
HOME ADVANTAGE

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Home Advantage
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Do I believe for one small second that Brandon Cannon, right winger extraordinaire and my very best friend since childhood, is ready to give up the puck bunnies and settle down with a soon to be medical school student?

Uh, how about no, with a capital N.

Which raises the question: why the hell did I agree to be his wingman? Or why am I showing my good friend Naomi Sanders that he's a real catch and that she should give the well-known player—on and off the ice—a chance?

Brain tumor?

Honestly, is there any other explanation? Maybe there's one, and I can't even believe I'm admitting this to myself after all these long and painful years of doing 'buddy' things with

Brandon. But I, Daisy Reed of sound mind and memory, have been in love, for as long as I can remember, with none other than Brandon Cannon.

Okay, there. I said it, and the next thing I need to do is go for a brain scan. I mean, come on, we're talking about a guy who made me eat dirt, a guy who tricked me into touching a fish's eyeball. A FISH'S EYEBALL, for God's sake!

Yeah, he did those things when we were kids. But you know what? He also did good things...great things, even. Like when we were teens on vacation at Wautauga Beach, Washington, where our families had cabins. He saved my ass the night I went to a party at Sebastian Wilson's house. I wasn't allowed to go to the rowdy party at the end of the beach, but I snuck away and did it anyway. When I drank too much, I called Brandon for help. He pretended to be sick right along with me—saying we both ate bad pepperoni on our pizza—claiming it gave us food poisoning. He took me home, and fortunately my parents bought the bad pepperoni story. Brandon stayed in the spare room that night, and kept checking on me every few hours. How could I not love him, right?

So, I guess I owe him this, and despite how much it's going to break my heart to see him with my friend Naomi, Brandon and I don't stand a chance at a future. You see, he friend zoned me a long time ago. I was the only girl allowed in his tree house and the blanket tent, and while I thought it was cool back then, I realize now that the guys all thought of me as one of them. The boobs and the hips that came along later... they didn't faze them one bit.

So here we are many years later, sitting at the Tap Room, the local student drinking hole, after my kick-ass hockey game, where I scored two goals, and the guys—my buddies—are all

ruffling my hair and telling me I did a great job. I keep scanning the place for Naomi. She had to run home after the game and said she'd meet me here later. Little does she know I'm Brandon's wingman and I'm going to try to set them up. Does that make me a bad friend? I guess not, especially if they end up married with kids.

Why does that thought bring pain to my stomach? Oh right... because I love him and never in this lifetime will he be mine.

As I swallow, hard, my friend Alysha nudges me. "Are you okay? You're quiet tonight."

I snort. I get it. I'm never quiet. "Just tired," I tell my new roommate. Alysha used to live with Piper, but moved out when Piper got together with Beck. Alysha came here from The Hampton's to study dance, and I like her a lot. She doesn't date, and is practically engaged to a boy back home. She never talks about him, which I find a bit weird. I also find it a bit strange how she's always stealing glances at Ryan. It makes me wonder if—

"I can imagine you're tired," Alysha says, cutting into my thoughts as she raises her beer glass and I click mine to it. "You kicked ass tonight, girlfriend."

I smile. While I do love hockey—heck, my dad was in the NHL—a future in the sport isn't for me. Over the summer, I spent every spare moment studying for the six-hour medical entrance exam. It's no wonder I'm exhausted. But it was worth it because I passed. Now I, along with Naomi, wait for the results of our interviews and whether we've been accepted or not, and I'm nervous as hell. I hold my hands out and examine my nails, which are faring worse than my nerves. I bring my fingers to my mouth and, catching me by surprise, my hand is slapped away from my face.

“What the—”

I look up and find Brandon shoving everyone away so he can sit next to me. “Stop biting your damn nails,” he warns for the millionth time, and plunks down next to me, like a bull in a china shop. I shove him, but it does nothing to budge his powerful body as his hard thigh squishes the side of mine.

I shove him again. I realize it’s futile, and can’t help but think I’m doing it just to touch him. Yes, my friends, I am that pathetic. “Move.”

He shifts, and scrubs his hand over his face, and I try to ignore the little shivers rushing over my skin as his scruff of a beard makes a little rustling sound that vibrates through me. It’s a familiar habit and I wish I didn’t like it so much.

“Hey, Duke.”

“B,” I respond. We’ve been calling each other by our nicknames for as long as I can remember. I’m still not sure why he calls me Duke. Maybe it’s because he simply sees me as one of the guys, and Daisy is too flowery a name for me. Yeah, we’ll never be an item, that’s for sure.

But I can’t think about that right now, not when he’s practically sitting on me, and I like it. I take a quick breath at his closeness and try to pull off casual, but his warm familiar scent of fresh soap and something uniquely Brandon curls around me and messes with my hormones. Good lord, when I’m around him I’m like a dim-witted moth. Not that he’d notice and maybe I’d be horribly embarrassed if he did. When push comes to shove, the last thing in the world I want is to risk losing his friendship. He means everything to me.

“Why are you chewing your nails again?” He takes my hand in his, and his stupid warmth invades my skin and curls around my heart. “I told you, you’ll get into medical school.” I nod, and he goes quiet, thoughtful before adding, “Want to do something next Wednesday? Go shopping or something? Grab dinner?”

My throat tightens. God, he can be so darn sweet. Next Wednesday is when the interview results come in and I find out if I’ve been accepted to Dalhousie Medical School here in Halifax. I hadn’t mentioned it to him in ages, I don’t want to think about it, but he didn’t forget the date.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I reply casually. “But you might be on a date with Naomi that day.”

His face lights up. “She said yes, she’ll go out with me?”

“I’m still working on it. You have a reputation that a professional PR firm with years to spare would have a hard time cleaning up. You gave me—a girl who knows nothing about PR—one week to sell you to Naomi.” It was at Piper’s birthday celebration that Brandon set eyes on Naomi, and I foolishly agreed to help set them up. Not because I don’t think they’ll be good together, but because maybe he is ready to settle down, and they might be a great couple. Could I be any more of a masochist?

He takes a swig of beer and a fat drop clings to his bottom lip. He swipes it away with the back of his hand and I try not to stare at his mouth or think about how many times I wondered what it would be like to kiss him—on his lips. Yes, we cheek kiss me all the time. We’re pals like that.

“She’s not into hookups, B.” I stare at him, gauging his reaction, and for a moment he seems like he’s a million miles away. “B?”

“Yeah.”

“She’ll want to go to nice places—places that aren’t your bedroom.”

“Are you saying my bedroom isn’t nice?”

“It’s disgusting, but that’s another story.”

He toys with the label on his beer bottle, his big fingers tugging at the paper and I try not to imagine them toying with my panties in much the same manner.

He arches a brow, looking totally offended. “Then you’re saying you think I don’t know how to treat a girl.”

“Fish eyeballs!” I shoot back.

He laughs. “Well, okay, maybe you’re right. I guess it’s good that I have you. To get insider information, so I don’t mess this up.”

“Insider information?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, find out what she likes, what she doesn’t... things like that.”

“You’ve really never been on a real date before?” I ask even though I already know he hasn’t. He shakes his head. “The first thing you need to know is that on a real date, with a girl you like, you have to put real work in, B. It doesn’t just come to you. I realize you had it easy, girls throwing themselves at you, but this is different. Naomi isn’t a puck bunny, infatuated with you.” How crazy is it that I’m giving advice when I haven’t been on a real date either? But I’m a girl, one who doesn’t sleep with hockey players, and I know how I’d want to be treated, so maybe I can be of value to him. Okay, and maybe there’s a secret girly part that would like to go on a real date with him.

He nods this time and when a plate of cheesy fries is set on the table, he snags one. I try not to stare at his mouth as he takes a bite and holds the cheesiest part out for me. I open my mouth and he feeds it to me.

“You never did tell me what you wanted in return for your help,” he reminds me.

The only thing I want in return is him and I can’t have it. I sigh and say, “To see you happy, B.” He smiles at me, and while this might sound cliché, the truth is, it truly takes my breath away. His hand goes to his temple and he rubs slightly and I narrow my eyes as he frowns. “Are you okay?”

He plasters on a smile, and while it looks genuine, I know him well enough to know something is bothering him. Is he worried about making it into the NHL? Most of the guys are, but most of the guys don’t have the kind of pressure Brandon does. His father was one of the greats and Brandon is expected to follow in his footsteps.

“I’m fine,” he answer cheerily, and leans into me again. “What about you?” I’m fully aware that he’s changing the subject and I’m about to call him on it until he shifts ever so closer and my brain nearly shuts down. Geez, I wish he’d cut it out—I think. “What can I do to make you happy?”

God, if he only knew.

“Naomi is here,” I say instead of answering and I lift my hand to wave her over. She comes toward me, dressed in a long pantsuit that looks amazing on her lithe body. Her hair is loose, framing her pretty face, and her makeup is absolutely on point. Everything about her reminds me I have no game—outside of the rink. I do, however get asked out a lot, but I’m beginning to believe it’s a competition between the guys now.

I shove Brandon. "Go. I can't say nice things about you if you're sitting right here."

He leans in and gives me a friendly kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Duke."

"Yeah, yeah, now go."

He stands and everyone grumbles and pushes him as he ambles his way from the booth. He heads to the bar, where our friend Ryan Potter is sitting, and Naomi moves in beside me to take Brandon's place.

"Great game tonight," she tells me, and I grab the pitcher on the table, fill an empty glass with beer, and set it in front of her. "Did I scare Brandon off or something?" she asks.

I laugh at that. "No, he needed to talk to Ryan."

"He's cute, huh?"

Maybe this will be easier than I thought. At the birthday party, she didn't seem to have the time of day for Brandon. I guess maybe she's changed her mind. I've yet to meet a girl who wasn't interested.

"Yeah, he's cute."

"You going to go for it then?" she asks me, and judging from the confused look on her face, I should probably pick my jaw up from the table.

"Me, go for it?"

"You two are always together, and it's easy to see how comfortable you are around one another."

I take a big gulp of beer—like, a huge gulp—hoping I don't say something crazy and give myself away. I set my glass on the table. "We're friends. We go way back." I hold both hands

up, palms facing Naomi. "Trust me, there is nothing between Brandon and me." She eyes me, her head angling. She's far from stupid, which makes me want to babble on, and say more to convince her, but she who protests too much...

"Oh, I just thought you liked him."

"I do like him. He's one of my best friends, and I'm so not his type. I'm a tomboy and he's into girly girls, you know." *Stop rambling, Daisy.* I take a breath and go for it. "Actually, it's you he likes."

Her big dark eyes stare at me in disbelief. "Me?"

"Yeah, he's been asking me about you."

She lifts her head and turns to look at Brandon, who is looking back. "I don't think I'm his type either, Daisy. I mean, his reputation..."

"Yeah, apparently, he's played out and is looking for a nice girl...like you."

She puckers her lips and runs her finger over the rim of her glass as she considers my words. "He really told you that?"

"Yup."

She stares at him for another second. "I don't do hook-ups."

"He's not looking for one. You know, underneath it all, he's a pretty great guy."

"Didn't he make you touch a fish's eyeball?"

I can't help but laugh as my mind goes back to that day on the lake. We were sixteen, out on the boat, and he caught a speckled trout. He wanted me to touch the scales and when I did the boat moved and I ended up poking the eyeball, and got so freaked out I jumped up and fell into the water. He

abandoned—and lost—the fish when he dove in to save me, and it only solidified my love for him.

I snort. “The story isn’t as bad as it sounds.”

She turns to me. “I trust you, Daisy. If you think I should go on a date with him, then I will.”

I angle my head, catch Brandon’s gaze, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s a little wobbly on his feet. Was he drinking before he came to the pub? I’m not sure, but something is off about him. Heck, maybe he’s in love with Naomi or something and it’s messing with him. Lord knows it’s messing with me.

“Yeah, I think you should,” I say. Just because I mean it doesn’t mean I don’t hate everything about it.

“Okay, I’m free tomorrow. Next week, I’m away for reading week.” She leans into me and her warm vanilla scent fills my senses. “You’re a good friend, always helping others. You’re a real caregiver, Daisy.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” If I’m thinking about others, I don’t have to think about myself—or how I was abandoned as a baby so my biological mother could snag herself a hockey player, one who wasn’t my dad. Crazy I know. It was my dad who got her pregnant, but she wanted his best friend. But the simple fact is, I’m a pawn. People use me to get what they want—just like Brandon is doing right now. But he’s not all to blame. I agreed to this, because deep down I have horrible abandonment issues and I’m terrified of losing him. One thought dances around inside my brain as I fill my glass up again, wanting to drown out the emotions rising in me.

When it comes to setting up Brandon, I’m damned if I do and I’m damned if I don’t.

“Thoughts?” I ask Daisy as she snatches a book off my shelf, and plops down on my bed. I spin around and wait for her opinion on my pants and dress shirt.

“Good,” she says, as she peels open one of my mother’s romance novels. I always buy a copy, wanting to support my mother, and I do read them—skipping over the sex scenes of course, because that’s just weird.

“Good?” I huff. “That’s all I get?”

Looking exasperated, she drops the book and sits up. “Okay, fine, you clean up nice.”

“That’s better.” I blink as the vision in front of me doubles, and I try not to wobble as vertigo threatens to overcome me. Nausea hits, and I curse under my breath as I try not to run to the bathroom to vomit.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

“I just said you looked nice.” Daisy huffs and rolls her eyes again. “Always fishing for compliments.”

I laugh, even though it throws me off balance. “No, I’m asking if you liked the book.” Daisy always reads my mother’s books too, but she doesn’t skip the sex scenes, and sometimes when I’m pissing her off—which is a lot—she threatens to tell me about them.

“Have you read that book?” I ask, redirecting her, and she stares at me in the mirror. I shift under her scrutiny, not wanting her to see my dilated eyes. She’s going to be a doctor, for Christ’s sake. She knows the sign of a concussion when she sees it, and I can’t let anyone, or anything, keep me from the game. I’ve been taking good care of myself, getting rest, and hanging out in the dark whenever I can and next week is reading week, so I’ll have lots of downtime. I just need to get through tonight—this date—without incident.

Turning her attention back to the book, she snatches it up and flips it over to read the blurb. “No, is this her latest?”

“Just out last month. You can read it if you want.”

She shrugs. “I guess I have nothing better to do tonight.”

“You know, Jared has been asking about you.” She flips the book open and reads, ignoring me. I laugh. “What is it you have against hockey players again?”

The book drops enough for me to see her pretty blue eyes. “Did you forget my two best friends are players, and not just on the ice.”

“Hey, come on, Chase is married now...” I stop to wave my hand over my clothes. “And look at me, all grown up and going on a real date.”

“Naomi is smart, B. She’s not going to fall for any of your ridiculous lines.”

“Maybe you and I should have gone out on a practice date.”

She laughs but I’m serious. I’m a little worried that a brilliant, sophisticated girl like Naomi is out of my league. She’s a soon to be medical student who probably dates professionals—no hockey players. The guys she goes out with are no doubt well-read and care about their studies more than sports.

What people don’t really know about me is that I’m well read and care about my studies too, even though my professors would give me an easy ride. But I want a good education—for private reasons. But no one knows that, not even Daisy, and I’m not about to tell her or anyone why I read my mother’s books and care so much about my classes. I have no desire to be the laughingstock of the academy. And honestly my dreams—my true passions—aren’t important. I need to make it to the NHL. Not making it, and disappointing my father, would be the worst thing in the world.

“Oh wow, this is spicy,” Daisy says, and I put my fingers in my ears when she pretends like she’s about to read the scene out loud.

“Stop!”

She laughs, drops the book and stands. Her ponytail bounces as she comes close and I turn to her, our bodies inches apart. A smile touches her lips as she fixes my collar, and runs her hands down the front of my shirt to smooth it out.

“Knock her socks off, B.” Her eyes move back to mine. “But not her panties.” As soon as the words leave her mouth, her head inches back and she shakes her head. “I just mean that I don’t think you should try anything on the first date.”

I put my hands on her shoulders, partly to reassure her that I'm not going to jump Naomi's bones, and partly because I'm dizzy again.

"I won't," I promise and because I don't want her noticing the size of my pupils, I lean into her and kiss her cheek. "You're a good friend, Duke."

Did she just suck in a breath?

"The best, you mean."

I inch back to see her, but she's already turning around and picking up my mom's latest romance novel. I don't usually tell people my mom writes sexy books. I'm not sure I could live up to any of the heroes she pens. I'm a good guy, don't get me wrong, and girls know what they get when we hook up, but I want to be a better guy and need to start thinking about my future.

I can't deny that I'm a little jealous of my friends. Most of them are all about serious relationships and family now, and I'm feeling a little lost and left out. Do I think Naomi is the one? I don't know, and if I don't go on a real date, I'll never know. So that is what I'm doing. She's a girl who knows what she wants in life and looks like she has herself together, and Daisy really likes her.

"You should get going. Are you driving or walking?"

"Walking." I'm not sure I'm in any shape to get behind the wheel. I'm really glad Naomi picked a place right around the corner from her place and wanted to meet me there.

"Come on, it's on my way home. I'll walk with you." She tugs her coat on, slides the book into her bag and we head downstairs. Tank is on the sofa in front of the TV, shoving popcorn into his face. It's Saturday night, and since he moved out of

Scotia Storm house and in with me, he's been partying less. I guess the newer generation has taken over the place, and we all seem to be okay with that. Cheddar spends a shit ton of time here too. I think he's as sick of the partying at Storm House as the rest of us.

"Hey Daisy, want to grab a drink later?" he asks.

"As much as I'd love that, Tank, I already have plans."

Tank laughs. "It was worth a shot."

I smile at Daisy. She might not date hockey players—or anyone for that matter; I honestly don't remember the last time I saw her with a guy—but she always lets them down nicely. She's kind like that and there's this weird strange tingling jealousy swirling around in my gut. She's my friend, my closest female friend, and I like having her to myself. Wow, okay, that's a real shitty thought, and I'm a real shitty, selfish guy for even thinking it.

I want to see Daisy happy. She deserves love and happiness like the rest of us, and while we talk about everything under the sun—almost everything, I guess—we never talk about her love life, or lack thereof. I know she puts a lot of focus into hockey and academia, but I'd like to see her enjoying life a little more. She hasn't even asked for anything in return for helping me.

We step outside and the end of October air is cold. Soon enough snow will be flying and I'll be flying back to Seattle to visit the folks for reading week.

"Do you have any plans for next week?" I ask Daisy and when she shivers, I put my arm around her and pull her closer. She sinks into me, a perfect fit, like always.

“Not really. Mom and Dad are vacationing in Mexico. They invited me, but I’m so stressed out about next Wednesday I think I might just stay here and hibernate until I hear if I’m accepted or not.”

“You’ve got this, Duke.” She chuckles, and I tug her closer to offer my support.

Her head lifts, her eyes full of questions. “Are you going home?”

“Yeah, actually, I’m headed to the cottage tomorrow.”

“Wautauga beach?” I nod and she frowns. “Why did you ask me if I wanted to do something next Wednesday if you weren’t going to be here?”

“I would have stayed.” I make a fist and give her a fake, best friend punch to the jaw. “That’s what friends do.” Something moves over her face, something soft and vulnerable—it’s not a look I often see on her. “Daisy?”

“That’s sweet, B. But not necessary. I’m a big girl.” A beat of silence and then, “You’re staying at the cottage, not with your family?”

I glance at the pavement and focus on it. I love my family and miss them, but early in my father’s career, he was down and out with a concussion, and one look at me and they’ll know. Like father, like son, I guess. He went on to do great things after some rest and I know I can too.

“I’ll see them, sure. I’m just going to decompress at the beach for a few days.” Hopefully that’s all it will take to get me up to par.

“Sounds like fun. Maybe you can catch a big fish and touch its eyeballs.”

I laugh. “That’s no fun without you. Come on, what are you really doing for reading week?”

“Stressing.”

“You’ll get in, I know it.”

She exhales a shaky breath. “Casey graduates from high school this year.” It’s a statement not a question and a way for her to get the focus off her. “He still planning to go to Stanford?”

I nod as I think about my younger brother, then a laugh bubbles in my throat. “Hard to believe how much that kid hates hockey.”

“Like his mom.”

I laugh. Growing up my mother hated hockey—even though her brother was in the NHL, and that’s how she met my dad. My dad and her brother were best friends. But honestly, I think Daisy would be shocked to realize just how much I’m like my mom. Not in my hate for hockey, I don’t hate it, but in my love for other things. But there are some secrets that I won’t—can’t—share with anyone. I was groomed for hockey and with my little brother wanting to be a software developer—he’s an ace at coding—I’m my dad’s only hope that that one of his offspring makes it in the NHL.

“Casey might hate hockey. It’s the only thing he has in common with Mom, but as far as everything else, you’d think he was adopted, really.” I’m joking, making an observation, but as I angle my head to glance at Daisy, I realize the joke has fallen flat. Shit. What a stupid fucking thing for me to say. “Daise...” I begin.

Christ, I know my insensitive words hit a sore spot with her. Even though she was raised and loved by her biological father

and his wife, who adopted Daisy as her own, and thinks of her as her own. Her fucking biological mother left her on the doorstep of a hockey player she was trying to trap. She was used as a goddamn pawn, and even though she was too young to remember any of it, that kind of shit stays with you, after you learn about it.

She bumps me, letting me know she's okay, and I stumble a bit on the curb. "Jeez girl, sometimes you don't know your own strength."

She laughs, letting my adoption comment go and I'm grateful it didn't conjure up painful memories. "I do know my own strength. I had to in order to compete with you and Chase and everyone else when we all summered together at the beach."

I laugh, missing those summer days. "Casey is a good kid who knows what he wants, that's all."

I nod in agreement. I like that he chose his own path. As the oldest, I feel the responsibility to follow in Dad's footsteps because I was good at hockey. I hope that somehow paved a way for Casey to be whatever he wanted. That would make it all worth it.

"You know what you want, too," I say.

She eyes me. "So do you right?"

I look straight ahead. "Yeah, of course. Hockey." It's not a lie. I do want hockey. I just want something else—something I can't pursue—more. "The goal is to play for the Seattle Shooters."

"Like your dad did." I nod and her steps slow. She waves ahead to where the restaurant sign is hanging. "Here we are."

“Thanks for walking me, and thanks...you know, for setting this up.”

She pokes my chest. “I didn’t set it up for you to mess it up.”

I shake my head and feign hurt. “You have such little faith in me, Duke.”

She jerks her thumb over her shoulder. “I’m going to grab a latte and go read. Text me later.”

“Will do.”

“If you don’t, I’ll start texting you snippets of the sex scenes.”

“Jesus, Daisy. That is just wrong.”

She laughs and I stare after her a second, a huge smile on my face as she bounces away and heads to the coffee shop. Numerous people call out to her, and at the door she meets up with our buddy Cheddar. That’s his nickname because he’s a ginger. No, it’s not an insult. I think he gave it to himself. He chats up Daisy and they step into the little café together, and I turn and walk into the restaurant.

The second I enter, and the bright overhead light shines down on me—instant headache. I tug a bottle of pain pills from my pocket and knock a few down. I glance around the restaurant and find Naomi sitting, watching me. Shit, did she see me take meds? I talk to the hostess and I try carefully to put one foot in front of the other as I walk to the table.

“Hey,” I say and drop down into the chair.

“Are you okay?” Naomi asks, her eyes narrowing in on me, much the same way Daisy’s had.

I touch my temple and brush it off. “Yeah, just a small headache.” Shit, my words sound a bit slurred, like I might

have been taking meds, *and* drinking. I can't even imagine what kind of impression I'm making here. Turning the conversation to her, I admire the pretty blue dress she's wearing. "You look really pretty."

She smiles and moves her shoulders, wiggling them happily. If she were standing she'd probably be spinning around right now, which would make me really dizzy. "You look nice too."

"How are you liking the city?" Daisy told me she moved here from British Columbia a short while ago.

"I love Halifax. It's a great city. Daisy tells me you're from Seattle, and your Dad was in the NHL and your mom is a romance novelist."

"Yeah, all true."

"I'll have to read one of your mom's books."

"I have some at my place, if you want to check them out." Shit, wait, did that sound like a pickup? Judging from the way her body is stiffening, I'm guessing it did. I'm about to back-track but the server arrives and sets the menus in front of us. I blink as the words blur, and order a beer when Naomi asks for white wine. I probably shouldn't be drinking, but I don't want her to think there's something wrong.

The server leaves and I excuse myself to make a quick trip to the bathroom. I splash water on my face and take a few deep breaths to pull myself together. Once the dizziness passes, I head back to the table. People walk by the restaurant and for a second I think I spot Daisy shading her eyes and peering inside. But I must be wrong. She was heading home to read. No way is she peeking into the window of Naomi's favorite Italian restaurant, because that would just be strange behav-

ior. Unless she's watching to see if I mess this up. I focus back on the table, and stutter a little as I try to speak.

The server brings our drinks and before she can take our orders, I reach for my beer bottle, and knock the damn thing over. It spills across the table, and unfortunately, Naomi's dress soaks it up like a paper towel.

Way to do everything wrong so far, dude.

She yelps and jumps up. "I'm sorry," I burst out. "My place is just around the corner..."

She glares at me as she snatches up her napkin. Oh, God, now she thinks I'm trying to get her out of her dress, and that I might have knocked my drink over on purpose.

"I'm going to go."

"I'm sorry, Naomi." She drops her napkin on the table, and I want to tell her I'm not well because of my concussion, but I can't admit that to anyone. "Can I call you?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'm sorry." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I'm having a bad night."

She pauses for a second. "Are you okay?"

"Yes...no."

Her eyes narrow in on me. "I'm calling Daisy."

"No, don't, please..."

She eyes me for a second longer, and I glance down, averting my gaze. "Do you need a ride home?"

"I think you've had one too many to be driving."

Okay, so she thinks I'm drunk and I can't believe I'm happy about that. But I am because it means she doesn't know it's a concussion.

"No, I walked, but I can get you an Uber."

"I'm good." She pauses for a second. "You might want to go sleep off...whatever this is."

She disappears, and I sit there for a second, trying not to vomit. A few minutes pass and I'm about to pay the bill and get my sorry ass back to my place when Daisy appears before me, concern all over her face.

"Daise..."

She leans into me, a full-on inspection of my eyes. "Jesus, Brandon."