

Chapter Three: Friends are Friends, Pals are Pals...

I was always a light sleeper. The whirl of car tires uselessly spinning after an eight-inch snowfall, the sound of freshly made ice cubes falling into the bin, too many work calls to count. All these sounds had roused me from my sleep at one point or another. But it had been a very long time since I was woken by someone's snoring. Particularly someone in my bed. Particularly Seth.

He was sprawled on his back, arms wide open and one leg hanging over the edge of the mattress. The jerky action of his eyelids and fingers told me that he was dreaming. The rest of his body, though, was calm and he looked to be enjoying whatever subconscious movie was unspooling through his mind.

I spent a minute just looking at him and admiring his smooth skin against my sheets. It was all I could do to stop myself from stroking his chest. It wasn't how I remembered it. I was almost certain there had been a light sprinkling of hair across his pecs back in the day. I wondered if that little patch of hair on the small of his back was gone, too. I couldn't remember, but then again, my memory of the previous night was a little cloudy and small, tactile details like that hadn't made the cut. Seth used to sleep as if he were dead, and I contemplated rolling him

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over to take a peek. But if his sleep patterns had changed over the years, I'd have some explaining to do. The hairline at his temples was as intact as the day I met him. Was it possible that men lost the hair on their bodies but not their heads?

As far as smooth, hairless skin went, however, Seth had me beat. No contest. A sturdy wave of embarrassment washed over me as I took in the sight of my stubbly legs and knew that my underarms were leaning toward European as well. I wouldn't even let myself contemplate the bikini region. For a moment, I tried to convince myself that I could sneak into the shower for a quick shave before he woke up with the hope that he didn't notice last night or that the gin somehow blurred his vision. And sense of touch. But getting caught shaving after the fact felt far worse than being caught not shaven at all, so I ousted myself from bed to make coffee.

In so many ways, it was an ordinary Saturday morning. The sun was lighting up the living room. Zelda was perched in her favorite spot on the window sill drinking in the light and warmth. I gave her ears a scratch and glanced out the window at all the usual signs of city life on the street below. My *Tribune* was on the stoop dressed in its protective blue wrapper. Neighbors were walking their dogs; a few people were getting in their morning jogs. When a couple came around the corner with their twins in a jogging stroller, I bolted into the kitchen where the clock on the stove glowered at me. 8:45. Shit. In exactly 15 minutes, Angela would be downstairs, fully spandexed with Lily strapped into her jogging stroller waiting for me to come down for our Saturday power walk.

That I was only wearing a robe and Seth was naked in my bedroom returned me to the fact that this was not, by any stretch of the imagination, an ordinary Saturday morning. I grabbed the phone and started dialing without any thought to exactly what I was going to say to Angela.

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Which excuse would she be more likely to buy, that I was sick or that I had a lot of work to catch up on? I prayed that Dean would answer the phone and I wouldn't have to explain at all.

“Hey, Lisa, I'm just putting on my shoes. I'll be there in a second.”

“Hi there! Angela, um, I was wondering if we could skip the walk this morning?” Seth, of course, chose this exact moment to rise from the dead. He walked out of the bedroom in nothing but boxers and greeted me with a warm, and loud, good morning. “I, um, got in kinda late last night.”

It was not entirely a lie.

“Flight delays?”

“Um, yeah, issues with the plane.” That, too, was not entirely a lie.

“Are you sure? The fresh air might be just what you need.” I made a note to acquire some new friends who will actually take “no” for an answer.

“Um, I think I might, um, just, uh go back to bed.”

“Brilliant idea,” Seth piped in and swept up behind me for a long, warm hug despite my furious pantomime for him to not come any closer and to be quiet.

Angela didn't even pretend to hide the incredulous tone in her voice. She just asked me point blank if there was someone at my house. Nor did she seem convinced when I tried to pass off Seth's voice as noise from the TV.

“You're not going to tell me what's going on? Fine. You will spill all later. And don't forget to stop by Flourish and pick up Michael's cupcakes for tonight, okay? And call me if you're bringing a date so I can set another place for dinner.”

“I will. Get the cupcakes I mean. There's no date. Nothing to tell. Late night, that's all.”

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Okay? I'll see you. Later tonight." I had become Hugh Grant, unable to speak in complete sentences.

"Lisa, is everything okay?"

"Yes, Angela. Everything's fine."

That was most definitely a lie. Nothing was fine. I had just spent the night with a random stranger. Okay, Seth wasn't exactly a stranger, but still. What on earth had I been thinking? The plane made sense. Why not spend a few hours chatting with an old college friend? The cab, too, was a perfectly fine, even laudably green, choice. Where it all fell apart was the turn down Clark Street, Seth spying In Fine Spirits through the cab window and thinking nothing of lugging his guitar case and my rollaboard out to the bar's beautiful back patio for flatbreads and a couple of French 75s. After that, it was a short walk from the bar to my bedroom. Again.

"Who were you hiding me from?" Seth asked, laughing.

"I wasn't hiding you. I just usually take a walk with a friend of mine on Saturday mornings and decided to cancel today."

"You *so* were hiding me. Was that your boyfriend? He'll never buy the TV line, Lees, unless he's an idiot. He's not an idiot, is he?"

"He's a she and she's not an idiot. I just didn't want to get into a long conversation."

"Oh. That's cool. Were you always bi or is this new since college?"

"No, no Angela is my girlfriend. I mean my friend. We're not dating, she's married. And I'm not bi, I'm just... I'm not dating anyone." Nor had I dated anyone for a very long time, and I had no idea what to say or do next. I remembered vaguely that there was something to be said or done at the end of a one-night stand, but the specifics evaded me. Going into hostess mode

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seemed safe, so I offered Seth a cup of coffee.

"Would you have any tea? Careener got me hooked."

Carina. The ex-wife. Not exactly the way I would have propped up an awkwardly tilting morning-after conversation, but at least he was trying.

"I don't think so," I told him, but went into the kitchen to open a cabinet or two anyway. I half expected a box of Earl Gray to simply materialize. It wouldn't have been the strangest thing to happen in the last twenty-four hours. "I could get you some, though. Coffee Studio is right up the block and I think they have tea. I wasn't exactly prepared for ... guests this weekend."

He lifted my hand from the cabinet handle and pulled it to his mouth for a soft kiss. "Me either, but I am really glad to be here."

I didn't look at him as I smiled. I knew that the proper response is to say "me, too." There was some part of me that even meant it more or less, but the words wouldn't come out. Possibly, they were blocked by the little issue of reliving the past. Friday night bore a significant resemblance to our first meeting at Bradley on one of those improbable March afternoons where the sun was finally shining with a modicum of warmth. The thing about spring in the Midwest is that the moment it's no longer cold enough to see your breath, you feel as if you're in Cancun. That's how half the campus found themselves outside in shirtsleeves grabbing beers at an impromptu fraternity party.

I remember thinking "How could I have not seen this guy on campus before?" He was slightly less well-groomed than the other boys and I liked that. It wasn't the smelly-looking kind of rumped, more like slightly mussed. He had a curl of dark hair around the collar of his shirt when most every other guy that year was had a nearly shaved head or hair approaching their

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shoulder blades. And his shirt didn't sport the ponies or alligators so ubiquitous in the early 80s. In fact, it said nothing at all. No sports team allegiance, no future alma mater, no Greek letters. He had to be the only one at the entire party wearing just a plain black sleeveless t-shirt. It really showed off his well-toned arms that I later learned got that way from incessantly playing the guitar. He wore his 501s a little baggy and they pooled just so around his red Chuck Taylors.

I followed him around for a good long time so it wasn't entirely accidental that I was behind Seth in the beer line. Still, I wasn't expecting him to spin around and say to me, "Every time I turn around, there you are."

I remembered that I flashed what I hoped was a flirty smile, and tried to figure out if he was charmed or annoyed by my stalking him. Then I made some comment about how I should probably skip the CIA info session at the career center. Seth agreed with a laugh and I still couldn't tell which camp he was in, so I resorted to that lame bastion of girly insecurity. "Sorry," I said weakly.

"Don't be sorry. Just introduce yourself," he told me. So I did.

When we stumbled back to his dorm well after dark that night, we were singing "Roxanne." Even drunk, he could sing and his voice was distinct. There was something in the tone of it that you would recognize regardless of what song it was or how many other voices were part of the mix, the way you can always tell when Don Henley sings back-up on someone else's records. I stopped stumbling long enough to get a good listen.

"Your voice is beautiful," I told him.

"Yep, I'm gonna be a rock star. You're beautiful, too."

"Oh, I can't sing."

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That's when Seth stopped stumbling, too, and took my face softly into his hands. "I know you can't sing, and that's not what I said. I said 'you're beautiful.'"

We were maybe ten steps from the front door of the dorm, but only five steps from a small clump of trees just beside the parking lot. Even so, we couldn't get to the trees and our belt buckles fast enough. All that was missing from last night's version was the frat party. At least we got indoors this time.

When Seth's cell phone rang, it took us a full five minutes to find it amid the bags and clothes that we had hastily tossed aside last night.

"Fucking hell. It's not seven, is it?"

"Not here. Did you forget to reset your watch?" He nodded and listened to his messages with a wince.

"Lees, I cannot believe I am about to say this, but I have to go. I am supposed to be rehearsing in Evanston right now. Actually, I was supposed to give Jeremy a call last night on my way to his place, which I forgot completely about."

"Is he mad?"

"He will be once he figures out I'm not dead. I hate how this feels so... I don't know, fuck-and-run. That's not my intention at all."

"Okay," I said, laughing at him.

"It's not." He looked at me seriously, too seriously. But I couldn't stop laughing.

"It's all right, Seth. I mean, it was completely random that we happened to be on the same flight. And it was completely nostalgic that we ended up sleeping together. It's just like old times." I kept laughing and Seth kept looking serious.

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"Except that it's not 1984 anymore," he reminded me. "And you remember what Split Enz used to say, 'History never repeats.'"

Seth got ready to go, all the while performing an a cappella version of the New Zealand band's hit from, what was it 1982? '81? His voice had a scratch to it, not surprising under the circumstances, but it was still his voice. *There was a girl I used to know, she dealt my love a savage blow. I was so young, too blind to see, but anyway that's history...History never repeats, I tell myself before I go to sleep.*

It was strange to hear sounds coming from elsewhere in the house that were not the kind that Zelda could make. Human sounds. I kind of liked it and for a split second I tried to imagine what it would be like to have someone around now and then, jockeying for space in the bathroom, sharing what happened during our days, maybe cooking together or arguing over who would empty the dishwasher. But I pushed away the thoughts quickly and wrote them off as just another after-effect of too much alcohol and too little sleep.

"Okay, Lees, I've got to run," Seth said as he gathered up his bag and his guitar case. "Come to the show tonight and I'll make it up to you."

"I'm sorry, Seth, I can't. Do you want to grab brunch on Sunday?"

"I can't. I'm on the redeye back to L.A. tonight. Are you sure you can't come? Catch the second set?" I just shook my head. "Well, call me next time you're in L.A. I'll take you out for a proper dinner. Like a gentleman."

I nodded noncommittally, knowing the likelihood of more trips to L.A. was slim based on the plant shut down.

"It was nice to see you, Seth." I told him. He nodded in agreement, but looked at me for

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longer than was necessary. When he kissed me goodbye, it felt completely different from the previous night's pleasant but drunken physical flurry. That was getting carried away in a moment; this was something more . . . intentional. His hand, warm where he set it on my cheek, brought a rush of fragile emotions like when you open a window and the ensuing rush of air flutters the magazine pages on your coffee table. For a second, I was afraid I might cry. It had been so long — not just so long since *he* had kissed me, but so long since *anyone* had kissed me like that, so that my ears filled with the sound of rushing water and my body felt taken over for a split second. It was a pristine kiss if there could be such a thing; our lips pressed together like a secret, totally free of groping or tongues or expectations. When Seth pulled his head back, his cheeks were slightly flushed. . His hand stayed on my face.

“I’ll see you soon, Lees.”

Before I could manage to respond, he threw his guitar over one shoulder, his small duffel over the other and headed out the door. I stopped myself halfway to the window. What was I supposed to do? Watch him walk away? Peer longingly out the window? This wasn't *The Way We Were*. Instead, I looked Zelda in the eyes and asked her “What just happened?” But if she knew, she was keeping it to herself.

Angela's house was designed with as much care as she put into her own appearance. She had the ability to know which tiny throw pillows to buy and exactly where to put them. And they'd look good, not at all like the useless pieces of fluff I knew them to be. On Saturday night, she'd focused her attention on the roof deck, my favorite part of Angela and Dean's house. It was everyone's favorite part when the weather was nice enough to be outside. The high rises of

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this neighborhood stayed huddled near the lake, while here, a couple of blocks west, most of the buildings topped out at three stories. At the right angle, you could see the Sears Tower, or catch a glimmer of the Navy Pier fireworks. But for the most part, it was a neighborhood view. From the vantage point of Angela and Dean's roof, you saw mostly out-sized single family homes like theirs, or renovated two- and three-flats like mine. Including mine, actually. I had yet to be up there without Dean exclaiming, "Look, Lisa, I can see your house from here!"

The truth was that the deck was better dressed for the party than I was. Paper lanterns hung from the pergola, tiny white lights encircled the topiaries, candles flickered on every flat surface and little vases of flowers at each place setting announced where all the guests were to sit. It was magical, really, just the way Michael liked his birthday to be. He was even wearing Lily's plastic tiara from her stash of dress-up goodies.

"Hello, Lisa. Thank you so much for blowing off my birthday party so that I could have a second one. You're a doll and I love you." He hugged me with one arm and handed me a glass of fruit-laden sangria with the other. "Even if you're wearing that."

He shook his head at my outfit of khaki shorts with a brown t-shirt as if it were something that came back up after you flushed the toilet. I kissed him hello anyway and handed him his present, a box of See's chocolates direct from the Los Angeles airport. I hadn't had a lot of time to shop but Michael had an unrepentant sweet tooth. Sometimes, things just work out.

"Come here, there's someone I have been dying for you to meet."

That's when I noticed that there was a man I'd never seen before standing in the corner inspecting the Mexican heather. And that there was a fifth place set at the table, conveniently placed next to mine. I couldn't believe my brother and Angela had ambushed me again. No

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wonder they were so worried about my clothes. It was as if they had learned nothing from every previous blind date. Or heard my repeated statements that I did not want to date, didn't have time to date, knew there was no point to dating. And this guy, well, he looked a little young. There was no way I was going to let my brother and my best friend turn me into a cougar.

The odd man out in the equation looked a little sheepish as we approached, which was a huge point in his favor. Maybe he was just as reluctant about being dragged up here for some ill-conceived fix-up as I was. Unlike me, he heeded the "dress up" memo from Michael and was nicely turned out, if a little overly formal, in his carefully pressed oxford shirt and jacket. I had to appreciate the effort. He had the look of man who dressed in timeless classics; not the stylized flair of Michael's wardrobe or that mature rocker look Seth had been sporting last night.

"Hi, I am Lisa. Michael's sister. It's nice to meet you, but I really wasn't expecting this tonight. Michael usually likes to keep his birthday parties all about him, and not about fixing up his little sister." I shook the new guy's hand firmly. Maybe too firmly because he looked a little dazed and didn't say anything at all.

"Lisa, this is Wilson," Michael announced, putting his arm around and planting a kiss on my date's cheek. "He's actually *my* date tonight, and has been for a couple of weeks now."

It was hard to tell which I felt more acutely, embarrassment at my huge assumption or shock that my brother somehow managed to get into a relationship. He had always been a casual dater, not a settle-downer. For him, the whole ritual of coffee or phone calls or a fancy dinner was not a precursor to a relationship, it was the relationship.

"Michael, I had no idea! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

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“I’m just so surprised...”

“What, that I am actually dating or that I picked my boyfriend out of the Brooks Brothers catalog?” He pulled Wilson even closer to him and for the only time that evening, I saw my brother’s date look relaxed. And Michael looked right at home in a way I had never seen before. He usually surrounded himself with coworkers from the gym who displayed the carefully chiseled physiques that personal trainers maintain for a living and outsized personalities gay men sometimes adopt when they travel in a pack. Wilson stood out, both for his relative softness and his reserve. Standing there in his blazer, he looked like a police detective or someone who was about to leave, even though his drink was full.

My gaffe would make an amusing story that I’d tell ... when? At Michael and Wilson’s civil union ceremony as I gave a toast? Not likely. At Christmas dinner around the table to the audience of nieces and nephews neither of us was going to produce? Not a chance. To amuse Zelda tonight when I turned out the lights and we were both ready to drift off to sleep? That one seemed right.

When Angela returned from checking on Lily after dessert, she looked at me with that familiar shake of the head.

“Lisa, your phone was beeping. I brought it up so it wouldn’t wake Lily, but I will only hand it to you if you promise not to take a work call.”

“Harry’s not...”

“Promise or I’ll throw it off the roof.” She backed up to the railing and dangled my Blackberry menacingly, like it was one of Michael Jackson’s infant children.

I promised and she tossed it toward me, but it only made it half way before landing softly

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on Dean's half-eaten red velvet cupcake.

"Seems to still be working," he said, wiping the buttercream frosting from the screen.

"Who's Seth? He's texted you twice. Says not to miss the second set because he might do a song you love. Lisa, do you have a date tonight?"

"Do you have a date?" Angela was eyeing me suspiciously and I could see how her mind was layering this information on top of our off-kilter phone conversation that morning. My plan was to ignore the questions, and it worked for the nanosecond it took Michael to gasp and bolt upright in his chair so quickly he knocked his tiara askew.

"Oh my God, is Seth Austin texting you?" He was breathless at the thought. One of the few things my brother and I had in common during college was our attraction to Seth. Michael frantically punched at his iPhone. "Seth Austin-Smith was the fabulous lead singer of the late, great band Joe's Got a Problem."

"Joe's got a what?" Wilson asked.

"Oh, you are so young," Michael said, putting a hand on Wilson's cheek while Seth's voice and a chorus of synthesizers emanated from the phone. "Joe's Got a Problem was a fabulous band in the 80s. They had like three big hits, too many to be considered a one hit wonder, but not enough for a *Behind the Music* episode. But if they had, Lisa definitely would have been interviewed for it. Seth was her college boyfriend."

Once again, Michael was off and running on one of his fanciful tales of the 80s, ignoring little things like the facts.

"I thought you married your college boyfriend, that stockbroker guy." Angela said, fully perplexed.

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"I did, Kevin was in M&A. Seth wasn't my boyfriend. He was just a friend." Before I even finished the sentence, I realized my error.

"A friend? I think you have to call him a buddy, don't you Lisa?" Michael had never, not even once, passed up the chance to revel in the glory of his "buddy" line. When I arrived at Bradley, he was already infamous for coining the phrase "friends are friends, pals are pals, but buddies sleep together." Last year, we recruited some engineers from the university and at their orientation, I was able to pull several aside during a break and ask if the phrase still made the rounds on campus. It did, which Michael viewed as his enduring legacy and something on par with having a dorm or a fellowship named after him.

Angela looked at me as if I had finally revealed my hidden third eye.

"I had no idea about your groupie past," she said, sounding truly surprised. That's the beautiful thing about meeting new people at different points in your life. You can create a pristine past and only tell them the stories you choose, the way a sympathetic biographer might pick and choose which material to write about. For instance, I had told Angela about my divorce, but not necessarily the part about the 27 consecutive nights I spent wide awake trying to figure out if I was devastated, elated or just relieved. And I hadn't mentioned Seth at all. The only problem with selective history was that when newer friends mixed with older friends, there was the potential that the real version could explode all over you.

"Was that the band that had the video with the dwarves and the weird dance?" Dean windmilled his arms in a reasonable attempt at "The Safety Dance" until I told him he was thinking of the band Men without Hats.

"Oh yeah. They weren't the Aussie band that sang about vegemite sandwiches, were

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they?”

Again, I had to correct him. “No, that was Men at Work.”

“*This is Joe’s Got a Problem,*” Michael said shoving his phone in Dean’s direction. I glanced at the screen and saw the 80s version of Seth lip synching in a video wearing a crayola-colored suit jacket with the sleeves pushed up and the skinniest of skinny jeans. I had bought him that jacket as a going away present. “The real question is, did Seth Austin-Smith text you tonight and if so, how did this happen?”

There was nothing to do but admit that that yes, I bumped into Seth on my flight home and yes, he mentioned that he was playing tonight with a musician friend at a small venue up in Evanston. The part about getting tipsy on the plane, stopping for a nightcap and the accidental sleepover seemed like unnecessary details that would just bog down the story.

Michael and Angela’s response was immediate and simultaneous. “Let’s go!”

“No!” I made my response short, decisive and in a tone I thought you were supposed to use with dogs to let them know who’s boss. But no one seemed to hear me and Michael took his phone back from Dean and continued Googling Seth.

“Wow. The years have been kind. He’s still hot.”

Before I could change the subject, Michael started fussing with his hair, Dean offered to stay home with Lily and Angela pulled me into her room while debating which outfit of hers I should change into because Michael’s birthday party was changing venues.

“I am not going.” I said, apparently to the wallpaper. You guys can go, but I’m not.”

“Why not?” She pulled my hair from its ponytail, tossed her new blue dress at me and told me to jettison my t-shirt, pointing out the barbeque sauce I’d dribbled on it, necessitating the

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change on top of its original offense of being the dullest thing she'd ever seen.

“I don't want to go.” I worried that I sounded like Lily refusing to go to daycare. That was a situation Angela was well-versed in handling, so the odds were stacked against me. I switched to a sympathy play. “I'm tired.”

“You're too young to be tired.” She stood in front of me and adjusted her dress on my shoulders until the v-neck plunged to depths that made me squirm. “Come on, it will be fun.”

“History Never Repeats” by Neil Finn. 1981 Enz Music, Ltd.

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