

Craving The Wrong Brother

Author: Elysian Sparrow

CHAPTER 001: A Hot Nerd

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~~SLOANE~~

I've been in love with my best friend, Finn Hartley, since we met in college ten years ago.

It's not like I'll ever tell him I have feelings for him. I know he doesn't see me that way. He probably won't ever see me that way.

Right now, we're in his living room, and I'm holding him to my chest, listening to him sob.

That damn girlfriend of his has broken his heart again, the third time this year.

"I can't believe she did this to me, Sloane," Finn says.

I run my fingers through his hair, trying to ignore how good it feels.

"What exactly did she do?" I ask. "You still haven't told me."

"I don't know how to say it."

"Well, start from somewhere."

My patience is wearing thin. I've been here for hours, sacrificing my Saturday to watch him disintegrate.

I don't know why he bothers crying when he'll be back in her bed by next week anyway. They do this every damn time.

I should be more sympathetic, I know. But ten years of watching him chase after the same toxic woman tends to erode a person's sympathy.

"Delilah's not coming back, Slaone," he says. "She left me for good this time."

"You know that's a lie."

"It's true. She's engaged. She sent me this digital wedding invitation, and I've been thinking about running my phone through a meat grinder."

That actually surprises me. Engaged? Delilah's getting married?

Finn pulls away from me, and I can finally see his face.

The stubble on his jaw has grown past the sexy phase into something wilder. His white t-shirt is rumpled and stained with what might be yesterday's dinner. I've never seen him this wrecked, and that's saying something.

He fumbles for his phone, fingers trembling as he pulls up the screen.

Then he thrusts the phone at me. There it is—a nauseating rose-gold invitation with flowing script announcing the union of Delilah Crestfield and some guy named Hunter. Eight weeks from now.

My heart skips several beats, a fluttering sensation spreading through my chest.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. This is the best news I've heard in years. The witch is finally, actually, genuinely out of the picture.

"Poor baby," I say, trying to sound sympathetic. "Did you know she was dating someone else?"

"I mean, it's Delilah. When has she ever been faithful?"

"You've got a point."

I hand him back his phone.

"I just can't believe she's leaving me, Sloane." He collapses back into the sofa, staring at the ceiling like it might offer some cosmic explanation.

"I find it hard to believe myself," I say.

My eyes trace his strong jaw, his lips, the eyelashes spiked with dried tears. I've memorized every inch of his face over the years, cataloged every expression. This one is new—complete and utter defeat.

It should make me sad to see him so broken, but all I can think is, "This is my chance."

They've been lovers since high school, way before I came into Finn's life. Sometimes I wonder if that's the key to her hold on him—she knew him before I did, when he was just a boy with a fragile heart.

I've watched Delilah string him along, always knowing she'd come back for another round. The thought that she's finally cut him loose is both thrilling and terrifying. What happens to us now?

"Who am I without her, Sloane?" Finn asks.

"You're Finn Hartley. You'll be alright." I reach over to squeeze his knee.

"I can't be alright without Lila."

"There are over eight billion people in this world, statistically. Just pick someone new."

"Statistically? You're such a nerd."

His words hurt. He's said it a million times before, his usual teasing about my cybersecurity analyst job, my love for random facts, and my collection of vintage sci-fi novels. But today it lands differently.

A nerd. That's all I am to him. Not a woman. Never a woman.

I stand abruptly, smoothing down my jeans and adjusting my glasses. I'll show him just how wild I can be.

"You know what?" I say. "Let's go to a club and get wasted."

Finn looks at me like I've suggested we rob a bank. "You want to go to a club?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been to a club before?"

He sits up straighter, some of the fog clearing from his eyes as he takes me in—plain Sloane in her weekend uniform of jeans and a faded band t-shirt, hair in its usual bob and bangs.

"Not exactly. But there'll be drinking and dancing. I bet it will be fun." I sound more confident than I feel. The truth is, clubs are my personal hell—loud music, sweaty strangers, overpriced drinks. But I'd walk through actual fire if it would make Finn smile again.

A slow grin spreads across his face. "Great," he says. "You're right. I need a distraction." He stands up, suddenly energized. "I'll go put on something appropriate, and then we'll stop by your house so you can change out of whatever the hell you have on right now."

I look down at my outfit, suddenly self-conscious. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Nothing, if we were going to a library book sale." He disappears into his bedroom, calling back, "Trust me, Sloane. Let's show Delilah what she's missing!"

I sink back onto the couch, already regretting my impulsive idea. What have I gotten myself into?

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The club is everything I feared and worse.

The dress Finn insisted I wear—pulled from the back of my closet, a relic from a cousin's wedding three years ago—is too tight, too short, and making me painfully aware of body parts I usually manage to ignore.

We've been here for forty minutes.

Forty minutes of watching Finn transform into someone I barely recognize—throwing back shots at the bar.

Twenty minutes ago, he found a girl—a tall, willowy blonde in a dress that looks spray-painted onto her body. Amber. That's her name.

I stand awkwardly at the dance floor, nursing a watered-down vodka soda, watching Finn and Amber grind against each other in a way that should probably be illegal in public.

Her back is to his chest, her arms raised above her head, fingers tangled in his hair. His hands are on her hips, guiding her movements, his face buried in her neck.

I feel sick. I feel stupid. I feel painfully, obviously alone.

"Sloane?" Finn calls out. "You can't just stand there. Dance!"

"I don't know how to," I shout back.

Amber frowns at me. "Then why are you here?"

"To keep an eye on my best friend."

"Like a chaperone?"

"Yes," I say. "In case you try to slip him a roofie or something."

Finn looks embarrassed. "Just ignore her," he says to Amber, his arm tightening around her waist. "She's a control freak."

Amber snorts. "More like your mom."

"Big sister would be more appropriate," Finn corrects.

Amber's eyes rake over me in a way that makes my skin prickle. "She's hot though, with her bangs and screw-me glasses. A hot nerd."

Finn grimaces. "That's not a very comfortable image."

"Come on. Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

"You don't find her nerdish vibes stimulating?"

Finn is thankfully avoiding my eyes. "More dancing, less talking."

"Seriously? You're not even a little tempted to see Sloane naked?"