

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FREIDA MCFADDEN

Is he the man
of your dreams
or your worst
nightmare?

THE BOYFRIEND

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FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Boyfriend

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*For my husband,
Who has never once tried to murder me in all the years we've been together*

Contents

[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Afterword](#)

[The Teacher](#)

[Also by Freida McFadden](#)

[About the Author](#)

Prologue

BEFORE

TOM

I AM DESPERATELY, painfully, completely, and stupidly in love.

Her name is Daisy. We met when we were four years old. I've been in love with the girl since age four—that's how pathetic I am. I saw her at the playground feeding bits of her sandwich to the hungry squirrels, and all I could think was that I had never met any living creature as beautiful or as kind as Daisy Driscoll. And I was gone.

For a long time, I didn't tell her how I felt. I couldn't. It seemed impossible that this angel with golden hair and pale blue eyes and skin like the porcelain of our bathroom sink could ever feel a tenth of what I felt for her, so there was no point in trying.

But lately, that's changed.

Lately, Daisy has been letting me walk her home from school. If I'm lucky, she lets me hold her hand, and she gives me that secret little smile on her cherry-red lips that makes my knees weak. I'm starting to think she might want me to kiss her.

But I'm scared. I'm scared that if I tried to kiss her, she would slap me across the face. I'm scared that if I told her how I really feel, she would look at me in sympathy and tell me she doesn't feel the same way. I'm scared she might never let me walk her home again.

But that's not what I'm most scared of.

What I am most scared of is that if I lean in to kiss Daisy, she will let me do it. I'm scared that she will agree to be my girlfriend. I'm scared that she will allow me into her bedroom when her parents aren't home so that we can finally be alone together.

And I'm terrified that the moment I get her alone, I will wrap my fingers around her pretty, white neck and squeeze the life out of her.

Chapter One

PRESENT DAY

SYDNEY

WHO IS this man and what has he done with my date?

I'm supposed to be meeting a man named Kevin for dinner tonight at eight o'clock. Well, it was supposed to be drinks at six o'clock—drinks are easier to escape from—but Kevin messaged me through the Cynch dating app that he was running late at work and could we push it to dinner at eight?

Against my better judgment, I said yes.

But Kevin seemed really nice when we were texting. And in his photos, he was cute. *Really* cute. He had this boyish smile with a twinkle in his eye, and his light brown hair was adorably messy as it fell over his forehead. He looked like a young Matt Damon. I've been on a lot of bad dates through Cynch, but I was cautiously optimistic about this one. I even arrived early at the restaurant, and I have spent the last ten minutes eagerly waiting at the bar for him to arrive.

"Sydney?" the man standing before me asks.

"Yes...?"

I stare at the man, waiting for him to tell me that Kevin was killed in a tragic taxi accident on the way to our date, because this guy is definitely *not* Kevin. But instead, he sticks out his hand.

"I'm Kevin," he says.

I don't budge from my barstool. "You are?"

Okay, let's be real here—nobody looks as good in real life as their dating-app photos. I mean, if you're looking to score a date, you're not going to snap a photo of yourself when you're rolling out of bed with a hangover. You're going to doll yourself up, take about fifty different shots from every conceivable angle and with a dozen lighting options, and you're going to pick the very best one. That's just good sense.

And hey, maybe that one perfect photo was taken ten years ago. I don't agree with this logic, but I understand why people do it.

But this guy...

There's no way he is the same man as in his Cynch profile. Not ten years ago—not *ever*. I just don't believe it.

Even though it's an obnoxious move, I grab my phone from my purse and bring up the app right in front of him. I compare the boyishly handsome man in the photo to the man standing in

front of me. Yeah—nope.

My date for the evening is at least ten years older than the guy in the photo, and bone thin, bordering on gaunt. I think his eye color is different too. His blond hair is badly receding, but what's left of it is long and pulled back into an unkempt ponytail.

This is not the same man as in the photo. I'm even more sure of that than I am of the fact that I enjoy long walks through Central Park and bingeing Netflix.

"Yes, that's me," Fake Kevin assures me. (Although really, the guy in the photo is Fake Kevin. Maybe the photo really *is* of Matt Damon. I'm starting to think it might be.)

I begin to protest that he doesn't look anything like the photo, but the words sound so superficial in my head. Okay, yes, Kevin looks vastly different from his profile photo. But does that really matter? We have been texting through Cynch and he seems like a nice enough guy. I should give him a chance.

And if it's not going well, my friend Gretchen will be calling me in twenty minutes with a manufactured excuse to get me the hell out of here. I never, *ever* go on a date without a planned rescue call.

"It's really great to meet you in real life," the real Kevin says. "You look exactly like your photo."

Does he expect me to say it back? Is this some kind of test? "Um," I say.

"Come on," he says. "Let's get a seat."

We snag a booth in the corner of the bar. As we're walking over there, I can't help but notice the way Kevin towers over me. I tend to like tall men, but he badly needs a little meat on his bones. It feels like I'm walking next to a broomstick.

"I'm so glad we are finally doing this," Kevin tells me as he slides into the seat across from me. Why is his ponytail so messy? Couldn't he have at least combed it before our date?

"Me too," I say, which is only slightly a lie.

He rakes his gaze over me, an approving expression on his gaunt face. "I have to tell you, Sydney, now that we're actually meeting in person, I genuinely feel like you are the perfect woman."

"Oh?"

"Absolutely." He beams at me. "If I closed my eyes and imagined the perfect girl, it would be you."

Wow. That's...sweet. Possibly one of the nicest compliments I have ever received on a date. Thank you, Real Kevin. I'm starting to feel glad that I stayed. And like I said, I do like tall men, so even though he looks vastly different from his profile, I get a tiny tug of attraction. "Thank you."

"Well," he adds, "except for your arms."

"My *arms*?"

"They're kind of flabby." He wrinkles his nose. "But other than that, wow. Like I said, you're the perfect woman."

Wait. My arms are *too flabby*? Did he really just say that to me?

Worse, now I am straining to surreptitiously examine my bare arms. And why did I wear a sleeveless dress tonight? I have only two sleeveless dresses in my closet. I could have worn something with sleeves that would have concealed my apparently hideous arms, but no, I chose *this*.

"Can I get you two something to drink?"

A waitress is standing over us, her eyebrows raised. I pry my gaze away from my monstrous

arms and look up at her. "I...I'll have a Diet Coke."

"A Diet Coke?" Kevin seems affronted. "That's boring. Get a real drink."

I never drink alcohol when I'm on a first date with a man I've met on Cynch. I don't want to impair my judgment in any way. "Diet Coke *is* a real drink."

"No, it's not."

"Well, it's a *liquid*." I glare at him across the sticky wooden table. "So I would call it a drink."

Kevin rolls his eyes at the waitress. "Fine, I will have a Corona and she will have a *Diet Coke*." Then he winks at the waitress and mouths the word *Sorry*.

I glance over at my purse next to me. When is Gretchen going to call? I need an escape route.

But maybe I'm not being fair. I've only known Real Kevin for five minutes. I should give him more of a chance. That's why I told Gretchen to call twenty minutes into the date, after all. Five minutes is a snap judgment. If I can't give a guy more than five minutes, I'm going to be having first dates for the next twenty years. And now that I'm thirty-four years old, I don't have that luxury.

"Hot damn," Kevin remarks, following the path of the waitress with his eyes as she goes to get our drinks. "She has *really* nice arms."

Gretchen, where are you?

Chapter Two

“SO YOU HAVE to pay two-thousand dollars if you’re a new member joining the group,” Kevin explains to me, “but for every vacation package you sell, you earn a five-thousand-dollar commission. Pretty amazing, right?”

I drag one of my french fries through a little trail of ketchup on my plate. We are nearly forty minutes into this date, and I am inexplicably still here. Stupid Gretchen. She’s making out with her boyfriend or something and has forgotten all about poor little me. I even texted her “SOS” and she still didn’t call me.

“I could definitely get you into the group.” Kevin chomps on one of his spicy barbecue chicken wings—he’s got an incredibly healthy appetite for such a skinny guy. I pointed out to him once that the barbecue sauce was getting on his cheek, and he wiped it off that time, but every single time he takes a bite, more of it gets all over his face. At some point, I got sick of telling him his face was dirty. “Do you want me to call Lois at the corporate headquarters? This is an amazing opportunity, Sydney. You’re lucky I came along.”

“No, thank you,” I say.

Kevin reaches over and grabs my Diet Coke. When his wings arrived, he complained they were too spicy, and then, over the course of fifteen minutes, he proceeded to drain his beer, then a second beer, and now he has commandeered my Diet Coke. “Why not? Why would you turn down an opportunity to make, like, six figures a year?”

“Because it’s a pyramid scheme?”

“A pyramid scheme!” Kevin chuckles. “Why would you think that?”

“Because I am an accountant and I know what a pyramid scheme is?”

“No, you just don’t understand,” he insists. “Look, I’m trying to do you a favor, Sydney. You’ve got this super-boring job crunching numbers all day. Wouldn’t you rather make a few sales a year and relax the rest of the time on your own luxury vacation property?”

I don’t know what to say to that, so instead, I grab my purse. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

I hope the bathroom has a window I can climb out of.

When I get to the ladies’ room, I find that there is sadly no window. So I actually use the toilet, then I spend another two minutes looking at myself in the mirror, carefully examining my “flabby” arms. They don’t look that bad, do they?

Do they?

I am googling “arm slimming exercises” on my phone when it starts to ring. Gretchen’s name pops up on the screen, and my jaw tightens. *Finally*, she’s calling. Forty-five freaking minutes into the meal. I swipe to take the call.

“Seriously, Gretchen?” I bark into the phone without even saying hello. “I have been on the worst date ever, and it’s pretty much all your fault.”

That’s not entirely fair. The real Kevin deserves at least fifty percent of the credit for this awful evening. But I’m pissed off, and I need to take it out on *somebody*.

“I’m so sorry!” Gretchen cries. “Randy and I were watching a movie, and we lost track of time...”

“Uh-huh...”

“I didn’t even want to watch the movie,” she insists. “Randy promised me he wouldn’t let me forget about the call, but then, well, you know.”

I can hear Randy in the background, saying, “Hey! Don’t tell her it’s *my* fault!” And then Gretchen giggles like he’s tickling her or something. I bite my lip, resentful of how cute Gretchen and Randy are together. When she and I became friends, she was single, like me. Then, one day, we were riding up in the elevator together, and she started gushing about how adorable the super in my building is. And now they’ve been dating for like six months!

Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy my friend has found the guy of her dreams. I’m just still trying to find mine.

“Where are you now?” she asks.

“Hiding in the bathroom, obviously.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I grumble. “You were probably making passionate love to your boyfriend, while I’m stuck here with a guy who is trying to talk me into a pyramid scheme.”

“Oh no, Syd! Seriously?”

“That’s not even the worst of it,” I say. “His mother tried to FaceTime him in the middle of our meal, and he actually took the call. I had to say hello to her! His *mother*, Gretchen! On our first date!”

“I’m truly sorry,” she says, even though I can tell she’s trying not to laugh.

“I’m sure.”

“Really, Syd. I’m the worst. Tomorrow after yoga, lattes and muffins are on me.”

I suppose I can accept that apology. Anyway, the date is almost over. I am about five minutes away from never seeing Real Kevin or Fake Kevin ever again. Well, I might see Fake Kevin again if I go to a Matt Damon movie.

I tell Gretchen goodbye, take one last critical look at my arms (which are *fine* the way they are, Kevin!), then I head back out to the table. And lo and behold, a miracle has occurred and our check is on the table, waiting for me. I might get out of here sooner than expected.

“You were in there forever,” Kevin comments. He wipes his lips with the back of his sleeve. It gets the sauce off his lips, but smears it all over his white-and-red-checkered shirt. I don’t even care anymore. “Did you fall in?”

I manage a thin smile. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Sure thing.” Kevin slides the check across the table to me. “Your share comes to thirty-eight dollars.”

I wouldn’t have wanted Kevin to treat me to this meal, because I don’t want to owe him, but I’m having trouble figuring out how my small salad and Diet Coke plus tip somehow cost thirty-

eight dollars. The accountant in me wants to pick up the check and calculate my actual share of the meal, but the woman in me doesn't want to prolong this another second. So instead, I toss two twenties on the table.

While Kevin is climbing out of the booth, the song "Eye of the Tiger" comes on the radio. He grins at me and winks. "This is my favorite song. Isn't *Rocky* the greatest movie of all time?"

"I haven't seen it."

Kevin clutches his chest in astonishment, like I just told him I kill puppies for fun. "You haven't *seen* it?"

"Nope."

"Well, now we know what we're doing on our second date."

I decide not to dispel him of the notion that there will be another date. But as soon as I get out of here, I am blocking him on Cynch. He doesn't have my real phone number, so he has no way of contacting me again.

"And then," he adds, "we can watch *Rocky II* on our third date. And *Rocky III* on our fourth date!"

He is in the midst of planning our seventh date (*Rocky VI*) when we get out of the bar. It's smack in the middle of August, which is a great time to wear a sleeveless dress that shows off my grotesque arms, but also peak humidity time in New York City. Despite my leave-in conditioner and my careful efforts with the curling iron, my hair has started to frizz. Thankfully, I couldn't care less what my date thinks of my hair right now.

"I'll walk you home," Kevin tells me.

I nearly choke. "No, that's okay."

He sticks out his chin. "I absolutely insist. It's dark out—what sort of gentleman would I be if I let you walk home yourself in the dark?"

"It's okay. Really."

"You could be *killed*, Sydney."

That seems unlikely. Anyway, I'm willing to risk death just to get away from this guy. But he has a determined look on his face, and I'm starting to suspect that the easiest option would be to just let him walk me home. Not that I am *actually* going to let him walk me home. I live about ten blocks away, and I figure after three or four blocks I'll just point out a random building and tell him it's mine. Then I'll be free of Real Kevin forever.

"Fine," I grumble. "Let's go."

He grins at me. "Lead the way."

Given that it's a Tuesday night rather than a weekend, the streets are emptier than they usually are when I'm out after dark by myself. Especially since I usually travel in a busier area, and now I am cutting through a more residential area just to get this over with as quickly as possible. The residential areas are always quieter, and they also smell less strongly of urine than the more populated path back to my apartment building. It's deserted enough here that it's not terrible to have Kevin's company.

That said, there's no way I'm going to let him see where I live—I'll never get rid of the guy.

I stop short at a brownstone a few blocks away from my actual apartment building. I gesture at the banister. "Well, this is me!"

Hopefully he won't insist on walking me into the building, because I have no way to get inside. But he seems very reluctant to leave.

"I had a great time, Sydney," Kevin tells me.

I can't quite bring myself to return the sentiment, even just to be nice. "Uh-huh."

A corner of his lip quirks up. “How about a hug?”

“Um...” I eye his outstretched arms and the pit stains that have gathered since we’ve been walking in the humid August air. “I don’t hug on first dates.”

“Oh.” At first I think he’s going to protest, but then he says, “Well, how about a kiss then?”

Is he out of his ever-loving *mind*? I didn’t even want to hug him, but I definitely don’t want this guy’s slimy lips touching mine.

“Come on,” he says. “I bought you dinner. You’re really not going to kiss me?”

He bought me dinner? On what planet does my paying forty dollars for a salad mean that *he* bought *me* dinner? “I don’t kiss or hug on first dates,” I explain. And then, in case he asks to bump hips or God knows what, I add, “I have a strict no-touching policy.”

“Seriously?”

He takes a step closer to me. He towers over me, but I can still smell the sour stench of beer on his breath. I take a step back, bumping into the short set of stairs up to the entrance of the building I claimed I live in. I scan the street, dismayed there isn’t another pedestrian in eyeshot. I thought Kevin was a dud, but I had labeled him as harmless.

Big mistake.

“Come on, Sydney.” He takes another step closer to me—this time uncomfortably close. Kevin may be skinny, but he looks strong. Stronger than me, that’s for sure. “You can’t tease me like that. All I’m asking for is a kiss, for God’s sake.”

“I think this date is over,” I say firmly.

“Don’t be a tease.” He frowns, his features contorting in the dim glow of the streetlight above us. “All you women are the same. You’re never going to land a husband if you won’t even kiss a guy on a date, you know.”

My mind races, thinking through the contents of my purse and what I could use as a weapon. Gretchen gave me a can of Mace, but I took it out at some point because it kept leaking all over my purse and I had never been in a situation where I was close to needing it. I do have a spritz bottle of hand sanitizer. If I sprayed him in the eyes with hand sanitizer, would that do the trick? Of course, that would mean I would have to locate it in my gigantic purse, which is probably eighty percent crumpled tissues at this point.

I decide the best bet is to push past him and make a run for it. In another block or two, I’m certain to run into another person.

“Sydney,” he says.

I avoid eye contact as I try to dart around him. But Kevin is quicker than he looks. His fingers close around my wrist, pinning it against the jagged brick wall of the building. His spindly fingers bite into my flesh.

“Come on, Sydney,” he says. “Don’t cut our night short. The fun is just getting started.”

Chapter Three

KEVIN HAS his body pressed against me. The stench of sour beer is almost overwhelming, and I have to turn my head away as I attempt to wriggle free.

He doesn't just want to kiss. He wants something more than that. And he's not going to leave until he gets it. I should never have let him walk me home.

God, why is he so *strong*?

"Let me go!" I hiss at him.

"I told you," he says through his teeth, "to stop being a tease."

His body is pressed against me now, hot and uncomfortable. I open my mouth, ready to let out an ear-shattering scream. There are buildings on this block. Someone is sure to hear it, even though all the windows are closed and the air conditioners are blasting inside. But before any sound passes through my lips, a voice booms from behind me:

"Hey! *Hey!* What are you doing over there?"

Kevin eases his grip on my wrist. He backs away from me an inch or two, and I decide to take advantage of the fact that I can now move again. Bracing myself on a metal trash can next to me, I lift my right leg and knee him in the groin as hard as I can.

It's gratifying how quickly Kevin goes down. I've never nailed a guy in the balls before, and wow, that works *really* well. He crouches down, clutching his family jewels, his face bright red. It's quite a rush—well, until I lose my balance in the process and tumble to the ground, clocking my head on the metal garbage can.

"You bitch!" Kevin gasps. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

As I gingerly get back to my feet, I squint into the shadows at the figure who came to my rescue. It's too dark to see clearly, but it's obviously a man, about average build and height. He's looking down at Kevin, who is still doubled over, but then he glances up at me.

"Are you okay, Miss?"

"This is none of your business!" Kevin spits out at him. "We were on a date, you asshole. We were having a great time."

The mystery man continues to look at me, waiting for my answer, his eyes dark shadows.

"I'm fine." I brush sidewalk dirt off my sleeveless blue dress, which I will probably never wear again for a multitude of reasons, including self-consciousness about my unacceptably

flabby arms. I should just throw it out after this. “I mean, *now* I’m fine.”

“*You’re* fine?” Kevin bursts out. “I should sue you for assault!”

Mystery Man lets out an astonished snort. “I saw what you were trying to do. I’d be happy to call the police and let them know all about it.”

With those words, he pulls his phone out of his pocket, as if about to call 911. He looks at me again, as if for permission, and I shake my head. That is not how I want this evening to end. I just want to go back home and soak in my bathtub. And block Kevin on Cynch. I can report him to the admins, since they have all his personal information.

For the first time, Kevin looks properly worried. He manages to straighten up with some effort. “Hey,” he says. “Hey, look, maybe you got the wrong idea. I wasn’t going to—”

“Get out of here,” the mystery man cuts him off. “*Now*. Before your date changes her mind about calling the cops.” His voice lowers a few notches, almost to a growl. “And if you *ever* bother her again, I’m happy to testify to what I saw you do. Do you know what jail is like for a sex offender?”

Kevin’s eyes widen. He finally gets the idea.

I watch my date limp down the street, in the opposite direction of my apartment building. It’s only when he disappears from sight that I feel my shoulders relax.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Mystery Man asks me.

I swivel my head in the direction of his voice. He has stepped into the glow of the streetlight, so I can finally get a good look at him. And...

Wow.

You know that cheesy thing people say—that they look at another person and get hit by a lightning bolt? I always thought that was absolutely ridiculous until it happened to me about three years ago and I met my first lightning-bolt guy. But that didn’t work out, and I had given up hope that it would ever happen again. But now, here it is. That damn lightning bolt once again.

Mystery Man is hot, to say the least. He has thick black hair and coal-black eyes, with a level of intensity that sends yet another lightning bolt through me. His strong jaw makes him seem utterly in control and confident. His face has that pleasing textbook symmetry. He’s wearing a black T-shirt that shows off his lean build and makes his dark hair and eyes seem even more intense. There’s also no glint of a wedding band on his left hand.

But best of all is the way he’s staring back at me. If I got hit by a lightning bolt, he did too. I’d bet my life on it.

“I’m okay,” I manage. “Just...you know, shaken.”

Mystery Man looks into the distance, making sure that Kevin is really gone. “Is he your boyfriend?”

I shake my head. “We just met tonight. Hooked up on Cynch.” My face burns slightly. “I don’t mean *hooked up*, obviously. But we had a date for tonight.” I add, quite unnecessarily: “It was bad.”

“I gathered.”

“He doesn’t know where I live.” I hug my arms to my chest. “I’ll report him to the app. They take this kind of thing seriously. I don’t think he’ll bother me again. But...thanks for helping me.”

He flashes a lopsided smile. “Looks like you took him down pretty good yourself. He could barely walk.”

I smile at the satisfying memory of how it felt to sink my knee into Kevin’s balls. “Thanks.”

Mystery Man is staring at me, that half smile playing on his lips. The electricity between the two of us is palpable. Sometimes I'm not sure if a guy is interested in me or not. But from the way Mystery Man is looking at me, I *know* he's interested. And despite feeling shaken from what just happened, I would happily hand over my phone number right now.

What a great meet-cute. I can already imagine telling the story to our children. *This jerk was trying to kiss me, and that, kids, is how I met your father.*

Okay, I might be getting a little ahead of myself. But when you know, you know.

"Can you make it home okay from here?" Mystery Man asks me.

I look around. In the last few minutes, the streets have become more crowded. It doesn't feel quite as desolate as it did when Kevin grabbed me. "I'll be fine."

"Great," he says.

And then, to my shock, he starts to turn away. To *leave*.

"Um, thank you again!" I call out. "I really appreciate what you did. You're, like, my hero."

That gets a full-on smile out of the guy. And if possible, he's even more handsome when he smiles. He's got to be some kind of actor or model or *something*. I mean, *geez*. "Of course," he says. "I'm just glad you're okay."

We stare at each other for another beat, and I imagine the next words out of his mouth...

Would it be okay if I called you sometime?

Can I take you out on Saturday night?

Can we make passionate love tonight? Are you down for that?

But he doesn't say any of that. He doesn't even ask me my name. He simply raises one hand and says, "Well, good night then."

And then he walks away.

What. The. Hell?

Chapter Four

BEFORE

TOM

DAISY.

I can't stop staring at her.

I'm being too obvious. At some point, she's going to start thinking I'm a creep if I keep looking at her from ten feet away and never make a move. But it's hard not to stare. She looks so good today. Her hair is the color of the center of a daisy, and it almost looks like gold glimmering in the sun as she stands surrounded by her friends just outside our high school. Her snug cornflower-blue sweater follows all the soft curves of her body.

Stop staring, Tom. Right now. Don't be a creep.

She looks up, and for a second, I freeze. *Caught.* I wait for her blue eyes to narrow at me, but they don't. Instead, a slow smile spreads across her lips. A couple of her friends notice us looking at each other, and I hear a smattering of giggles. I can make out the words "Tom" and "so cute," both in the same sentence.

"Jesus, Tom. Stop being a wuss and go talk to her already!"

My best friend, Slug, is leaning over me, spouting wisdom in my ear. His breath still smells like cigarettes, despite a healthy spritz of the mint mouth spray he uses to hide the smell from his parents. Unless they're dumb, they must know he smokes and have decided they don't care. Slug is the youngest of five kids, and his parents have pretty much checked out, as far as I can tell. As long as he doesn't take a flying leap off a building, they're happy.

"I'll talk to her," I say.

Except I don't move. My feet feel stuck.

Slug rolls his eyes so dramatically that all I can see between his eyelids is white. "If I had a girl looking at me the way Daisy looks at you, I'd be sticking it to her behind the bleachers as we speak."

Slug drools over every single girl in the entire school, and they all think he's gross. To be fair, he *is* gross. His real name isn't Slug, obviously. He got the nickname when we were in grade school because he used to eat bugs—legit *bugs*. During recess, when we went to the playground and most kids were running around or playing kickball, Slug was chowing down on insects. Mostly ants. But one day, he found a slug squirming its way through the dirt, brought it to the cafeteria at lunchtime, and very theatrically swallowed it in front of our entire class.

After that, most kids didn't want to hang out with Slug. So when I sat down across from him in the cafeteria at lunch once day, he looked amazed. Ten years later, we're still best friends. He stopped eating bugs, at least in front of other people, but he still doesn't have many friends.

What do you say about a guy who is seventeen years old with a nickname like Slug? Then again, what does it say about *me* that he's my best friend? My *only* friend.

Also, it doesn't help his prospects with girls that even though he shot up to over six feet in the last two years, he's only gained about ten pounds from when he was five feet tall. He looks a lot like a walking skeleton that put on a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt and got a face full of acne.

He sneers at me. "What the hell are you so scared of? You *know* she likes you."

I adjust the strap of my backpack on my shoulder. "Fine."

His face lights up. "And when you talk to her, will you put in a good word for me with Alison?"

"Sure," I say to make him happy, even though Slug has a better chance of scoring with a Victoria's Secret model than he does with Daisy's best friend.

My heart is thrumming in my chest as I walk over to Daisy and her flock of friends. The girls are standing by the stairs leading to the entrance of the school, in front of a bunch of flyers stuck on the wall. Right behind Daisy's head is a flyer for this year's school musical, debuting in two weeks—*Grease*—and next to that is a black-and-white photo of a teenage girl with the word "MISSING" underneath. I recognize the face of Brandi Healey from our class, who ran away from home way back at the beginning of the school year, which is why the flyer is now crumpled and weatherworn.

"Tom!" Daisy's face glows when I get within earshot. "I thought you were tutoring today!"

I shake my head. I've always had a knack for math and science, so I've been tutoring them since my freshman year. Last semester, I tutored three days a week to make extra money, but this semester it's only twice a week. I'm pleased Daisy knows my schedule. "Used to."

When she looks at me, her eyes are the color of the Pacific Ocean. I've never seen such a clear shade of blue. I literally can't imagine any girl being as perfectly beautiful as Daisy Driscoll.

But somehow, my eyes are pulled away from her face and down to her slender neck. To the pulsation of her carotid artery, below the angle of her jaw. Most peoples' hearts beat at about sixty to one hundred pulses every minute—I wonder how fast Daisy's heart beats. If I could watch for a minute, I could calculate her heart rate.

"So you're free then, huh?" Daisy says.

"Uh-huh." I scratch at the back of my neck. Daisy's friends are all staring at me and nudging each other. The nice thing for her to do would be to *step away* from them so I could talk to her without being humiliated. But she's not budging. "Do you...um, would you let me...um, walk you home?"

My request warrants a peal of giggles from the peanut gallery. One girl has her hand clamped over her mouth like this is the funniest damn thing she's seen all year.

"Shush." Daisy whips her head around to shoot her friends a look. Then she turns back to me with a serious expression on her face. "I'd *love* to walk home with you, Tom."

I'm so happy, I don't even care if these stupid girls won't quit laughing. Let them laugh. I'm walking home with Daisy.

But before Daisy can step away from her friends to join me, the girl standing closest to her, with pin-straight brown hair and thick glasses, grabs her arm. That's Alison—Daisy's best

friend. I've got Slug and she's got Alison. Both of us could probably do better.

"Daisy," she murmurs.

That's all she says. *Daisy*. Which makes me think she's said a lot of other things about me in the past. And now that one word is a reminder of whatever awful things she said about me when I wasn't standing right here.

Alison doesn't like me. She's made that really clear. And it isn't that she doesn't know me and doesn't understand me. Alison knows me. We are, in fact, lab partners in biology this year. We have spent plenty of time together. And every minute we spend together, she likes me a little less.

"*Shush*," Daisy says, more firmly this time.

Alison releases Daisy's arm, but not before shooting me a dirty look to end all dirty looks. If we were animals in the jungle, she'd be scratching my eyes out right now. I can't believe Slug's got a thing for her.

But I don't care, because a second later Daisy waves to her friends, and then she and I are walking away from the school, in the direction of her house. And when she smiles at me, I forget all about Alison. Alison who?

It's a really great day today. The sun is shining, and after the longest and coldest winter in history, we don't even need our jackets finally. All I can think about is Daisy. She has a dreamy look on her face, and she's almost skipping along beside me. I've known Daisy a really long time, and there are times when she reminds me of that same girl in pigtails that I gazed at from across the playground when I was four years old, even though, back then, all I could hope for was friendship. But even when I was four, I knew I wanted to marry Daisy Driscoll.

And someday I will.

"Let me carry your backpack," I blurt out.

She looks at me in surprise. "I can carry my own backpack."

But isn't that what a guy is supposed to do? Carry stuff for the girl? I don't want to screw this up. Daisy is too important. "Yeah, but I want to carry it for you."

She considers my offer for a moment. Finally, she hands over her purple backpack. "You are such a gentleman, Tom."

I'm smiling to myself—I did good. At least, I'm smiling until I get her backpack onto my shoulder. The thing weighs a *ton*. What the hell does she have in here? *Bricks*? Jesus.

"You...you have a lot of stuff in here," I gasp.

"I like to carry all my textbooks with me." She squints at me. "Is it too heavy for you?"

"No. No. Of course not."

I can't exactly give it back. I didn't have to offer to carry it, but I don't have to be Einstein to realize that I'm not going to score points by telling her that her backpack is too heavy for me to carry. So I suffer silently. I'm focusing most of my effort on not falling over backward from the weight of these two backpacks as we traverse the next several blocks in the direction of her house. Thankfully, it isn't far. We live in a tiny town, about ninety minutes from Buffalo, in upstate New York, where there's only one high school, everyone knows everyone, and you can walk clear across the whole town in an hour.

"You're always so quiet, Tom," Daisy says.

Damn—these backpacks are distracting me. "Am I?"

"Not in class," she amends. "In class, you always have your hand up."

My face gets hot. Does she think I'm showing off in class? I'm not trying to. I just want to get good grades. Next year we are applying to college, and I want to get into a top school so I