

# friend zone

(A NEW ADULT COLLEGE ROMANCE)

JUST FRIENDS SERIES

BOOK 2

CAMILLA ISLEY



One

Rose

*Now*

Inside the Smithson's country house, Rose followed Ethan up the stairs and down a corridor with too many white doors to count. He stopped in front of one toward the end, pausing with his hand on the handle. "You're about to have a glimpse into my teenage lifestyle," he said, and flung open the door.

Sprawled on Ethan's bed was a bulging middle-aged man, fast asleep and snoring.

"Rose, meet Uncle Frank." Ethan sighed. "He must've decided my room was as good a place as any to fall asleep."

Rose giggled, taking in what she could of Ethan's room before he closed the door. As it clicked shut, they tiptoed away, careful not to wake the sleeping man.

"We'll have to take one of the guest rooms." Ethan turned on his heel and headed back toward the beginning of the hall.

He opened a random door. Before Rose could peek inside, Ethan roared and rushed into the room. Rose made to follow him but stopped dead on the threshold. She raised a hand to cover her mouth as she stared at the scene before her eyes in shocked silence...

Two

Alice

*Seven Months Ago*

Jack had beaten her to the library. He was waiting inside the small reading room, head bent over his laptop, and a cute frown on his face. He hadn't spotted her yet, so Alice paused and studied him through the glass door.

Even seated, it was easy to tell Jack was tall; all basketball players had to be. Not to mention playing varsity sports gave him a lean, flat-muscled body all too visible under his tight t-shirt and faded jeans. Dark eyes and hair, high cheekbones, and a straight nose made her best friend dangerously gorgeous. And his mouth... it was made to keep girls awake at night, which unfortunately it did—*too often*.

As Alice leaned closer to the glass, a dark lock slipped out from behind her ear, startling her. She still wasn't used to being a brunette. What would Jack say? Would he like it? Only one way to find out. Alice grasped the door handle and her chest tightened. He would reject her. Telling Jack the truth now was a bad idea; she should wait. *Yeah, definitely wait*. Today was a regular work-on-your-group-project-and-not-tell-Jack-you-love-him kind of day.

Alice pushed the door open. "Hey," she greeted

Jack.

“Hey, Ice.” Jack looked up from behind his laptop. “Whoa!” His dark eyes widened in shock, and his gaze made Alice’s stomach flip. “What’s up with the hair?”

“Change of style.” She dropped her messenger bag on the floor and sat in the chair next to him. “Ethan dumped me.” Alice pretended the news was trivial as she set up her laptop on the table.

“So you dyed your hair black?” Jack tousled his fringe, perplexed.

It was a habit of his, one that made Alice want to run a hand through his soft curls every time he messed them around. The gesture exposed more of his biceps, too, making Alice wonder what kissing him would feel like if she were free to lock one hand in Jack’s hair, pull his lips to hers, and wrap the other hand around the marble-like smoothness of his arm.

She mentally slapped away her hands, and said, “I was tired of the fake blonde. Like it?” Alice hoped the makeover would stir something in Jack, but he ignored her question point blank.

“What happened with the dude? You’ve been dating him for what... three, four months now?”

“Remember when I told you about the night of Georgiana’s birthday party?”

“Your former sorority big sister?”

“A big sister is for life, even if she graduates and moves on to grad school. But, yes, her.”

“She’s hot.” Jack smirked. “You should introduce me.”

“Can’t do. She’s in Paris with her boyfriend until next semester.” Alice rolled her eyes, and Jack laughed.

“So? What does Georgiana have to do with Ethan dumping you?”

“Well, he’s her brother, for one—”

“Seriously?” Jack made a mind-blown gesture.

“Yeah. We were at that hip sushi restaurant downtown for Georgiana’s birthday and Ethan ditched me at the table to go flirt with this other girl. But then he showed up at my place later and apologized, and I thought we were okay. It was business as usual—and then he ghosted me for a month straight.”

“That’s awful.”

Jack was clearly trying and failing to keep his lips from twitching. Ghosting was his favorite breakup strategy.

Alice ignored his distracting lips, and said, “The radio silence was driving me mad, so last night I confronted him. He didn’t even try to deny it.”

“The ghosting part, or that he’s seeing someone else?”

“Either. Both,” Alice admitted. “At least he was honest.”

“Do we know *the other woman*?”

“No, but she’s a grad student, too.”

“Hot?”

“Yeah, she’s hot.” Alice swatted him playfully. “You’re not helping...”

Jack waggled his eyebrows. “Want me to seduce her for you?”

*Yeah. Just what I need.* “I doubt she’s into college juniors.”

“You never know,” Jack said, focusing on his laptop screen. With a few clicks of the mouse, he opened the 3D model of a complex molecule they had to design for their Organic Chemistry group assignment. Jack started to rotate the model but stopped to regard Alice with a suspicious air. “Wait, is this girl... What’s her name?”

“Rose.”

“How sweet,” Jack said. “Is she a brunette?”

Alice’s cheeks burned. “Yep.”

“Hence the hair change?”

“No. Ethan made it clear I got a one-way ticket to the dumpster. Dark brown is actually my natural hair color. I’ve decided I want to be truer to myself from now on. Starting with my hair, I guess.” *And my feelings for you.*

“If it’s any consolation”—Jack knocked twice on the table—“Lori and I are over, too.”

Alice shifted in her chair as a slow melting sensation started in her stomach. Jack’s low voice did weird things to her. Especially when he was saying he was single. Alice had feared Lori would become a long-term problem. And now, *poof*, she was gone. Was it a

sign she should talk to Jack today? And say what, I love you? *Nah*. Maybe a physical approach would be better with Jack. She should just grab his face and kiss that mouth. *How would he react if I did?* The thought made her cheeks flame red, and Alice decided to take it slow. She didn't have to kiss him right now. Better to hear about the breakup first.

Alice pursed her lips, schooling her face to appear concerned instead of elated as she spoke. "Why? I thought your bio concentration was a keeper, what with all her talk of med school and her short skirts."

Jack snorted. "Until she went from super fun to a clingy nightmare in the space of five dates."

"I wasn't the only one who had a bad night, huh?" Alice suppressed a satisfied smile. Her plan to make a move on Jack had just become much simpler.

"Mine was horrible, trust me."

"Worse than mine? At least you did the dumping." Jack hated confrontations, in particular with the girls he dated. Hence the ghosting. "What happened? Lori a crier?"

Jack scowled at her. "It's not funny. She's a kidnapper. Batshit crazy."

"A kidnapper?" That was a new one. "What did she do?" Alice was genuinely curious at this point.

"She picked me up after school because we had a date." Jack abandoned the 3D model and turned toward Alice. "So I naively got into her car."

“Wait—to dump her?”

“Yeah, my plan was to tell her and leave.”

“Wow, no ghosting?”

“Nah.” He shook his head. “I’d run into her too often to pull that off. She’s taking pre-med Chemistry, remember?”

“No, I’d forgotten,” Alice lied, and gestured for him to keep talking.

“So I got into her car and she drove away. I asked her if we could go talk somewhere quiet, and she told me I’d just read her mind.”

“She was expecting the ‘Sayonara’ speech?”

“No way. This is where my tale gets interesting.” Jack grimaced as if in pain. “I noticed she was heading out of town toward the middle of nowhere, so I asked her where we were going. ‘A special place,’ she told me.”

“Oh gosh.” Alice put a hand to her head. “This story is about to get dreadful, isn’t it?”

“In a second. The best part is coming.” Jack winced. “I tried to tell her I didn’t have much time, and that we needed to talk. She ignored me and kept driving, insisting I had to see this place, no matter how many times I asked her to pull over.”

“But couldn’t you have made it clear you didn’t want to go?”

“Believe me, I did. At that point, I had two options: either keep sitting in the car or grab the wheel and make

her pull over by force.” Jack frowned at the memory.

“Lori literally kidnapped me.”

“How long were you in the car?”

“Close to an hour?”

Alice let out a low whistle. “Where to?”

“Here’s the best part.” Jack groaned. “She took me to this scenic viewpoint on top of a hill and timed it so we would get there at sunset.”

Alice almost felt sorry for Lori, except that her total fiasco served Alice’s cause too well.

“My day is improving,” she said. “Now I can cross myself off the most-humiliated-girl spot. What happened when she stopped the car?”

“I tried to speak first, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Of course not.” Alice chuckled. “What did she say?”

“She told me she was falling for me, that I was the only guy she’d cared about in a while...” Jack paused. “Her speech ended with the L-word.”

“Oh gosh, poor girl. And that’s when you told her?”

“Yep.”

“And what did she do?”

“Let me just say the one-hour drive back to the city was... *awkward*.” Jack sing-songed “awkward.”

“Well, at least she didn’t leave you stranded on the hilltop.” Alice’s mouth trembled with the effort of not smiling. “I would have.”

“Nah, Lori might still hope she can change my

mind.”

Alice’s pulse sped up as she asked, “Can she?”

“No way. If I had any doubts, yesterday’s trip cleared them up for good.” Jack made a gun with his fingers and shot himself in the head. “Worst Friday night of my life.”

“Really?” Alice couldn’t hide her amusement.

He nodded. “Really. Ice, why don’t you turn on your laptop so we can get going. You can give me more grief later. Deal?” Jack added a stomach-flipping wink.

“Deal,” Alice whispered, suddenly out of breath.

As she powered on her Mac, her fingers prickled. Both their relationships had ended on the same day; it had to mean something. Today *was* tell-your-best-friend-you-love-him day. She’d wait until they were done with the project to speak to Jack. *Or jump him*. He was single and wouldn’t stay so for long; this was her moment. After all, how bad could it go? Not as tragic as with Lori. The worst he could say was no...

## Three

### Alice

Alice burst into her three-bedroom apartment, slamming the door shut behind her. Ignoring her roommates' questioning faces, she crossed the entrance hall to her room and flung herself onto the twin bed. Alice hid her head under the pillow and suffocated a scream with the bedcover.

Both of her roommates followed her into the room.

"Are you okay?" Haley asked.

"Hey, what's up?" Madison said.

Alice rolled over on the bed so she lay facing the ceiling. Still holding the pillow over her face, she muttered something incomprehensible.

The mattress dipped as her friends sat next to her one on each side of the bed. "You might have to repeat that without the pillow covering your mouth," Haley suggested, her voice coming from the right.

Alice lifted the pillow to say, "I just humiliated myself in the worst possible way," and then hid her face again.

"How?" Haley asked.

She pressed the pillow harder against her face and shook her head, refusing to speak.

Haley tickled her sides. "Come on, out with it."

Alice thrashed in the bed, trying to make Haley stop.

Finally, she tossed the pillow aside. “I surrender!” she yelled. “I’ll tell you everything.” She recovered the pillow from the floor catching sight of Blue, her pet bunny, hopping away from the commotion. Alice straightened and settled the pillow behind her head, then took a moment to study her friends.

On her left, Madison. An introverted poet in the body of a statuesque blonde who dressed like a boho hippie. Her long, soft curls were always loose, and a book was constantly in her hands, like now. On Alice’s right, Haley. An edgy computer science geek with a sleek, dark bob and an urban style. Whenever Haley had something in her hands, it was some techie gadget with software in it. They were both smiling at her encouragingly.

“I hit on Jack!” Alice confessed.

Madison looked down at her with big eyes. “You didn’t!” she yelled, her grip tightening on the hardback in her lap.

“I did.”

“I take it it didn’t go well,” Haley said.

Alice groaned. “Worse.”

“What happened to our plan of waiting for a gap in girlfriends while you moved out of the friend zone?” Haley asked.

Madison nodded, but kept silent; she was letting Haley run the interrogation.

“The gap presented itself sooner than we thought.”

Alice told them about the kidnapping debacle. “And you know how Jack is. He would’ve been dating someone else by Monday, so I... I...”

“Did something stupid and impulsive?” Haley offered.

Alice nodded.

“What did you do? Jump him?”

“I tried.” Alice moaned with shame. “I threw myself at him, and he was like ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’”

Anxiety broke on Haley’s face. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Me too,” Madison added, looking fretful and worried.

Haley took Alice’s limp hand, squeezing it. “Did he say why?”

“He said we’re friends.” Madison and Haley both kept silent, waiting for the rest. So Alice gave it to them. “And that’s when I practically begged him for it. And he just kept saying no.”

“You begged?” Haley repeated. “Give us specifics.”

“He said I was his friend, and I countered by saying he’s slept with all his female friends. He told me that’s exactly why he doesn’t have many left. So I told him Felicity is still his best friend, even though she’s female, and he slept with her.”

“Who’s this Felicity?” Haley asked.

“She’s his oldest friend from Indianapolis.”

“What happened between them?” Madison asked.

“I don’t know the specifics. Only that at some point they had a relationship that didn’t end well. And Jack was all like”—Alice started talking in a mock dude voice—“*It took me two years to be friends with her again after we broke up. I won’t screw up another friendship.*” She made a finishing gesture with her hands. “End of story.”

“Hmm. What happened after that cozy little chat?” Haley asked.

“He told me I was upset about Ethan dumping me.”

“Which is sort of true,” Madison said. “I still can’t believe my cousin broke up with you.”

“It doesn’t matter, really. I’m not upset about Ethan, I’m upset about Jack.”

“How did you leave things?” Haley asked.

“I followed his lead and pleaded temporary ‘I-was-dumped’ insanity.”

“Well, at least you didn’t give him the ‘I’ve been desperately in love with you for two years’ speech,” Haley said. “Harder to take back.”

“No doubt,” Alice agreed.

“What if Jack was right?” Madison asked. Alice flashed her an incendiary stare, so her friend hurried to explain. “I mean, he’s not exactly boyfriend material, and you don’t want to be friends with benefits.”

“I know he’s attracted to me—”

Haley scoffed. “He’s attracted to every good-looking female.”

“Fair enough, but we have a deeper bond. We’re not just friends.” Alice pointed a finger at them in turns. “You both said that.”

“Yeah, okay,” Haley conceded. “But put yourself in his shoes.”

“How so?”

Haley sighed. “He’s a guy, gorgeous, and he can have all the girls he likes. He enjoys his popularity with the ladies. When he gets tired, or when a relationship gets too serious, he moves on to another girl. But he has you for all his emotional needs. A constant, steady connection that he doesn’t risk screwing up by sleeping with someone else. You told me yourself he doesn’t have self-control when it comes to sex.”

“Well, he does with me.” Alice pouted.

Haley gave her an encouraging smile. “Which, in a twisted way, tells you how much he cares about you.”

“He can keep Felicity as his emotional backup.”

“Felicity is a thousand miles away,” Haley pointed out. “You’re here.”

“And I don’t think him confiding in his ex would work so great for you,” Madison added. “Do you even know her?”

“I’ve seen her around campus a couple of times when she came to visit.”

“Why don’t you talk to her and get an informed opinion?” Madison suggested. “Ask her if it was worth risking their friendship for a shot at love.”

Alice shrugged. “I don’t have her number.”

“Mm, helloooo?” Haley said. “Pity we don’t live in a world where finding people on the Internet is just a name search away. I wish there was a website for that. How about we invent it and become gazillionaires?”

“I’m not friending her on Facebook,” Alice replied stubbornly. “And I’m not talking to her. I can’t risk anything getting back to Jack. I don’t even know if I can trust her—what if she’s still holding a torch for him? I’d pour my heart out to her, and the next second she’d spill everything to Jack. I’d be digging my own grave.”

“You don’t know that,” Madison said. “Aren’t you curious to talk to the only person who can tell you how the friend-girlfriend-friend cycle really is?”

“Even if she said being with him wasn’t worth ruining their friendship, it would mean nothing. They may not have been able to make it work, but that doesn’t mean it would go wrong with us, too.”

“You want to be his girlfriend, and he doesn’t want a girlfriend,” Haley said flatly. “You could be headed down the same destructive path as Felicity if you’re not careful.”

“What if he broke up with Felicity because he wasn’t in love with her?” Alice insisted.

“And he is with you?”

Alice shrugged. “There’s a deep connection between us, something more than a friendship. If, as you said,

he relies on me emotions-wise, what do you call that?"

Haley blew out, making her bangs balloon for a second. "Complicated."

"It is. But I'm tired of playing the 'friend' role, pretending I don't have feelings for him. I'd rather try and fail than not try because he's afraid it *could* fail."

"So what do we do now?" Madison asked.

Alice lifted up to a sitting position, lying back against the headboard. "We make him jealous."

"You were with my cousin for months, and Jack never showed signs of jealousy."

"Jack never saw me with Ethan," Alice said. "There's a big difference between knowing someone you like is dating someone else and seeing it with your own eyes."

Madison arched her brows. "So you're looking for a casual hook up?"

"Ew. No!" Alice grimaced. "I just want to show Jack what he's missing."

"How?" Haley asked.

"For once, I'll shed the geek uniform." Alice stuck to a conservative dress code in class, and Jack had never seen her dressed to impress. "It's time he realizes I'm a woman. I could read indecision in his eyes before he said 'no.' He just needs a push."

Madison scratched her cheek before asking, "No chance you saw only what you wanted to see?"

"No, I'm positive, and I'm tired of pretending. I

don't want to be his friend. Watching him sleep his way through campus is like dying a slow death. It makes me live in fear that one of his girls will eventually stick around, and she won't be me. I get anxious whenever he dates someone for more than a month, and I'm not interested in being his emotional fix forever." Alice waved one hand in the air dismissively. "If he really feels nothing for me, I'd rather find out now and move on with my life."

A muffled squeal came from under the bed. Alice bent over to reach and pick up Blue. "This is all your fault," she told the dark gray bunny as she stroked his soft fur. "If you hadn't scurried off to his room in our freshman year, I would've never met Jack."

A flashback of that day forced its way into Alice's mind.

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*Alice ran down the hall of her newly assigned freshmen dorm to find Blue. Her stupid roommate had let him out of his cage and then forgotten to close their door. Alice popped her head inside every room on both sides of the hall, asking, "Hi, have you seen a small bunny, dark gray fur?" But no luck.*

*Her anxiety grew with each passing door—until she reached the end of the corridor and stopped on the threshold of the last room. Inside, a guy sat on a twin bed holding Blue in his lap. He was wearing a simple white t-shirt, black basketball shorts, and man's slides.*

*And he was SO hot.*

*Alice barged into the room. "You found Blue," she shrieked, startling both human and bunny.*

*A pair of dark eyes focused on her and the boy's expression changed from slightly alarmed to interested. Something fluttered inside Alice's belly. Blue had stumbled upon the best-looking boy of the dorm: dark brown hair, square jaw, and a general tousled, bad-boy aura.*

*Alice lowered her gaze, suddenly self-conscious. His scrutiny felt like having a spotlight pointed at her face. She did a quick mental checklist of the state of her hair, makeup, and clothes. Um, probably not good; she'd run out of her room midway through her unpacking, in cozy clothes, no makeup, and her hair was a recently bleached mess.*

*"Hello stranger," the boy said, flashing her a*

*mischievous grin.*

*“Hi.” Alice pushed an unruly lock of hair behind her ear. “You have my bunny.”*

*The hottie scratched Blue behind the ears, making him purr. I’d purr, too, if it were me, she thought.*

*“Blue, is it?” he asked.*

*“Yep.”*

*The boy cocked his head toward her. “And you are?”*

*“Alice.”*

*“I’m Jack.”*

*“Nice to meet you.” Alice took a tentative step forward. “Can I have him back?”*

*“Wait, don’t I get a reward for finding him?” Jack teased.*

*He should get a reward for finding you, Alice thought. Instead, she said, “Your reward would be that I take Blue back before he poops on you.” Did I really just say “poop” in front of a super-hot guy? Alice blushed as she watched Jack’s smile switch back from dashing to mildly worried. She closed the distance between them and took the struggling bunny from his hands. At the light brush of skin on skin, a shiver ran through her.*

*“You start tomorrow?” Jack asked. “Or are you one of the luckies with no lectures on Monday?”*

*“Definitely not lucky.” Alice shook her head. “My first class is at a stupid early hour.”*

*“Same bad luck here. You pick a concentration already?”*

*Alice frowned. “Concentration?”*

*“It’s the fancy word they use around here for major,” Jack explained.*

*“Oh, that.” Why can’t they just call it a major? “Chemistry.”*

*“No way, same as me.” His face lit up. “You’re in Professor Chase’s class?”*

*“Yes.” Same major—concentration, whatever—same classes. I’ll see you almost every day. Alice did a victory dance inside her head.*

*“Me too.” The “I’m interested” smirk was back on his face. “Want to go together?”*

*“Sure.” Alice clutched Blue more tightly as the bunny tried to leap out of her grasp and back into Jack’s lap. “I’m just a few doors down, room 254.”*

*“I’ll stop by tomorrow morning. Deal?”*

*“Deal.”*

*“See you later, Ice.”*

*Alice’s face fell a little. “It’s Alice.”*

*“Mind if I go with Ice?”*

*Usually, her name got shortened to Ali or Ally. Lice once, thanks to a mean girl in fourth grade. But never Ice.*

*“Why Ice?” she asked.*

*“It has the most beautiful crystalline structure.”*

*Oh! He was flirting with her using molecular*

*structures. If this wasn't perfect chemistry...*

*Alice left the room and walked down the hall, but then, on impulse, decided to look back. Jack was leaning against his doorframe, smiling. He'd been watching her go.*

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“You would've met Jack in class the next day anyway,” Haley said, bringing Alice back to present.

“Yeah, but if it wasn't for this little guy”—she kissed Blue and set him back on the floor—“we wouldn't have gone together. I wouldn't have sat next to him that day, or the next, and now I wouldn't be stuck in the stupid friend zone.”

“It could be worse,” Haley insisted. “You could've slept with Jack freshman year and now he wouldn't even remember your name.”

On Alice's other side, Madison blushed a furious red. She was very self-conscious of one-night stands and guys ditching her afterward.

Alice crossed her arms and pouted. “Say what you like, I'm tired of waiting.”

“What's your evil plan to make him jealous?” Madison asked.

“He's going out with the team tonight,” Alice said. Jack played varsity basketball for the Harvard Crimson. “He doesn't know I know his plans.”

Haley narrowed her eyes at her. “And how do you

know?"

"A girl in my photography class is dating a guy on the team. She told me."

"And what are these plans?" Madison pressed.

"Halloween house party; I'm going, and you're coming with me."

"To a party populated by tall basketball players?" Madison smirked. "Who am I to complain? Where's the party? Is it walk-in, or do we need an invitation?"

"It's someone's house off campus, and all Kappa Kappa Gamma are invited."

Their sorority was where Alice, Haley, and Madison had met. After becoming close friends, they'd moved in together at the beginning of sophomore year. Greek life at Harvard wasn't residential, so no sorority house. Both Haley and Alice had been recruited as freshmen, while for Madison Smithson, being a Kappa Kappa Gamma was a family legacy. Just like going to Harvard, and then Harvard Law School. The sorority was also where Alice had met Madison's cousin who, at the time, was a senior and chose to mentor Alice. Now Georgiana was in law school. Weird how many people in Alice's life shared the same surname. Ethan, too, was a Smithson. The only one ever to quit the family's law firm to start his own real estate business. He was the black sheep of the family. *Alice, Ethan could be a golden sheep, you don't care. He dumped you! Stop thinking about that particular Smithson.*

“What about Emily’s party?” Haley asked. “I told her we were going.”

“Yeah, but her parties suck. We can stop on our way to say hello, stay half an hour, and then join the real paaarrttyy.” Alice bobbed her shoulders up and down to an imaginary tune.

“We’re sold on the party switch.” Haley nodded. “But just showing up won’t be enough to mess with Jack. So...?”

“I’ve no idea. I figure I’ll make it up as I go.” Alice looked at her friends with a conspiratorial air. “Your task is to make me as hot as I can be in my costume.” She struck a pin-up pose, pushing her chest forward and locking her hands behind her head. “I want to show him what he’s saying ‘no’ to.”

“All right, Miss Femme Fatale,” Haley joked. “Let’s make you irresistible.”

## Four

### Jack

Jack was late. In less than an hour he had to be Halloween-ready, and he was still in the bathroom shaving. This was the last Saturday before the basketball season kicked off, a.k.a. the last game-free weekend for the next five months. To celebrate, the entire team was going to a house party. The address he had was just a few blocks off campus, meaning Jack could get as wasted as he liked with no car to drive.

And he *needed* to get wasted tonight.

What an awful weekend he'd had so far. First, a kidnapping followed by a traumatic breakup, and then his best friend tried to kiss him in the library. Women were crazy; he was past due for a guy's night.

*No, not women plural*, Jack corrected himself. One woman in particular.

He didn't care about Lori; she'd get over it. Ice, on the other hand... Dodging her once had been hard, but what if she tried again? He wasn't a saint, and her new look sorely tested his self-control. The dark hair was unsettling—*sexier*, even. Not what he was used to. And she'd tried to kiss him! *Don't think about it, Jack*. He'd mistaken his connection with a friend for something more once, hurting Felicity hard. The whole thing had been a disaster, one he wasn't going to repeat with Ice.

Even if it was impossible to forget the thrill he'd felt when she'd come close to him. How their lips had almost touched before he'd come to his senses and pushed her back—

Jack involuntarily jerked his head and cut himself with his razor. He threw the blade in the sink and washed the cut with fresh water. To stop the bleeding, he reached for a paper roll and pressed a sheet of paper on the small wound. This Ice business was affecting him way more than it should. She was just acting out because her boyfriend had ditched her. That was it. When girls dyed their hair and made a move on their best friends, they were acting out. It was nothing more. Ice would be back to normal as soon as she found someone else to date.

Jack frowned at himself in the mirror. All of a sudden, the thought of Ice dating someone else wasn't that pacifying. *What's wrong with me?* Jack had never had a problem with her dating other men. Then again, she'd never tried anything with him before. Since they'd met, he'd kept Ice locked in the friend zone. Okay, maybe not since day one. Jack remembered fondly the girl barging into his room looking for her bunny. She'd been impossibly cute with her messy blonde bun and worried frown. At once, Jack had vowed to make the human bunny his first college catch. But when they'd started seeing each other every day in class, they'd become friends. And now Ice wanted

more. *Not going to happen.*

Ice wasn't the "friends with benefits" type—well, no girl was, really. No matter what they said, girls always ended up asking for more. Commitment, a serious relationship, *I love yous*, and all that. Jack wasn't interested in any of it. He was determined to enjoy his college years with no strings attached.

He removed the paper from his jaw. The bleeding had stopped, so he quickly finished shaving and rinsed the remaining gel from his face. The cold water was soothing on his skin, tempting him to dunk his entire head under the icy stream to cool off. One freezing shower apparently hadn't been enough to forget Alice had made a pass at him.

The doorbell rang, announcing Peter had arrived. *Good!* Peter Wells, his best wingman and team captain, was the fire Jack needed to melt his thoughts about Ice. If possible, Peter was even worse than Jack with girls. The Crimson captain was a senior and always dated a bunch of girls at the same time—freshmen to seniors, or even older. Exactly the bad influence Jack wanted tonight.

He dried his face with a towel, then wrapped it around his neck and went to open the door.

"Sullivan, my man," Peter greeted him.

They clasped hands and bumped chests, which resulted in Jack's hand getting smeared with bluish paint. The team had decided to go to the Halloween

party dressed as Smurfs. The costume was very basic: white sports shorts, no clothes from the waist up, a white jersey beanie, and a *lot* of blue body paint.

Peter was wearing a team hoodie, for now, one the blue paint would make unusable. But the captain always wore team-branded clothes. His favorite pickup line was to tell the ladies he was joining the NBA after graduation. It wasn't necessarily a lie. Peter was bound to receive an offer from one of the big teams sooner or later. What the girls didn't realize was they'd be long forgotten by then. But just saying the three little magic letters—N B A—kept the WAG dream alive, and the girls fell right and left for Peter. His blue eyes, dark hair, and impressive height certainly didn't hurt, too.

Peter gave him the once-over. “Yo, my man, you're late,” he complained. “I need you to get blue and do my back. The lady doctor keeping you busy?”

“The lady doctor was fired,” Jack said, closing the door behind his friend. It was another lady giving him pause.

“Already? What happened?”

“She drove me an hour out of the city to show me the beautiful sunset, tell me she loved me, and announce she was ready to move our relationship to the next level.” Jack raised his hand sarcastically.

“Ouch!”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I had the worst night yesterday.” *And the worst day, today. What the hell,*

*Ice!* Jack shook his head.

Peter took his headshake for disappointment about the doctor. “Come on, my man,” he said. “Tonight we’re going to find you a hot nurse to replace the doctor and cure your soul. Now put on your white shorts and let’s get blue.”

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The Smurf costumes were a rousing success. It was impossible for them to move around the party without being the center of attention. Twenty tall guys were hard to miss in a crowd already—paint them blue, and it became impossible. The ladies seemed to love the idea; the guys scored extra points for daring and originality.

Jack dodged a girl who was pushing through the crowd, sloshing her drink over anyone not fast enough to get out of her way. As she scurried by, Jack noticed the girl’s face was smeared with blue paint. At least one of his teammates had already scored. Jack poured himself a beer from a huge keg and took position next to Peter in a corner that offered a strategic view of the house.

From his vantage point, he spotted a group of three girls with potential: a blonde and two brunettes. The ladies had their backs turned, but the rear view did not call for complaints. The blonde was dressed in a short, airy dress, which looked more like a babydoll shirt. She

had little white wings strapped to her back. *An angel.* One brunette was clad in a tight, glittery black jumpsuit with only one shoulder strap. From her bottom sprouted a tail she'd laced around one wrist for support, and she had kitten ears. *Meow.* The last girl was wearing a short, sequined red dress and had tiny red horns on the top of her head. *Hell-o.* Jack had a good feeling about the trio.

He nudged Peter. "Angel, devil, or hellcat?"

The captain whistled. "I'll take the kitty catty."

A pang of disappointment stabbed Jack's chest; he would've chosen the kitten, too. Never mind. Angel or devil? As they scoped out their targets, a dude in an unoriginal vampire costume approached the girls and left a minute later with the she-devil. "I'll take the angel, then," Jack said.

"Let's see the faces first," Peter cautioned.

Jack stared as the angel spun around; she was pretty and looked familiar. Where had he seen her? Realization hit him a second before the black kitty turned around and they locked eyes. It was Ice.

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