
CRAZY APOLOGETIC CANADIANS

CATHRYN FOX

Cathryn
FOX
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Shut Out

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CANADIAN TERMINOLOGY.

Beaver: Sovereign animal and also a term for lady parts.

Yeah, no: No.

Yeah, no, for sure: Yes.

Yeah, no, for sure we're not doing that: Not doing that.

Oh, yeah, no for sure you do: Yes, you do.

Zamboni: Vehicle that smooth and cleans ice in a rink.

Scooch. Squeeze by you an inch.

Sorry: Sorry.

Toonie: Two-dollar coin.

Loony: One-dollar coin.

Canadian Bacon: Back bacon. (In Canada, we just call it bacon.)

Beaver Tail: Delicious pastry.

Eh?: Express solidarity, reassurance, or confirmation.

Oot and about: Out and about.

Tim Horton's: Our fast food donuts and coffee.

Toque: Wool knit cap.

Out for a rip: Going for a drive, snowmobile or any excursion.

C anada.

Poutine and politeness. Back bacon and beavers. Loonies and toonies.

Bloody hell, a toonie is a two-dollar coin, and they can't even spell it properly? It should be *twonie*, not toonie. Don't even get me started on the country's obsession with hockey. The only game worth playing is football. Every good Brit knows that.

But you're not in Britain anymore, are you, Colin?

A laugh—more like a groan—crawls out of my throat as I glance around the airport, at the crowd of people walking around in slow-motion. Who leisurely strolls through an airport? Canadians, that's who. Don't they have a plane to catch? Somewhere to be?

As I maneuver around them, it suddenly occurs to me I'm the brainless muppet amongst this relaxed lot—the loony twoonie—no matter how one chooses to spell it. I'm definitely out of my mind, considering I agreed to fly across the pond, leaving my castle behind—sure, it's big and damp, but it's the only home I've ever known—to spend a few days in rural Nova Scotia, aka the armpit of the western world.

I hurry down the terminal, my thoughts distracted, and collide with some woman speed-walking past me. She drops whatever it is she had in her arms, and latches onto the sleeve of my suit jacket. The grasp pulls me off balance, and I stagger backward, breaking the tight hold. I dip my head and find a petite woman staring up at me, her blue eyes wide as she holds her hands up palms out.

“Sorry,” she says quickly.

Wait, wasn’t I the one who bumped into her? “What are you sorry for?”

She angles her head, her gaze moving over my face. “You’re British.”

I frown. “You’re sorry I’m British?”

“No, no!” Her long dark hair bounces on her shoulders as she repeatedly shakes her head. “For colliding with you, and...tugging on your jacket. It was a knee jerk reaction.”

“Touching strangers in airports is a knee jerk reaction for you, is it now?” I glance out the rotating doors leading outside and take in the streaks of purple and pink bruising the night sky above the large concrete parking garage. “Do you only grope in airports, or can I expect to be accosted once I step outside, as well?”

She frowns at me, and I get it. I’m grumpy as hell. It’s been a long day, and I missed my connecting flight, and now I’ve arrived at my destination much later than planned. My driver would have given up on me hours ago. Rightfully so. No one in their right mind would continue to wait for a no-show. I’m not about to call Bryant now, the guy who owns the bed and breakfast where I’ll be staying, and have him come back to the city at this point. From what I understand, it’s a good three-hour drive.

“I thought you were going to fall. Sorry I touched you,” she apologizes again as she picks up a sign she’d dropped and scampers off. Alrighty then. Her legs aren’t overly long, but she moves like lightning, the only person in the airport in any kind of hurry. She must not be a local, and I should probably tear my gaze from her cute arse, which happens to

be nicely framed into a pair of frayed shorts, and put her out of my mind.

I straighten my shoulders, in need of a pint before I figure how and where I'm going to find another driver at this hour. I walk through the airport terminal looking for a pub, but a small store with gobs of Halifax, Nova Scotia merchandise catches my eye and reminds me I'm supposed to bring something back for my cousin's daughter. Might as well get it over with, because the sooner I'm out of this place, the better.

I drag my suitcase along and adjust my leather bag over my shoulder as I step into Hudson News. With no idea what to buy an eight-year-old girl, I walk up to a rack full of plush toys. As I debate between a beaver and a moose, someone crouches down in front of me, her body brushing mine, right around the vicinity of my...dangly bits.

"Can I just scooch..."

I glance down, and realize it's the groper again as she bends and reaches for something off the bottom shelf.

"Scooch?"

She straightens, a plush lamb in her hand, and her smile falters when her gaze lands on me. "Oh, you again."

"Nice to see you, too," I respond.

One manicured brow lifts, as the strap on her tank top slips a bit, exposing a hint of a lacy bra. "Is it?"

"Is it what?" I ask as I snatch up a beaver.

"Nice to see me again?"

Okay, I get it, she's being cheeky. "How could it not be? It's been what...all of five minutes." I step around her, my body between hers and the checkout. "If you could just scooch," I say using her slang. "I'd like to pay for my beaver."

She makes a sound, and I turn back to catch a grin flirting with the corners of her mouth. While I'm trying to be less grumpy, considering she's the one who apologized when I bumped into her, I get the sense that whatever it was I said, she's finding a different kind of humor in it. "Something funny?"

She steps back and waves her hand. "Nope. You go right ahead of me. I would never stand in the way of a man trying to pay for his beaver."

I clutch the toy in my hand as I stand over her and glower. Does she really think I play with beavers? "It's not for me."

She holds her hands up, palms out again. "No explanation needed, my friend." I eye her, and she nibbles her bottom lip. What is the matter with her and why is it killing her to keep a straight face? "What a man does with his beaver is none of my business." She frowns, taps her chin and scans the store. I follow her gaze until it lands back on me. "Got wood?" I angle my head, note the way her body is almost quaking. "Beavers like wood, you know."

The girl behind the counter lowers her head and snickers, and that's when I realize I'm the butt of some joke. I just don't know what it is. Here I thought Canadians were nice folk, but really, they're just a bunch of wankers. I won't make that mistake again.

I toss my beaver onto the counter. "It's not for me, and it's not a real beaver," I state. "It doesn't need wood."

"No, of course not." Another snicker before she pulls herself together. "Who's it for?"

Why has this conversation not ended already? Canadians talk too much. Or maybe it's just this girl who likes to blabber on. "If you must know, it's for my cousin's daughter."

"She's going to love it. My friend's daughter collects lambs. They moved to Toronto a while back." She frowns like she's missing them and then shakes the lamb in her hand. "What do you think we should call this one?"

"Lamb," I say and check my watch.

“Aren’t you going to name your beaver?”

“No.” I grab my luggage ready to leave, but turn back to her. “Does this place have a pub?”

“There’s a lounge right over there,” she answers in a piss poor British accent as she extends her arm to point down the long hallway. “You’ll be able to find yourself a right and proper pint.”

I stare at her and she grins at me. “Thanks, eh,” I respond, using Canadian slang I heard on the plane, and hoping I’m using it in the right context, although from her grin, I’m guessing I’m not. I take a step toward the exit, but pause. “And I’m sorry for bumping into you earlier.” Cripes, I’ve been in Canada for all of ten minutes and I’ve already started apologizing. Before I can stop myself, I ask, “What’s your name?” I’m not sure why I suddenly have the urge to know. It’s not like I’m going to broadcast this comedy of errors all over social media. That’s my younger brother Nate’s specialty.

“Violet. Yours?”

Violet, pretty and delicate, just like her. Although I’m not so sure she’s all that delicate. I think in this case, looks can be deceiving.

“Colin.”

“Colon? Like...” She cringes as she points her finger over her shoulder, and down toward her bum.

What is she getting on about? “Colin,” I repeat.

“Oh, okay.” She exchanges a look with the clerk, and they both stifle a laugh. Wait, does she think I’m saying colon, as in my bum parts? She’s the one with the ridiculous accent, not me.

Before I can ask, she turns back to the clerk, and I let it go. I’m far too tired for this and if she thinks my name is Colon, then so be it. It’s not like I’m ever going to see her again. I glance at my watch. She’s right about one thing, though. I am going to need a right and proper pint before I try to make alternate arrangements.

I'd rent a car and drive myself to the middle of nowhere, but Canadians drive on the wrong side of the road—or rather the right side of the road—which is wrong. I think it's best to get a driver until I'm used to it. With my luck, I'd probably hit a daft beaver trying to cross the road. I'm pretty sure killing or maiming the country's sovereign rodent would send my arse straight to jail. Then again, they do eat beavers' tails. At least that's what the girl seated beside me on the flight over here told me. *You have to try one.* Sure, right after I climb the famous lighthouse at Peggy's Cove and hurl myself into the cold Atlantic. Yes, I've been doing my research on this intolerable province. Now I fully understand Mum's threat to send us to Nova Scotia to live when we misbehaved, although that was more my brother's specialty than mine.

I head down the long terminal and glance outside as the bruised sky fades to black. The great white north. What was I thinking? I shake my head. It's not like I had any choice in the matter. Nope. Grandfather tasked me with the job of coming here to secure land for an international boarding school he wants to build. We have perfectly good schools in the UK, built and owned by my grandfather's great grandfathers. Why he needs another one, or one here, is beyond me. Nevertheless, I couldn't very well say no. I'm one of the lawyers who oversees land deals and amendments, but the timing couldn't be worse.

Or maybe it is good timing. I might be missing the cricket match, but at least I won't have to put up with Mum trying to shove some debutante down my throat. I'll marry when the time is right—never—and with the right and proper girl of my choosing. She doesn't exist. Even if she did, I wouldn't know it. I'm not even sure what love is, or if I have it in me to fall for a woman. I'm pretty sure I don't. Don't get me wrong, I love my family, but that's different. I didn't—couldn't figure out how to—love the girl I thought I was going to marry a couple years ago, and when I heard her on the phone having a conversation about me, and our future...I ended things between us then and there.

I take a seat at the bar, and the first thing I do is order a pint. The second thing I do is shoot off a text to Bryant, to let him know I've arrived and ask if he knows of any drivers. He texts back quickly.

Bryant: *Are you at the airport?*

Me: *Just grabbing a right and proper pint.*

I laugh as I send the text. Violet's bad accent reverberates in my brain. Is that how she thinks we sound, and why the hell am I thinking about her anyway? The barman brings my drink and I sip the watered-down ale while I wait for Bryant to text back. Three dots appear and then disappear. Maybe he's pissed that he made the trek to the airport for nothing. The missed flight was out of my hand, but if he's a man like me, and doesn't like his time wasted, I can understand him being upset. I stare at my phone a little longer, and shrug when no message comes through. I'm about to ask the barman if he can help a guy out, when my phone pings.

Bryant: *I'm here.*

Me: *At the airport?*

Bryant: *Look up.*

I look up, and stare at the bottles of high-end alcohol behind the bar. My phone pings again, and I check it again.

Bryant: *Turn to your right.*

I do as he asks and when I spot Violet in the doorway, holding up a sign with Mr. Parker on it, I nearly fall off my stool.

You have got to be bloody joking!

VIOLET

Well, well, well. What are the odds that the grumpy Brit—who I’ve also dubbed as Mr. Brit with a stick up his bum—is the man I was supposed to pick up hours earlier.

“I thought you missed your connection,” I say as he walks toward me, pulling along a designer suitcase that likely costs more than I make in a year. I hold my phone up and shake it, not that he can see his text from earlier, and not that I’m displaying it.

“It’s you...you’re Bryant?” he asks.

“Why didn’t you tell me you caught another flight?”

As we stand there hogging the entranceway, he says, “I thought you were a man.”

A group of women in purple hats head our way and I back up into the terminal, giving them a wide berth. Colin follows and I say, “I was planning to come back first thing tomorrow to get you.”

“I don’t even know why you’re still here waiting.” He stares at me, dumbfounded. “Why would you do that?”

“You really should have texted that you caught another flight.”

We stare at each other, both having our own conversations with one another, and getting nowhere. He finally shakes his head, a deep line in his forehead, and I’m guessing the tumblers just aren’t falling into place.

“You’re Bryant?”

I snort. “You should at least try to hide your enthusiasm.”

“I’m not—”

“I know. I know. You’re shocked and not at all happy about any of this. It’s easy to tell by that throbbing vein in your forehead.”

“I do not have a...” He straightens to his full height and adjusts his dark leather bag over one shoulder, and it’s right then that I notice how broad it is. Kidding. I noticed it the first time he bumped into me—and I groped him. “I’m surprised is all.” Those salted caramel eyes of his narrow in on me. “Why are you still here?”

“Oh, I have a friend coming in from Toronto.” I wiggle my fingers. “Two birds, one stone.” He stares at me like I might have two heads instead of two birds. “You know, achieve two things at the same time.”

“I know what it means. I’m not daft.”

Okay, this conversation is getting us nowhere. I hold my hand out for a shake. “Nice to meet you, Colin Parker. I didn’t realize it was you earlier. I only knew you as Mr. Parker. Violet Bryant, the groper, at your service.”

His shoulders sag a bit, a new kind of weariness about him as his big hand closes over mine for a very efficient shake. “I think we might have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“The first two times sure, but the third time’s the charm, right?” I give him a wink and check my watch. “Come on, my friend should be at the luggage carousel by now.”

I reach for his bag to help him—he must be exhausted—but his big palm quickly closes over mine to stop me. Holy moly. Okay, it's been a long time since I've felt a man's touch, and there is no way my girly parts should be standing—fine, fine, jumping—to attention.

“I've got this,” he says, his voice an octave deeper.

I pull my hand away, and in an effort to cover my body's ridiculous reaction, I joke, “Do you have the crown jewels in there or something? Smuggled them to Canada, eh?”

He stares at me, like I'm a puzzle he can't figure out, but I'm anything but complicated. I'm an open book, an easy read. I don't mean I'm easy, you know sexually, just...well... What the hell am I doing? Why am I thinking about sex with this guy, a man who is hell bent on shutting down our beloved seasonal theme park and putting up some pretentious boarding school for the elite.

Those privileged students won't fit into the easy going, laid-back town of Annapolis any more than Colin Parker will. I'm just worried his reception will be met with pitchforks and torches. Although we're no longer living in the nineteenth century, not since last week anyway, when we got our first Tim Horton's coffee shop—ten miles out of town. Oh well, beggars can't be choosers, and I did a lot of begging on the townfolks behalf.

His head lifts, his body a little stiffer. Hard to believe, I know. Clearly offended by my crown jewels question—hey, I wasn't talking about *his* jewels—he runs his hand down his perfectly smooth tie and says, “No, I did not smuggle anything into Canada.”

I grin. I'll have to remember that he takes everything literally. “I was just kidding. Can I help you with your shoulder bag then?”

“I've got everything.”

Yeah, you do.

Whoa where did that thought come from and why did the voice in my brain sound like Joey from Friends?

“Suit yourself.” I turn and speed walk toward the gates, and he kicks his legs out, easily keeping pace beside me. Everyone might be slow moving, but I have a few more steps to get in to make my daily goal. It’s not an obsession, not like everyone back home thinks. Not really. Maybe a little.

I spot Emily snatching up her bag and call out to her. She hauls her suitcase from the belt and waves at me, and I don’t miss the way her attention suddenly jerks to the man standing close. He really is hard to miss. From the corner of my eye, I let my gaze travel from the top of Colin’s head right down to the tip of his leather shoes.

Tall. Check.

Dark hair. Check.

Chiseled jaw. Check.

Smoking hot. Check.

Mr. All Kinds of Wrong for Me. Check.

Not that I’m looking for Mr. Right. I’m not. I’m quite happy running my little bed and breakfast, and working at the park my grandfather envisioned, designed and helped build—the same park this man is about to tear down. But the park is run by the non-profit Hanson society now, and while I’m on the board, I have little to no say in what happens to the business. I do know it’s been hemorrhaging money, and I invested my entire inheritance to keep it running. If I go any deeper in debt, I’ll have to rent out my entire house and sleep in the corn stalks in my back yard.

Emily comes over and I take her bag from her shoulder and put it over mine. I’m about to hug her when Colin’s fingers brush my bare shoulder and goddammit, I think I might have just climaxed a little. He takes the bag from me, and tosses it over his deliciously broad shoulder.

Deliciously broad shoulder?

Who are you, Violet Bryant?

“Oh my, what a gentleman,” Emily says instantly going from zero, (not flirting) to sixty (flirty) in two seconds. I try not to snort. Should I remind her that she’s married? Nah. If she wants to get her flirt on with Colin, who am I to stop her? It’s not like I’m jealous or want to flirt with him myself. The guy probably doesn’t even know the meaning of the word anyway.

“I was raised to be a gentleman,” he says, and on the flirtation scale between one and sixty, his comes in...minus ten. I was right, he doesn’t know the meaning of the word and the man is wound so tight, he probably squeaks when he has sex.

Stop thinking about sex already!

Emily’s curious, yet slightly disappointed gaze, shifts to mine, and I jerk my thumb out. “Emily, this is Mr. Parker. As in Colin Parker, from the Waltonstound foundation.”

“Oh,” she says, her smile dissolving faster than that new vitamin supplement I’d swallowed at breakfast. I make a fist and pound my chest. I think it’s still stuck.

“Nice to meet you, Emily.”

“Be nice,” I murmur under my breath. I’m just as upset as everyone else that this guy is here to tear up our town, but it’s not his fault. I can’t shoot the messenger. Ogle and admire him yes, shoot him, no.

“Nice to meet you too,” she grumbles.

I switch subjects. “How was Toronto?”

As I guide her outside to the parking garage, she talks a mile a minute, telling us about her visit to her cousin Tanya’s place after Tanya was rushed to the hospital. Apparently, Tanya was insistent that she was having an appendicitis attack, but it turned out she just had a bad case of gas. Too many cruciferous vegetables, a new diet she’d been on, according to Emily.

I steal a fast glance at Colin. His handsome face twists, like he's mortified that Emily is talking about one's bowels in public, and I bite back a laugh. We might move slowly in Nova Scotia, but we talk fast, openly, and non-stop. I guess this must all be a lot for him and for a moment I feel a hint of pity.

We reach my car, and Colin insists on loading the trunk, although he's calling it a boot, and it's so small I'm not sure it can be described as either. Emily switches topics, giving every detail of a delicious meal she had at some fancy downtown Toronto restaurant.

"You better take the front seat," Emily says to Colin as she pushes a piece of gum from a foil package and holds it out to us. We both shake our heads no.

"You can take the front. Sounds like you two have a lot of catching up to do, and I'd like to check my emails," he replies.

"Suit yourself." Emily flips the seat forward, and gestures for him to climb into the back. He puts one leg onto the floor of the back seat, pushes forward and grunts. I'm about to circle the car, but notice he's not moving, or grunting. I'm not even sure he's breathing. Great, I think we've killed him. We certainly have the motive. As I glance around, and contemplate on how to hide, or even move, the body, a loud groan reverberates through the near empty parking garage.

"Violet."

"Yeah."

"I'm...stuck."

I admire his perfect ass, wedged between the back seat and the frame of my car. "Um, do you want me to push?"

"I think maybe you should pull."

I take in the angle of his body and consider the logistics. "What do you want me to pull?" Emily chuckles beside me and I nudge her with my elbow. "Stop it."

“Ow,” she complains.

I glare at her. “You’re not helping.”

She snaps her gum, enjoying this entirely too much. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. Go around the other side and push on his head.”

“I thought that’s what he wanted you to pull.”

“Ohmigod!” She grins, clearly proud of her quick-witted sexual innuendo. “Do you want to walk home?”

The car rocks as he tries to free himself, and I pray to God he hasn’t heard Emily, or think in any way that I want to pull his...anything.

Emily drops her gum back into her purse. “Fine.”

She circles the car, and I step up to him. “I’m going to put my hands on your hips and pull, okay?”

“Yes, I believe that will work.”

Pity once again hits me. The man is obviously embarrassed. The British are so stiff—do not think about head and stiff.

Dammit, I’m thinking about it.

Let me try that again. The British are stoic and reserved, and this must be mortifying. Then again, maybe he’s none of those things. People have misconceptions about Canadians too. Yeah, okay, it’s true. We’re ridiculously nice and overly apologetic. Sue me.

As he struggles, I take a fast second and consider drawing this out, letting him wallow in his embarrassment. I mean he is here to destroy our town, but because I only have one mean bone in my body—you did just hear me say we were ridiculously nice right—and I might need to use it later, I put my hand on his sides, and brace my pelvis against his rear.

Oh my.

I glance over my shoulder and pray no one is watching. The last thing I want to be accused of is bum-fucking some Brit in the back of my car. I'm not looking to cause an international incident here. I suppose I could just tell them I'm trying to remove a stick that's lodged deep. That's more believable, anyway.

He mumbles something under his breath, and I'm certain it's gibberish about three times the charm, because yeah, this is the third time I've groped him and the first, or possibly the third, time I've enjoyed it.

I'm about to pull but stop. "You're not going to leave me a bad review, are you? Bad reviews are bad for business. I can't have that, Colin."

"Get me out of here and we'll call it even. Oh, shite, what are you doing?"

I loosen my grip on his hips. "I'm not doing anything?"

"Not you, Emily. Stop. You're going to compress my spine. Shite, that hurts. Ow, bugger off will you." He curses some more, his ass brushing up against my pelvis. I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry. Maybe I should get a selfie.

"I thought I was supposed to push on your head, and Violet was supposed to pull," Emily says.

"No, I didn't...Blasted, have you gone mad? None of this is helping. In fact, you're giving me a migraine."

Emily huffs. "You don't have to be so hard to get along with."

"I am not..." his voice falls off and he takes a deep breath. I love Emily, but sometimes we all have to take a moment around her. "Violet, can you pull?"

I dig my fingers into his hard, muscular sides, and with all my strength I yank on him, and after a few good pulls, I manage to dislodge him. We both tumble backwards, until I'm flat on my back and he's sitting in my lap.

He quickly jumps up, turns, and pulls me to my feet. Worry dances in his eyes as he gives me a once over. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine. I’m tougher than I look.” I brush my hands over my ass to clean the debris.

“Stronger too,” he says, respect and appreciation in his voice.

My chin lifts an inch at the compliment, his hand still lingering on my arm, and the warmth of his fingers seep under my skin, travelling all the way through my body until it reaches my girly parts. Emily snaps her gum, bringing me back to the present.

“We...uh, we should get out of here,” I say. “I think you should take the front this time.”

He nods and we all climb into the car. He falls silent for the most part, checking and answering emails on his phone, as Emily continues to tell us about her trip. Many hours later after I drop her off at her place, I ease my car into my driveway. The porch light illuminates the cracked stone in the walkway, and I gesture to the front stoop of the old farmhouse as I reach for my door handle.

“Door’s open. You can go right on in. I’ll get the luggage.”

“You leave your doors open?” he asks, and follows me to the trunk. I open it, and he brushes my hand away to pull out his luggage.

“This is Annapolis. No one locks their doors.”

“You’re not afraid of break ins?”

I snort. “Yeah, no.”

He stands there staring at me. “Yes, or no. I don’t understand.”

I stare back. “What’s that now?”

“You said, yeah, no. Which is it?”

He gathers up his luggage and I laugh as I head up the walkway. “Oh, right. That means no. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“Habit.” I push open the door, and flick on the lights. He stands there for a long moment, looking around. “Let’s get you settled. You must be tired.”

“I’m a bit knackered,” he responds, and I angle my head. I guess that’s how the British say tired. It’s going to take me getting used to his slang as much as it’s going to take him getting used to mine, not that he’ll be here all that long.

“Follow me.” I walk toward upstairs, and after I take the first couple steps, a loud bang, followed by a menagerie of funny curse words, vibrates through me. I spin, and find him holding his head and glowering at the low stairwell header.

“Are you okay?”

He crouches. “Why is everything so small in this country?”

“It’s not. You’re just big.” That’s not entirely true. Some of the headers in my house are low, especially for someone of his stature.

“How many guests have conked themselves out?”

“None. Most duck.”

“You could have warned me.”

“Yeah...” Ah, there’s that one mean bone. Not really. I’m just so darn tired, and maybe a bit distracted by his presence that the low header slipped my mind.

He angles his head, and as his caramel eyes narrow, I resist the urge to tell him a bump on the head is mild compared to the wrath the townsfolk plan to bring tomorrow once they find out he’s here. The sale of the park, and how to stop it, has been the talk of the town for months.

Making light of the situation, I say, “You should have let Emily compress your spine. You could have been a couple inches shorter, and easily fit under this header.” From my perch on the third step, I tap the header.

“If we’d listened to Emily, you’d be pulling my...” His words fall off, and my heart lurches.

Ohmigod, he *did* hear Emily, and her ridiculous sexual suggestion. I really hope he doesn’t think I want that. I have no desire to push or pull his anything...

At least not before I shave my legs!