

Praise for the Novels of Christina Lauren

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—*Kirkus Reviews* on *Dating You / Hating You* (starred review)

“Christina Lauren hilariously depicts modern dating.”

—*Us Weekly* on *Dating You / Hating You*

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“In our eyes, Christina Lauren can do no wrong.”

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my
favorite
half-night
stand

CHRISTINA
LAUREN



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*For all of the CLo friends who helped us swim
through the shark-infested waters of internet dating*

my
favorite
half-night
stand

chapter one



millie

When I was in grade school, my best friend, Alison Kim, was obsessed with horses. She was *the horse girl*—you know the one. She took lessons, came to school in cowboy boots, and always smelled faintly of barn. Not *necessarily* a bad thing, but certainly unique among the student body at Middleton Elementary. Her room was covered in pictures of horses; her clothes were all horse-themed. She had trading cards and figurines. This girl was *invested* and could be called upon at any given moment to answer a horsey question or rattle off an equestrian fact.

Did you know horses can run a mere six hours after birth?
Nope.

What about their teeth—were you aware a horse's teeth take up more space in their head than their brain does? Didn't know that, either.

Most little girls are obsessed with *something* at one point, and for the most part it never gets a second thought. Puppies: standard. Princesses are also frequently idolized. An obsession with boy bands is to be expected. Begging your parents for a pony or unicorn is normal.

I don't think I've ever been normal. Me? I was obsessed with serial killers.

More specifically, I was obsessed with the idea of female serial killers. Hear the phrase *serial killer*, and most of us probably picture a man. It's not surprising—let's be real, men are responsible for at least ninety-two percent of the evil in the world. For centuries, women have been socially programmed to be the nurturers, after all—the protectors, the emotional bridges—so when we hear of a woman who takes life instead of creating it, it's instinctively shocking.

My particular fascination started around the time I played Lizzie Borden in my seventh-grade theater class. It was an original musical—the brainchild of our eccentric-would-be-an-understatement teacher—and I landed the lead role. Before then, the concept of murder was still loose and shapeless in my head. But, ever studious as a child, I gobbled up everything I could about Lizzie Borden, the

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gruesome hatchet murders, the dramatic trial, the *acquittal*. The fact that, to this day, the murders remain unsolved was enough to get the wheels in my mind spinning: What is it about the male brain that makes it not just more aggressive in general but more prone to serial violence—and what trips that same switch in a woman? It's why I read every book on the subject I could find as a teen, watched every crime drama and mystery, and why I now teach criminology at UC Santa Barbara, and am working on my own book about the very women who so fascinated me as a child.

It's probably also why I'm drinking it up with four of my strictly platonic best guy friends, instead of out enjoying myself on an actual date.

No man wants to hear “I wrote my thesis on gender differences in serial murderers” during the *Tell me about yourself* portion of an initial rendezvous.

“Millie.”

“Mills?”

My attention first snags on Ed's voice, and then focuses on Reid's. “Yeah?”

Reid Campbell—one of the aforementioned strictly platonic best guy friends, the reason we're here celebrating tonight, and a man whose genetics never got the memo that it's unfair to be both brilliant and beautiful—grins at me from across the table.

“Are you going to pick your game piece or stare slack-jawed at the wall all night?” He’s still waiting, still smiling. It’s only now that I notice the game board on the table, and the pastel money he begins distributing.

Apparently while zoning out, I inadvertently agreed to play Monopoly. “Ugh. Guys. Again?”

Reid, who for some reason is always the banker, looks back up at me with faux-wounded blue eyes. “Come on. Don’t even pretend you don’t love it. Getting a monopoly on Park Place and Boardwalk gives you an *obscene* amount of joy.”

“I loved it when I was ten. I still mostly liked it two years ago,” I say. “But why do we keep playing it when it always ends the same?”

“What do you mean it always ends the same?” Ed—or *Stephen Edward D’Onofrio!* if you’re his mother—pulls out the chair to my left. Ed’s hair is this wild mop of reddish-brown curls that always looks like he either just got up or should really go to bed.

“For starters,” I begin, “Reid is always the top hat, you’re the car, Alex is the ship, Chris is the shoe, and I’m the dog. You’ll go to the bathroom twelve times right before it’s your turn so we all have to wait. Chris will hoard his money and then get mad when he keeps landing on Alex’s hotels. Reid will only buy the utilities and somehow still

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manage to clean the floor with all of us, and I'll get bored and quit six hours into a never-ending game."

"That's not true," Ed says. "*I quit last time, and Chris bought up all the orange properties to get back at Alex for the rooster-shaped birthday cake.*"

"Man, that was a great cake," Alex says, dark eyes downcast as he laughs into his drink. "Still worth Chris putting salt in my beer for two weeks."

"What's greater," Chris replies, "is how you never once expected the salt, even after the fourth time."

In typical fashion, Reid won't be distracted from his goal, and pipes up from where he's organizing the property cards. "The rules were very clear tonight: my party, my choice."

We groan in unison because he has a point. Reid and Ed are both in neuroscience—also at UCSB—but while Ed works as a postdoc researcher in Reid's lab, Reid is a newly minted associate professor, just awarded tenure. Said tenure is why I'm wearing both a dress and a party hat, and why there are somewhat droopy crepe-paper streamers hung throughout Chris's living room.

Chris is always Team Reid; he's gathering up the game pieces, but not to put them away, to compromise. "We'll switch things up. I'll be the dog, Mills."

"I think you're missing my point, Christopher."

CHRISTINA LAUREN

Four sets of eyes stare blankly back at me, urging me to give up the battle.

“Okay then,” I say, resigned as I stand and walk into the kitchen for another bottle of wine.



An hour later, I've lost track of how much pretend money I've paid Reid, and how many times Alex has refilled my glass. Alex is a professor of biochemistry, which explains how he can always be counted on to get me drunk. And oh, I am drunk. I don't know what I was complaining about: Monopoly is awesome!

Chris reshuffles the Community Chest cards and places them facedown on the board. “Ed, are you still seeing that redhead?”

I have no idea how Chris remembers this. Between Alex and Ed it seems there's never a shortage of odd dating stories to go around. Alex, I get. He's tall, dark, and wicked, and even though he's originally from Huntington Beach, he spent every childhood summer with his extended family in Ecuador, giving him an accent that stops women in their tracks. He's also never serious about anyone, and rarely sees someone again after getting a cab home in the morning.

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Ed is . . . none of these things. Don't get me wrong, he's not unattractive and he has the aforementioned full head of hair, but he's more like a grown frat boy than a manly man. If we went to his place right now we'd find ketchup and a case of Mountain Dew in his refrigerator, and a living room full of pinball machines instead of furniture. Still, he goes out more than me, Reid, and Chris combined.

Not that that's saying much.

Reid is a workaholic. Chris is gorgeous and accomplished, mentoring fellow African American chemists right here at the university. But he's also picky and serious, and works the same insane hours as Reid does. And me? Honestly, maybe I'm just lazy.

Alex counts out his spaces and sets the dice in the center of the board. "You're talking about the one with the eye patch?"

Okay, *that* jogs my memory.

Ed isn't amused. "She did not have an *eye patch*."

"Actually, I remember her, too," I say. "I distinctly recall seeing a patch covering an eye." I motion to the board and the neat row of hotels lined up there. "PS, it's your turn and if you roll anything other than a two—which will land you in jail—you are *fu-ucked*."

"Slumlords," Ed mutters, but rolls the dice anyway. I have no idea how, but he does—miraculously—roll a two,

and does a celebratory fist pump before scooting his little car into the space marked *Jail*. A momentary reprieve from the rows and rows of Alex's hotels. "And it wasn't an eye patch, it was a small bandage. We were being . . . amorous and things got a little crazy."

"A little crazy as in . . ." I trail off, deciding I might not really want the answer.

Reid laughs over the top of his glass. When Ed doesn't immediately clarify, though, his smile slowly straightens, and a hush falls over the room as we're all left to mentally unravel this, logistically. "Wait. Seriously?"

I tidy up the meager remains of my money. "He did say it was a *small* bandage."

Reid falls forward onto the table laughing, and maybe it's the fact that half my blood has to be wine at this point, but I'm reminded all over again that the first thing I noticed about him was his smile.

Just over two years ago, Reid and I were introduced by my then-boyfriend Dustin, the department chair for criminology. (Yes, this means that my ex-boyfriend is now my boss—the reason I will never date someone I work with again.) Reid was new to UCSB, and at the dedication of a new computer science building, Dustin made some crack about it being the first time anyone had seen Reid outside his lab. Apparently Reid and his fiancée had just broken

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up; her first complaint was that Reid spent too much time at work. I didn't know that at the time, but I found out later that Dustin had. Reid laughed at the little dig and continued to smile warmly as we shook hands. I had a tiny, immediate crush on that sparkling, crinkly-eyed smile that survived the sting of Dustin's underhanded jabs.

For un-Reid-related reasons, I broke up with Dustin a few months later, but because it turns out no one liked Dustin anyway, I got to keep Reid, and all his friends, too: Chris and Reid went to graduate school together, Ed joined Reid's lab as a postdoc shortly after he was hired, and Alex shared lab space with Chris when they were both new faculty at UCSB. I'm the only non-sciencey person in the group, but at work and at home, these guys have become my sweet little chosen family of sorts.

"So," Chris says, "I'm going to take that as a no, on the still dating question."

Ed rolls again, happy when he doesn't manage a double and gets to remain safely in jail. "Correct."

"Then who are you inviting to the commencement banquet?" Chris asks.

Reid pulls his attention from the board and over to Chris. "Do we have to think about that yet? The banquet is in June. It's only March."

Chris smiles and looks smugly around the table. “I take it none of you heard the rumor about this year’s speaker.”

Reid searches his expression. “The speaker will make me want to bring a date?”

Chris stands and walks into the kitchen to grab another beer. “I heard a rumor that Obama is giving the commencement address, and a keynote at the Deans’ Banquet. Black tie, plus-one, the whole nine.”

We all gasp, deeply, in unison.

“I got word that the chancellor is going to announce it this week,” he adds.

“No way.” Ed stares at him, eyes wide behind his thick glasses. “Oh. I am definitely going this year.”

Reid laughs, picking up the dice. “You’re supposed to go *every* year.”

“Last year the commencement speaker was Gilbert Gottfried. I don’t think I missed anything.”

“I actually wanted to talk to you guys about this,” Chris says. “None of us is dating anyone—” He stops, glancing to where Ed is balancing a cork on his nose and counting to see how long he’s able to do it.

“Look at this, Millie.” Ed stretches his arms out. “Ten seconds, no hands.”

Chris turns back to the rest of us. “—or has any serious prospects,” he continues slowly. “Who *are* we taking?”

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Ed straightens, catching the cork in his palm. “Why can’t we all go together?”

“Because it’s not junior prom,” Chris says.

“We can’t just go solo?”

“I mean, you could,” Chris says, “but this is gonna be a big deal with dancing and coupley stuff. Go solo and be the loner, go in a group and we’re the table of dudes—and Mills—sitting there awkwardly. We should get dates.”

Reid rolls his dice and begins counting out his turn. “I call Millie.”

“You *call* me?”

“Whoa, whoa.” Derailed from his initial argument, Chris turns to Reid with a frown. “If we’re just going to pair up, why’d you pick her?”

Reid shrugs and gives a vague nod in my direction. “She looks better in a ball gown.”

Ed seems genuinely insulted. “You have obviously never seen me in one.”

“I took you to the Deans’ Banquet last year,” Chris reminds Reid. “We had an awesome time.”

His turn completed, Reid drops the dice onto the center of the board and picks up his drink. “We did. I’m just being fair and going with someone else this time.”

Ed smacks Chris’s shoulder. “I’m more Reid’s type. Remember that cute bartender he liked? The one with the

curly hair?” He makes a show of pointing to his head and the mass of auburn curls there. “Tell me we wouldn’t look great together.”

“I can beat that.” Alex brings up a foot to rest on the table and rolls up the hem of his jeans, flexing his calf muscle. “Reid is a leg man. Just look at these stems. I could spin you all around that dance floor.”

Reid watches each of them, bemused. “I mean, technically speaking, *Millie* is my type. Being female and whatnot.”

“Is it weird to anyone that this roomful of straight men is fighting over Reid and not me?” I ask.

Chris, Alex, and Ed seem to give this fair consideration before answering “No” in unison.

I lift my glass of wine and take a deep swallow. “Okay, then.”

Finally, Reid stands, carrying his empty glass into the kitchen. “*Millie*, you need anything?”

“Other than tips on how to develop an alluring female presence?” I ask. “I’m good. Thanks.”

At the counter Reid rinses his glass and bends to open the dishwasher, carefully setting it inside. It’s something I’ve seen him do a hundred times, and I don’t know if it’s the talk of dates, or the wine, or if Reid is just looking particularly good in that dark gray shirt, but tonight, I don’t look away.

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I watch as he easily moves around the kitchen, picking up stray dishes near the sink and loading them into the correct tray. I can see the muscles in his back flex as he bends when he's done, rubbing a hand over the broad head of Chris's silver Labrador, Maisie.

I've had enough to drink that my limbs feel loose and pliable; my stomach feels warm. My brain is a little fuzzy around the edges—just enough to block out my tendency to overthink everything. Instead, my mind meanders around the fact that Reid doing something as mundane as loading a dishwasher and petting a dog is absolutely *fascinating*.

With the kitchen tidied up, Reid extends his arms above his head in a leisurely stretch. My eyes are like magnets and follow the lines of his body, the way the fabric of his shirt pulls tight across his chest and strains along the curve of his biceps. I get a peek of stomach.

Reid has a really nice stomach.

I bet he'd look great with that shirt all the way off . . .

Kneeling above me, arms outstretched, fingers wrapped around the headboard while he—

Whoa.

I mean . . . *WHOA. Where did that come from?*

I fix my attention down at the dining room table and it's a full five seconds before I dare to move again. I just had a

sex thought about Reid. *Reid*. Reid Campbell, who always roots for the underdog in any sporting event, who pretends he enjoys classical music so Chris doesn't go alone to the symphony, who buys a new pair of running shoes precisely every six months.

When he returns to the table and sits down next to me, if the pounding of my heart is any indication, I do not look like I'm thinking about resuming our fascinating game of Monopoly.

I blink over to my empty wineglass, eager to point blame in the most convenient place. How many of these did I have? Two? Three? More? I'm not hammered, but I'm not exactly sober, either.

I'm the kind of tipsy where I should want to hug everyone, not pull my best friend's pants down.

GAH.

Strictly platonic best guy friend. Strictly platonic best guy friend.

Heat rushes to my face and I stand so quickly my chair teeters on its back legs. Four sets of curious eyes swing in my direction, and I turn, making a beeline for the bathroom.

"Millie?" Reid calls after me. "You okay?"

"Gotta pee!" I shout over my shoulder, not stopping until I'm safely inside the bathroom and the door is firmly closed behind me.

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Normally I laugh when confronted with one of the dozen roosters we've given Chris over the past two years. But now? Not so much. The cock thing began as a joke—Chris complimented a giant rooster painting at Ed's mom's house, and she gave it to him on the spot—so of course every birthday, Valentine's day, and Christmas present since has been some form of rooster décor. But even the sight of one of my favorites—a RISE AND SHINE MOTHER CLUCKERS sign I got him for his last birthday—only makes me think of the cock joke, which makes me think of penises, which reminds me of the image of Reid naked, in my bed, on top of me.

Hands on the counter, I lean in to examine my reflection and, okay . . . it could be better. My cheeks are flushed, my eyes a little glassy. My eyeliner and mascara have converged in a dark smear below my lower lids.

Kneeling, arms outstretched, fingers wrapped around the headboard—

With the faucet on as high as it will go, I clean up and splash cold water on my face. It helps a little—cooling down my skin and clearing out the haze so I can think.

It's not that I find Reid unappealing in a sexual way—he's gorgeous and brilliant and hysterical—but he's also my best friend. My Reid. The guy who held my hand during an emergency root canal and dressed up as Kylo Ren when we went to see *The Last Jedi* on my twenty-ninth birthday. I'm

close with the other guys, but for whatever reason, it's different with Reid. Not *that* kind of different, but . . . closer. Maybe it's because he always knows to find me in the true crime section of the bookstore. Maybe it's because he has a level of intuition that I've never known in a friend before. Maybe it's because we can be quiet together, and it's never weird.

I squeeze my eyes shut; it's hard to have an existential crisis when you're drunk. Part of me thinks I should head to the nearest exit, but the other part thinks we should just . . . hug it out.

There's a knock at the door and I step back just far enough to open it a crack. It's Reid, looking sweetly disheveled with a dish towel still slung over his shoulder.

God damn it.

I straighten, hoping I look more sober than I feel. "Hi."

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Totally." I lean against the doorframe in an attempt to appear casual. All this really does is bring my face within inches of his, which somehow makes me feel drunker. "You know how I am with wine. Goes right through me."

I'm an idiot, but before I can regret what I've said, he's laughing. *Why does he always laugh at my dumb jokes?*

"Ed and Alex are headed out," he says quietly. "You can't drive. Can I take you home?"

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“I’m not drunk.” This statement would carry more weight if I didn’t hiccup immediately after saying it. “And I wasn’t going to drive.”

He tilts his head and a piece of soft brown hair falls forward, curling over his forehead. My brain immediately sides with Team Hug It Out.

“Come on,” he says. “You can control the radio on the way.”



It’s sunny and perfect in Santa Barbara at least three hundred days a year. We get most of our meager rainfall in early spring, and as we drive down Highway 1 at midnight—windows open and Arcade Fire blasting on the radio—it smells like a storm in the distance.

“Did you have a good night?” I ask, rolling my head to see him. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to refocus. The inside of the car is dark, his profile in shadow.

“I did.”

“Does it feel different?”

He turns to me and smiles, the tips of his lashes glowing gold in the light from the dashboard. “What? Tenure?”

“Yeah. Knowing you can only be fired for incompetence or gross misconduct.”

He laughs. "Define gross misconduct again?"

"Sexual harassment, murder, embezzlement . . ."

"You're kind of making it sound like a dare." He reaches for my hand where it sits on the console between us and squeezes my fingers. "You cold? I can turn on the seat warmers if you want to keep the window open for air."

"I'm good," I say, but he keeps hold of my fingers anyway. "Maybe with less time in the lab and more in the classroom, you can cut back a little. Have more time to yourself."

"To do what? Play pinball with Ed?"

"I don't know," I say, "explore new hobbies, find yourself, date. You work too much."

He turns to me again and grins adorably. "Why would I need a date when I already have you for the banquet?"

I roll my eyes. "I mean, like, in the general sense."

"Okay, Pot. When's the last time you went out with someone who wasn't one of us?"

I search my memory, counting back five . . . six months, and can't help but recall the veritable wasteland my sex life has become. I've been stressed with deadlines and family stuff and my brain is just looking for an escape pod, a little release. No wonder I'm having sex thoughts about Reid.

When it takes me too long to answer, he gives my fin-

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gers another squeeze. “Need me to get out a calendar? I think I have an abacus in my office.”

“I think it was Carson? The barista who worked at Cajé.”

In the dark I see his eyes narrow as he thinks. “Wasn’t he younger than you?”

“A few years,” I say with a shrug.

“Seven years,” he corrects. “And he had a nose ring.”

That was some impressive recollection, Reid. “Men date younger women all the time and get a pat on the back. Why does dating a younger guy automatically make me a cougar?”

He holds up a hand. “I am not calling you a cougar. Listen, if twenty-one-year-old college me had had the chance to bang beautiful twenty-eight-year-old you, I’d have done it in a hot second.”

Wait, what?

A shiver moves down my spine and he notices, shifting to run a hand along my arm. “You have goose bumps.”

“Oh.” I reach over to close the window. “I guess it’s chillier than I thought.”

“So what happened? Between you and—”

“Carson,” I finish for him. “Nothing happened. He was twenty-one. There weren’t a lot of places it could go.”

“You mean, it was just sex.”

I’m thankful we’re still sitting in the dark so he can’t

see me get all blushy and awkward. “My muscle tone had never been better.”

Reid barks out a scandalized laugh.

“I’m not lying. What about you? When was your last . . . you know?”

“Hmm.” He taps his thumb against the steering wheel. “My last *you know*. I’m not sure. You probably know my life as well as I do. You tell me.”

“You work all the time.”

“Funny thing about that,” he says with a grin. “It’s probably how I got tenure.”

I concede this with a dorky little nod. He turns down State Street, which, this time of night, is the quickest route to my house. I watch as we dart past the streetlights one by one.

“Does that make us lame?” I wonder. “That we’ve been single this long and nobody in our group is in an actual relationship? Ed and Alex date more than us, maybe even Chris, but it never goes anywhere. Is it possible we’re all enabling each other to die alone? Are we turning into a weird celibacy cult?”

“We’re definitely enabling each other.”

“But should we be worried about that?” I ask. “One of the many, *many* problems I had with Dustin was that he wanted a good little wife. I’m not even sure I have that gene

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and haven't been with anyone long-term since him. You haven't since Isla. Does that make us failures?"

"I think it means the opposite, actually," he says, pulling into my driveway and shifting the car into park. He turns to face me. "Let me ask you a question. Do you love your career?"

I don't even have to think about it. "One hundred percent."

"Well, there you go. And even if we are enabling each other, who cares? You could never die alone, because you have me."

It's suddenly quiet in the car and I know I should go inside. I should wash my face and put my pajamas on and go straight to bed.

I should let Reid go home.

The problem is I don't want to.

"Come inside with me," I say, pushing open my door and already climbing out. The air is cool and smells like the ocean, but it's not enough to drown out whatever buzz is still humming in my veins or make me come to my senses.

I have no idea what I'm doing or what's happening between us, but when I reach the porch and pull out my keys, Reid is right behind me.

chapter two



reid

I've never hooked up with a friend before . . . is that what's happening right now?

I mean, it seems like it might be. Millie is being herself but a little . . . *more*. Giving me a shy smile while her eyes wander a lot more than I'm used to, then twisting her fingers in mine when I held her hand in the car . . .

It's like unlocking a window and letting the wind blow it wide open. If Millie is flirting, then what? Should I flirt back? This is a very *The Usual Suspects* moment—I had no idea Millie was this person.

Are we doing this?

I blatantly check out her backside when she ducks into

the fridge to grab us each a can of sparkling water. It feels nearly clinical the way I study her.

Objectively, it is a fantastic ass.

It's just that it's *Millie's* ass. Initially—briefly—she was known as Dustin's Millie. Later—and better—she was known as one-of-the-guys Millie, *Our* Millie. Now, it appears, she's Drunk Flirty Millie.

I've looked at her ass before, of course. I've looked at all of her, frankly, but I've done it in the dissociated way all guys look at women—almost without realizing we're doing it. Casually, too, and entirely due to the habit of proximity: while helping her out of her coat, while holding her beer as she takes off a sweater, while examining her outside a changing room when she asks whether she should buy a particular pair of jeans. Regardless, no matter how objectively pretty she is, Millie Morris has always been off-limits.

But mostly I think she's been off-limits because she's never shown any particular interest in any of us.

She clears her throat and I drag my eyes back up to her face. Which, it's fair to say, may be the best part of her: the enormous bright green eyes, the sarcastic mouth, the splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She's beautiful, yes, but I've never truly veered into *Is she sexy?* territory until tonight.

MY FAVORITE HALF-NIGHT STAND

“I was checking out your ass.”

“And?” She leans a hip against the counter and gives me a smile that’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen from her. Most of her smiles are openmouthed, delighted, often given through a choking laugh as she quickly swallows a mouthful of beer. Other smiles are half-baked, amused at us while we try to get a rise out of her. The rare smile is triumphant—when she gives us the perfect amount of shit. They’re rare only because she so infrequently shows her cards.

But this one is a little like being told a secret. She seems to agree, because she bites her bottom lip halfway through it, like she’s trying to put it away.

I think she wants a rating on her backside, but it’s probably clear from my expression that I’d give her high marks. “What’s with you tonight?”

A bare shoulder lifts and drops. “I’m tipsy.”

This makes me bark out a laugh. “‘Tipsy’? I’d be amazed if Chris has any wine left in his house.”

“Don’t blame that on me,” she says. “You’re the one who went and got tenure. Besides, Ed took down two bottles by himself, and Alex was pouring mine.”

“Ed’s blood is ninety percent alcohol.”

“And ten percent Cheeto dust.”

She moves over to me, waters in hand, and the only

way to describe her gait is sashay-y. It's so dramatic it makes me start to laugh. We've known each other for more than two years, and I never would have predicted this playful, seductive side of her. But the sound is cut off in my throat when she puts the waters down on the end table near me and puts her hands squarely on my chest.

Anticipation comes alive beneath my skin.

"Mills."

"Reids."

Speaking through the pressurized air in my throat, I say, "What are you doing?"

"Seducing you." She lifts one hand and draws a pinky down the side of her face, pulling away a strand of auburn hair. "Is it working?"

I've never had reason to check myself around her before, and the answer easily slides out of me, unfiltered: "Yes. But why?"

Another shrug. "I haven't had sex in a while. You were doing dishes earlier."

"Dishes?"

"It was sexy. And you stretched. I saw stomach muscles and happy trail."

"Oh, well, of course we should end up here."

She growls a little as she stretches to press her nose into my neck, inhaling. "I like how you smell."

MY FAVORITE HALF-NIGHT STAND

I freeze. When she says this, it feels a little like standing at the static center of a spinning room. Again: Millie. This is *Millie Morris*. Goofball. Colleague. Stealer of my Stanford sweatshirt. Woman who shares my exact tastes in beer. The glue of our circle of friends. “You do?”

“Yeah,” she says, and blazes heat into me with the press of her mouth over my pulse point. “It’s familiar, but I never realized until now how nice it is up close.”

While she kisses up my neck, I’m dragged back two years, when Dustin brought her along with him to meet up with the rest of us for drinks. Chris, Alex, and I thought he seemed like a cool guy; maybe he’d be another colleague we could end up hanging with. Academia is hard as hell, and it helps to have a community of people who get the schedule, understand the pressures. But within a half hour, Dustin was playing darts with some surfers, and Millie got us all drunk on car bombs and dirty jokes. From that night on, Millie seemed more *ours* than *his*. I know they ostensibly broke up because their schedules weren’t compatible, and they hit a plateau—also he was basically a dick—but I sometimes wonder how much her friendship with us contributed to the breakup.

It was a friendship that came at the perfect time. I was still reeling from Isla calling off our engagement, and only

beginning to find my friend clan at the university. Chris, Alex, Ed, and I hung out, but it was spontaneous—never something we planned or assumed. As soon as Millie joined our little gang, though, being together became the default: barbecues at Chris's when it was nice out. Football at Millie's on Sundays with a big TV and the best furniture. Game night at Ed's. Inside jokes and familiarity. We fell into a rhythm and built a scaffold of community. Before Millie we got together when we randomly bumped into each other; because of her we now have lunch every Monday and Wednesday, and I can't imagine a week without it.

I fucking love all of them, but romance wasn't even on the table. Now it's just me and Millie here, standing so close our chests touch. I'm trying not to contemplate what the others would think right now.

When I focus again, it's hard to think of anything; Millie has been busy. One finger is tucked into my belt loop and her lips are hovering near my chin, skirting along my jaw. It's decision time. All I have to do is tilt my face down to her, and we'll be kissing. I'm already getting hard, and the question whether this is a great or disastrous decision is growing cloudier.

"Are we going to do this?" This time I say it out loud. Her breath, against my mouth, is sweet with wine and the