways won't be splashed all over an app accompanied by a trending snippet of music.

Although . . . it would make a good post . . . no, I'd never do that.

"Not trying to prove anything." His eyes travel down my body and then all the way back up, his gaze feeling like an infrared light examining me for any inconsistencies. Trust me, he doesn't need a special laser sight to spot them. With a step closer, he says, "Just looking for some company. Are you really going to make me spend my birthday alone?"

Well, isn't that just a kick to my flimsy escape plan?

Blue-green eyes lock with mine as I take in his beautiful face. He's so disgustingly proportionate. From his lips to his nose to the strong, angular curve in his jaw, he's perfect. Actually freaking perfect. Pair that with his