

Let's be
just
friends

(A NEW ADULT COLLEGE ROMANCE)

JUST FRIENDS SERIES

BOOK 1

CAMILLA ISLEY

One

Rose

Something woke Rose with a start. She tried to pinpoint the source of the noise, but it stopped before she could. A quick peek at the alarm clock sitting in silence on her bedside table told Rose it was only 9:00 a.m. *Good. At least two more hours to sleep.*

The noise started again just as Rose was beginning to drift off. Already half-awake, she managed to identify the sound clearly this time. It was Tyler's phone ringing in the distance. *But, where?* Not in the adjoining room where Rose assumed he was sleeping. No, the sound seemed to be coming from farther away, somewhere on the lower floor of Tyler's townhouse.

Curled under her soft covers, Rose waited for the sound of his quick footsteps down the stairs, but it never came. He must've been fast asleep, in which case she doubted the faint noise of his ringtone would be enough to wake him. Tyler was a heavy sleeper ordinarily, and he'd been out all night, or at least until three this morning when she'd gotten in. She guessed he wouldn't wake up until at least noon.

Rose waited for the phone to stop ringing so she could go back to sleep. But Tyler's vintage MC Hammer ringtone started playing again almost

immediately. *Can't touch this...*

Throwing the blankets away from her, Rose sat up and swung her legs off the side of the bed. What the hell! Who was so eager to talk to Tyler this early on a Saturday morning?

Georgiana! The name popped into Rose's mind. She was the only person who'd obsessively binge-call him on a Saturday morning and not get the message people wanted to sleep. Even Tyler's mom would've given up after two missed calls. Why was Georgiana so desperate to talk to him? Did they have a huge fight? Did he finally ditch her? No, that would be too good to be true; they probably just had some kind of argument.

Rose sat on the edge of her bed, tense, listening. The phone had gone quiet again. She waited to hear if it was going to ring again and began twisting her long brown hair into a side braid. Sure enough, after a few seconds, she heard the same familiar tune. *Can't touch this...*

Irritated, she hopped off her bed, threw open her door, and stepped out onto the landing.

Tyler's door was shut. Rose pressed her right ear to the wooden panels. She heard the faint, regular breathing of someone sleeping. Listening more closely, she tried to make out the sound of a second person breathing, but she could only hear Tyler. It seemed he was alone.

Rose stepped away from the door, disappointed. So

the argument had not been about Tyler cheating on Georgiana with some other girl. Rose was surprised—and a little annoyed—that Tyler had been faithful to Georgiana for as long as he had. Not that she supported the cheating, but she was eager for Georgiana to be out of their lives, and Tyler *had* cheated on every girl he'd ever been with. It was maddening that the one girl he'd decided to be faithful to was an obnoxious Regina George type.

The house fell silent again. Standing there in the hall in nothing but a turquoise tank top with a frilly trim and matching shorts, Rose shivered. Boston always seemed too cold compared to Texas, no matter the season. She would've preferred to wear an oversized sweater to bed, but last night she'd had no other choices. Busy with her Summer Academic Fellowship for Harvard Law, she hadn't bothered to do laundry in weeks. Her Victoria's Secret PINK set was the only clean thing left at the bottom of the sleepwear drawer. It was either that or two drops of Chanel number five.

Rose massaged her arms with her hands to warm herself up as she turned around, away from Tyler's door and toward the bathroom. *Might as well, since I'm already up.* She finished her business and was about to exit the bathroom when she caught herself in the mirror. Her mini-pajama fit her well. Yes, not bad at all. Pity she turned into a popsicle when she wore them.

Rose moved her gaze up to her face. Her eyes were such a dark brown as to be almost black, and her skin tone made her look constantly tanned. Not like Georgiana with her impossibly white skin, long licorice-black hair, and startling blue eyes. Did Tyler prefer blue eyes? Over the years, he hadn't shown any particular trend in his women. Tall, short, curvy, androgynous, brunette, blonde, redhead—it didn't matter to him. As long as they were attractive.

Tyler's phone began ringing again downstairs. Like an angry cat, Rose hissed at the mirror. How was she supposed to sleep if that damn thing was going to go off every five minutes? She exited the bathroom and ran down the stairs, the carpet muffling her steps.

After a quick scan of the living room—no phones in sight—she eventually located the phone in the kitchen: a shiny rectangle lying innocently on the table—lifeless. Rose looked at its black screen accusingly just as it started ringing again. Georgiana's smiling face greeted her. So it *was* her calling. Rose grabbed the phone, turned it to silent, and put it back down, relieved. Georgiana's face remained lit for a few more seconds and then disappeared.

With the phone neutralized, she could go back to her peaceful sleep-in day. But as she turned to leave, a speech bubble popped up on the screen. The temptation was too strong; Rose snatched up the phone and read it.

Georgiana: I'm sorry, ok? Can you please pick up?

So they definitely had an argument. And it looked like it was Georgiana's fault. What could she have done? Nothing too bad, Rose was sure. Georgiana was all sweetness with Tyler. She acted nasty only when he wasn't around, during the rare times when Georgiana and Rose were alone together.

Georgiana was jealous of her. That was the only explanation. The sentiment was strong and reciprocated, too. Georgiana didn't like the idea of her boyfriend living with his attractive female best friend. As for Rose, she didn't appreciate Georgiana's intrusion into their friendship—or the intrusion of any of Tyler's girlfriends, for that matter.

And Georgiana was more annoying than most of the girls he dated. She went to Harvard Law with them, meaning she imposed not only on their free time but on their school time as well. In class, she sat with them—Rose on one side, Georgiana on the other, and Tyler sandwiched in the middle. At lunch, she ate with them. When they were studying, she followed them to the library. And she was at the house so often that Rose wondered if she was trying to move in without Tyler noticing. Georgiana being beautiful and rich didn't help. Nor the fact that she was the daughter of one of the most powerful and recognized lawyers in Boston,

Bradley Smithson.

This was the first time since high school that Tyler had dated someone who was in school with them. Rose had forgotten how hard it was to have a daily reminder of him being with someone else. Not to mention the unwelcome novelty of being in the next room when Georgiana spent the night. Contractors should make thicker walls. It was almost like Georgiana was being a loud lover on purpose, to make sure Rose knew just how well Tyler satisfied her in bed. *Her*. Not Rose. Never Rose.

When Tyler had first started going out with Georgiana, it hadn't been so hard. Not while Rose had been with her boyfriend Marcus, her longest relationship to date. She suspected the two years she'd spent with Marcus had been Tyler's first experience with jealousy. She remembered being glad when he'd started dating Georgiana so she could finally stop feeling guilty for spending all her time with her boyfriend. Rose also hadn't told Tyler she was moving in with Marcus and hadn't been sure how he would take the news. Then everything had collapsed. Marcus had been offered a huge promotion in LA. And in less than a month, he'd left Rose heartbroken, with a canceled lease and nowhere to live. Of course, Tyler had stepped in immediately and invited Rose to stay in his spare bedroom. She'd accepted, grateful to have her best friend near her 24/7. Georgiana hadn't been happy

about it.

Rose sat in a chair at the kitchen table and rolled Tyler's phone in her hands, tempted to snoop. She didn't know why, but it seemed important she found out why Tyler and Georgiana had argued. But if Tyler discovered her at it, he'd flay her. He'd always been protective of his things, especially his phone, at least with his girls, and usually with a good reason. Although lately, he'd been growing increasingly private with her, too. Rose felt left out, and she couldn't help but blame Georgiana.

Georgiana, who was sorry for something she'd done. *What was it?* She contemplated the black screen, trying to make up her mind. *To spy or not to spy?*

"What are you doing?"

Tyler's voice put a sharp end to her dilemma. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, wearing only a pair of gray sweat pants.

"Oh, you're awake, good!" Rose said, faking anger to cover her embarrassment at nearly being caught in the act. "Next time if you leave your phone lying around, do me a favor and put it on silent so it doesn't wake me up."

"Rose." There was an edge to his voice. "Why were you looking into my phone?"

"I wasn't looking into your phone." She dropped the phone on the table. "This thing has been ringing nonstop for almost an hour. I couldn't sleep, and it

didn't seem like you were getting up anytime soon, so I came downstairs to silence it.”

“If you were just putting the phone on silent, why were you sitting on a chair with it in your hands?”

Always the lawyer.

“I was trying to decide if your cuckoo girlfriend had ruined my sleep-in,” Rose said, getting up. Her chair scraped loudly on the kitchen's floor. “Or if I could go back to bed.”

Rose stared him down; attack was the best defense. But would he believe her?

Two

Tyler

Rose's aggressive tone was familiar. It was the one she used when she got caught doing something she shouldn't and wanted to steer the attention away from herself. She was *so* busted. Tyler didn't really care if she'd tried to hack his phone. Try as she might, his password was an alphanumeric nightmare, and he was sure not even the CIA would be able to crack it. One bad experience with an above-average tech savvy girlfriend had been enough to force Tyler to up his security.

Still, what business did Rose have nosing around his things? Usually, it was hysterical girlfriends who tried to hack him, not his best friend. He kept no secrets with Rose. Well, except maybe his constant arguments about her with Georgiana. Rose had never been BFF with any of his previous girlfriends, but with Georgiana, it had been hate at first sight. On both sides. Had Rose sensed she'd been the reason for their argument? But if she wanted to know, all she had to do was ask.

Tyler was planning a way to make her confess when she stood up, and he saw what she was wearing—or rather how much she wasn't. His eyes widened and his

mouth dropped open. He was used to seeing his best friend in faded loose t-shirts three or four sizes too big for her. Not in mini shorts. Definitely not in mini shorts.

Rose must have noticed his staring because she blushed bright red. Yet, she didn't lower her gaze or rush off. *Weird*. Regular Rose was so shy and reserved. So much so that in the six months they'd been living together she'd never shown more skin than that on her ankles. When she showered, she brought her clothes in the bathroom and came out already changed. He'd never even seen her in a towel. Even when she did the wash, she planted herself outside of the tiny laundry room like a watchdog. She said she didn't want him to see her underwear because it embarrassed her. So her standing there half-naked and bold was seriously freaking him out.

Frozen, Tyler watched her walk toward him.

"Anyway, Georgiana says she's sorry," Rose said, brushing past him as she continued toward the stairs. "And before you ask, no—I didn't spy. The message popped up on the screen."

Tyler followed her, not quite able to tear his eyes from her derrière as she climbed the stairs. He was shocked into silence. Seeing her like this was like being slapped in the face. He hadn't tried to sleep with her, sober or drunk, for how long now? *Two years*. Not since she'd been with Marcus, not since her last fierce refusal of his advances. That night he'd been drunk and

came on to her hard. Her “no” had been equally strong, worse than an ice shower. Sobered up by her rejection, he’d never been tempted to try again. Call it a strong reality check. To him, it had become clear she wasn’t interested. So Tyler had set his mind on being her friend, *just* a friend.

His reaction to her lack of clothes was a dead giveaway that he’d been kidding himself. He collapsed onto the living room couch, taking a few minutes to steady himself and reboot his brain. He’d always thought Rose was beautiful, but he’d never considered her sexy. Yet today, her outfit combined with her defiant attitude made her irresistible. He needed to know what was going on to make her act so strangely. As if pulled by an invisible rope, Tyler got to his feet and followed Rose up the stairs.

His phone remained forgotten and lonely on the kitchen table, Georgiana’s face surfacing on the screen yet again.

At the top of the stairs, Tyler looked toward Rose’s room. She’d left the door half-open. Was it an invitation?

He approached, padding quietly across the carpet, and peeked inside. Rose was lying on the bed, propped on a mound of pillows with her legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. She was playing with her phone.

To his delight, she hadn't changed, or put on a sweater. His Rose, after being caught in mini shorts, would be covered head-to-toe by now. Something was definitely up with her.

Tyler knocked on the door and stepped inside without waiting for permission.

"Oh," she said, surprised. "I thought you'd be downstairs making peace with Georgiana."

"What's up with the shorts?" he asked.

She looked down at herself. "I was behind with my laundry, and this was the only clean set left."

"Weren't you against Victoria's Secret and their objectification of women?" Tyler retorted.

"I didn't buy them." Rose shrugged. "They were a present from Marcus."

She said it casually, but he knew her well. He could detect the lingering sadness hidden behind that simple response. As a loyal friend, he ought to feel sorry for the abrupt way her relationship with Marcus had ended. Instead, Tyler couldn't help but be relieved that Marcus had moved to LA and out of their lives for good. But now a new emotion had entered the mix—a fierce jealousy he'd never experienced before. He was jealous that Rose would wear something so not like herself for Marcus.

Tyler sat on the bed next to her. He took her right foot into his left hand, placed it in his lap, and started massaging her ankle. *Time to switch on the charm and make Rose talk.*

Three

Rose

Rose was extremely aware of Tyler's thumb swirling around her ankle. How long had it been since he'd tried to sleep with her? Tyler had been "well-behaved" since that stupid night two years ago when she'd refused him in no uncertain terms. She almost flinched at the memory. At the time, she'd been so taken with Marcus that she'd been harsh with her best friend, treating him with contempt—and not in their usual playful way. Rose hoped Tyler had been drunk enough not to remember how badly she'd turned him down. But given that he hadn't tried anything ever since, not even after her breakup, some of it must've sunk in. Before that night, his cute, double-meaning jokes and her constant turning him down had let Rose believe she and Tyler weren't together by her choice. That if she only wanted, she could be his girlfriend. That he'd be different for her. But not anymore.

A tingle rose up her legs from where Tyler touched her with the tips of his fingers. It had been easier to say no to Tyler when he was hitting on her once a week. But now she was out of practice and vulnerable. Especially when he was standing in her room looking impossibly hot in sweatpants and nothing else. Rose's

gaze traveled over his naked chest and down to his sculpted stomach before she forced herself to adopt a neck-and-above only view policy. Not that staring at his face helped. With messy light brown hair, gray eyes, and lips to die for, Tyler was gorgeous. And he knew it.

“So what’s up with Georgiana?” Rose put her phone down and looked at Tyler expectantly.

“Oh, nothing,” he replied.

“It must’ve been something if she felt the need to call you ten times on a Saturday morning.”

“I’ve already told you it was nothing.”

“So why was she sorry about nothing?”

“Why do you have to always insist so much when it comes to Georgiana?”

“And why are you so adamant about not telling me? You used to tell me everything!”

“I still do.”

“No, you don’t.”

Tyler’s shoulder tensed and his grip on her feet tightened. “I can’t stand the two of you bickering anymore. I’m always caught in the middle.”

“I’ve never said anything bad about Georgiana,” Rose said, feeling her cheeks warm up. “But apparently she doesn’t have a problem talking behind my back.”

Tyler held her gaze for a few seconds before looking at the floor, embarrassed.

Comprehension dawned. “The argument, it *was*

about me, wasn't it?" Rose said, leaning forward. She folded her legs, her ankle slipping away from Tyler's grip. "Why does she hate me so much?"

"Don't be melodramatic. She's just jealous, that's all."

"Why am I the only friend she's jealous about? Especially when I'm the only one you haven't slept with."

"Well, you're the only friend who lives with me. And Georgiana has this theory: the fact we haven't slept together is more meaningful than if we had. She actually said she wished we'd done it before I met her and got over it!"

"And what exactly makes Georgiana think sleeping with me would make you get over us?"

"Would it?" Tyler asked with a hint of flirtation. He raised one eyebrow and smirked, making one of his cutest, mischievous faces.

"It doesn't matter. We're not going to test it." Rose kept her sulky frown. "So, what was she going on about this time?"

Tyler released a breath. "Georgiana asked me when you were planning on moving out."

Rose shot out of the bed as if it were made of burning coals. "I didn't know I'd overstayed my welcome," she spat. It was just like Georgiana to stick her posh nose into Rose's life, where it didn't belong.

True, Rose was living in Tyler's swanky apartment

without paying any rent. But only because Tyler didn't let her pay her share. To compensate, Rose did what she could. She bought most of the groceries and paid all the bills. Even though she and Tyler had never spoken about it, she thought he was fine with their arrangement. Georgiana had already made a snarky comment once to her: "How nice it must be to live rent-free in such a nice neighborhood." Rose could only imagine what other things along that line she was telling Tyler. The thought made her livid.

"I can start packing immediately." Rose moved to grab some discarded clothes from a chair.

"Rose, will you calm down?" Tyler said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her onto his lap. "I've told Georgiana to piss off."

"You know I feel guilty about not paying rent," she protested, trying to ignore the fact that she was sitting on top of him and they were both half-naked.

"And you know I don't want you to pay anything. You already sneak around and pay all the bills before I even have a chance to open them. It's more than enough."

He put his hands around her waist, making her stomach drop.

"Are you sure?" Rose asked. She needed more than just a physical assurance.

"Rose, my life has improved since you moved in with me. The fridge used to look like a war zone, but

now you make sure I eat all my vegetables,” he joked.

“I bet she just wants me out so *she* can move in,” Rose couldn’t help saying.

“As if.” Tyler snorted, and the goofy sound made Rose happier than she’d been all morning.

She beamed at him, looking him straight in the eyes. Tyler stared back with a strange intensity, and suddenly, Rose’s smile disappeared. He leaned in closer, slowly, and her breath caught in her throat in anticipation

Four

Georgiana

A few miles away, in another posh neighborhood of Boston, Georgiana paced around her living room. As she circled the couch, she was seething with hatred for Rose, anger for Tyler, and resentment for Marcus. Whom she didn't exactly know, but who she was positively sure had ruined her life by moving to LA.

She tried Tyler's number again. When he didn't pick up, she threw her phone across the room and let out a growl. The phone hit an armchair and bounced off its soft cushions, landing on the carpeted floor.

This wasn't going to work. Another woman living with Tyler wasn't right. How could he not see it? What was his house, a stupid co-ed? A charity? Georgiana didn't know for sure, but since Rose and Tyler came from the same rich neighborhood in Dallas, she doubted Rose had money problems. She was just a parasite. Tyler's best friend was poison ivy, and she was sprouting roots in his house.

Why wasn't he picking up his damn phone?

Georgiana checked the time on her Rolex: 9:45 already. She'd been calling him for almost an hour now. Bracing her arms on the back of the couch, Georgiana stared out of her floor-to-ceiling windows

without focusing on anything in particular. Maybe his phone was switched to silent and he hadn't heard it ring. What if Tyler was still asleep? It wasn't unusual for him to sleep late on weekends, and they'd been arguing until the small hours last night. Tyler had left her apartment at—three, four a.m.? By the time he'd gotten home and to bed, it must've been late.

That was it, she decided, Tyler was still sleeping. Nothing to worry about. Yeah, they had a row, and he'd taken Rose's side, *again*, but it would pass. It always did.

Georgiana's nervous fingers tightened their grip on the soft cushions' fabric. *Men!* They could sleep through everything. Unlike her. She'd barely slept and had been forced to use all of her willpower not to call him before nine—Georgiana didn't want to come off as the hysterical girlfriend.

Anyway, Tyler asleep or not, the problem remained. Georgiana needed to weed the poisonous bitch out of her boyfriend's place. The sneaky little ho was after her man. She'd probably been since puberty. Why did Marcus have to dump Rose and give her the perfect excuse to move in with Tyler? To feed off his generosity and good nature?

If Tyler and Rose stayed under the same roof much longer, something was bound to happen. Tyler's relationship with Rose wasn't strictly brotherly—no matter how many times Tyler swore it was. Georgiana

didn't believe in male-female friendships. And their body language sent a clear message: there was tension between them. The fact they hadn't done the deed yet wasn't an assurance it would not happen in the future. It was even worse, in a way. It built pressure, making Rose—the one girl Tyler had never had—too big of a temptation for him to resist.

Why did everything have to go down this way? And why now?

Georgiana felt as if a cosmic conspiracy was in place to undermine her relationship with Tyler. But she wasn't a "live and let live" kind of girl. She was used to taking action and gaining control over things. She'd even tried to convince her brother to provide a distraction for Rose as soon as she'd moved in with Tyler six months ago. Ethan, five years their senior, was drop dead gorgeous and a womanizer. But he'd refused without even meeting Rose. And now was dating one of Georgiana's best friends, Alice, so his charms were out of the picture. To hell with him, too. Georgiana needed a different plan, something final that would keep Tyler and Rose apart for good.

Georgiana turned away from the window and started pacing the apartment again in search of inspiration. It took her a few laps of the room before an idea began forming in her mind. At first, she couldn't quite grasp it. Georgiana was sure she'd overlooked something, but couldn't put her finger on what. Then, out of the blue, a

possibility came to her. She needed to talk to her dad and see if he could help her.

Georgiana sprang into action. She grabbed her bag and car keys from the coffee table and hurried toward the door. Halfway there, she paused and turned around to go get her phone. She picked it up from the floor and checked the screen, only half-hoping to see if Tyler had called her back. He hadn't.

Never mind, he could wait. Right now, she had bigger fish to fry. Filled with purpose, Georgiana plonked the phone into her bag and exited her apartment. She felt strangely calm and regenerated. It was good to finally have a plan.

It'd be complicated to achieve, and she'd have to pull a lot of strings to make it work. Hard, but not impossible. And, *oh*, Rose wouldn't even know what had hit her. Georgiana opened her car and sat behind the wheel. She paused a second with her finger on the ignition button. She closed her eyes, imagining the face her rival would make when she found out. It'd be priceless. But now wasn't the time to celebrate, it was the time to set her plan in motion. To pull it off, she had to act quickly. Georgiana revved the engine and backed out of her parking spot, speeding away on the almost empty street.

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