Evasive Maneuvers

***By C.T. Byrd***

How did I end up sitting next to Connor Ryan at a Hong Kong film festival? Tucked right up against him like we’re on a fucking *date*?

*How?*

I jam popcorn in my mouth (popcorn I got from *his* tub) and tighten my death grip on the seat arm, thinking that maybe the buttery salt or the soft nap of the worn velvet will wake me from whatever strange dream I’ve stumbled into.

But no, I’m still here. Still in my *Hard Boiled* t-shirt, black jeans and Docs. Still sitting with my knees jammed up against the wooden back of the seat in front of me and if I turn my head just fractionally to the left, I can still see Connor Ryan’s perfect jawline and the slight curl of his dark hair against his neck.

*Fuck.* I angle away and almost manage to lose myself in the extremely violent, yet somehow graceful gunfight that’s exploding across the screen—until Connor shifts and I feel the fine hairs of his forearm brush against mine. Of course my arm jerks dramatically, a movement I try to turn into a totally normal repositioning exercise, ostentatiously crossing my leg and messing with my purse.

But he knows, and I can tell he knows, because I feel him look over and I catch a hint of a smile. And the shit of it is, I don’t know if it’s a nice smile, a laughing (*at* me? *with* me?) smile or a, ‘How hilarious that you thought I meant to touch you,’ smile.

I scrunch down and try to calm my jangling nerves. Lucky I’ve seen *The Killer* three times already because I am definitely not paying attention. Even Chow Yun Fat can’t distract me as I obsessively run over exactly what led to this moment.

The whole thing started so normally.

I got off work from the coffee shop at three. Drove an hour to The City, belting the lyrics to *Yoshimi* the whole way. Happy as a clam that I was going solo to a John Woo double feature at The Roxy. There is nothing I love more than going to the movies, unless it’s going to the movies to see something obscure and cool at a tiny theater in San Francisco.

I was early enough to purchase my habitual Red Vines and Coke before entering the tiny theater and claiming a good seat. A quick look around showed that I was definitely the only highschool-aged person in attendance, a fact which made me nerdily proud.

I was just settling in, slicing the plastic on my licorice and inhaling the heady fragrance of corn syrup and red food coloring, when someone dropped down right in front of me.

I was annoyed before I even looked up.

I mean, the theater was half empty—why was some broad-shouldered jerk crowding my area? But when I did look up, I gasped. I mean, really gasped out loud like an overdramatic heroine in a romance novel.

Because I knew those shoulders instantly. And the neck and the back and the profile. They all belonged to Connor *fucking* Ryan; my school’s vaunted golden boy—star quarterback, likely Valedictorian, shoo-in for prom king and unmitigated dickhead.

Roughly the *last* individual in the wholeworld I wanted to see here. On *my* turf.

The flight part of fight or flight kicked in and I swear, turf or no turf, I almost bolted for the door. But unfortunately my gasp must have carried, because Connor turned around, lifted his eyebrows in a sort of mildly surprised way and said, “Hey, Lauren.”

*Hey, Lauren*. As if this was a totally normal occurrence. As if everything was cool. As if we weren’t sworn fucking enemies.

I froze for about two seconds before blurting, “What are *you* doing here!?”

I’ll admit it came out a tinch on the outraged and accusatory side. It also came out *loud* because several heads swung in my direction.

Connor cut his eyes to the screen and back to me with a shrug. “Watching a movie?”

Apparently my mouth wasn’t done being embarrassing because the next thing it said was, “Did you *know* I’d be here!?”

Connor just looked at me and tilted his head as I felt my face turn what I knew was a deep, enduring burgundy.

I managed to keep quiet for a few more seconds before my embarrassment gave way to a seeming determination to dig an even deeper hole. “Do you even like these kinds of movies??”

“*Shhhh*.” An annoyed salvo from a man a few rows behind me rang out, even though the previews hadn’t even started yet. It was that kind of crowd.

Connor twisted fully around in his seat, looking like he was suppressing a smile, looking exactly like he did in AP English when he was about to say something he knew would piss me off.

“I might.”

He smirked and turned back around, and I thew myself back against my seat, the filament that always flared inside me when I interacted with Connor heating until I couldn’t help popping forward again again. “Have you ever even *seen*—”

“Hey! I got an idea. Why don’t you two just sit together?” Irritated man’s snippy voice sounded again.

“What? No!” I looked to Connor for solidarity in my outrage, but he was patting the seat next to him with a grin.

“Come on, Keller. You can explain the complicated parts to me.”

“*No!*” I said again. Connor shrugged and started to face forward.

“You need to move over though,” I hissed after a moment.

“Do I?” Connor spoke over his shoulder, but kept his back to me.

“Yes! I can’t see! I was here first!”

“Oh my god, just *go sit with him!*” An irritated woman joined irritated man.

I cringed, suddenly realizing I was the person I most hated; the loser disturbing the sacred space of the movie theater. I’d barely made the observation before I was scrambling over the seat, fully intending to drop in two seats away from Connor. But my boot got caught and my jacket slipped and I grabbed for everything as it started to fall, and somehow ended up right next to him.

“Want some popcorn?” He said, holding out the box.

I stared at him for a full five seconds with my mouth opening and closing in what I’m sure was an extremely flattering way, before snatching a handful just as the curtain pulled back from the screen.

That was roughly 2.5 hours ago. And I still have no idea what is happening.

I don’t get any bright ideas in the last thirty minutes either, and before I know it, the closing credits are rolling over swelling string music. Everyone starts to stand up and Connor holds out his arm in a ‘you first’ gesture, so I shuffle down the row.

I can feel his *tallness* behind me as I walk up the aisle.

Maybe, I hope fondly as I shrug into my leather jacket and pull my long braid over my shoulder, he’ll just melt away with a quick goodbye and we’ll never speak of this again. But he stays with me, holding the theater door open over my head and walking with me through the tiny lobby.

I peek at his profile and it occurs to me that everyone around us must think we’re *together*. The thought is shocking and, to my extreme dismay, a little thrilling.

I’m instantly aghast. *Really Lauren? Can you* be *any more shallow??* But I’m also drowning out a tiny voice that whispers that Connor really isn’t the standard issue popular jock though, is he?

And therein lies the rub.

That whole Valedictorian thing? Yeah, he gets better grades than I do—and not just in calculus and physics. He hasn’t quite beat me in English yet, but he’s come close. He can be insightful...even *thoughtful* at times. And his command of Spanish idioms is truly annoying.

But he’s still an arrogant, sarcastic asshole. He argues with me constantly, makes fun of my music and clothes, can just generally be kind of haughty.

Although it’s not like it really bothers me. I deeply do not care about his opinion. And I give back as good as I get.

But he’s *not* someone I’m interested in. I’m very *pointedly* not interested in him; a fact that sets me apart from the entire non-gay female population of my school.

I take a deep breath on this comforting thought, deciding that my momentary attraction was an aberration brought on by proximity and the profound experience of sharing popcorn. I’m a teenager with normal hormones and urges, and he is a (stupidly) fine physical specimen. It’s just biology and nothing more.

A gust of evening air blows a hint of fog and the tang of the nearby ocean against my face as I push through the door of the theater. I let it blast away the last vestiges of my ridiculous thoughts and turn to Connor as we start walking up the street.

“What did you think?” I ask, fully expecting him to say the films were weird or dumb.

“They were great. I really liked the first one. The pacing was insane and the gun fights were almost balletic, but the emotional heart was what made it work.”

“*What*?” I stutter, basically speechless.

“You don’t think I have the depth to enjoy things like that?” He gives me a challenging look.

Busted.

“Of course you do.” I wave my hand. “I guess I’m still just surprised to see you here. How did you find out about it?”

I just cannot keep the incredulity out of my voice and he shakes his head.

“My sister was home from Cal this weekend and she was talking about it,” he says. “And Spencer also mentioned it when I saw him at the video store this morning.”

Spencer!? My best friend. Connor’s ex best friend. Did Spencer *tell* him I’d be here?? The thought whips across my mind, but I quash it immediately. The idea that Connor is here because of me hasn’t gotten any less ridiculous since I blurted it earlier. As if my presence somewhere would do anything but send him running as fast as his all-state legs could carry him in the other direction.

“Why did you come alone?” I ask. He doesn’t seem like the type. “I mean, I like to come to the movies alone, but I’m weird.” I hear the faintest of snorts and I whip my head up. “Oh, fuck off,” I say, but Connor just gives me a smug grin. “What, you couldn’t get any of your cool friends to come to with you?” I continue. “Or no!” I stop on the sidewalk. “You probably didn’t even ask them!”

He looks away and shakes his head once.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” I know I’m right and it fills me with glee.

He looks back and blinks down at me. I notice his eyelashes, dark and unfairly long. “No, OK. I didn’t ask anyone because I knew they would think it was weird. Are you satisfied?”

I squint. “Noo, I’m more feeling sorry for you that you have such shitty friends.”

“I do not have shitty friends!” He’s kind of pissed but also kind of laughing.

“OK, then just dumb ones who would make fun of you for trying something different. That’s the business you’re all in, right? Making fun of people for being different?” I say it with a sort of saccharine sweetness that is clearly not lost on Connor.

“I don’t do that, Lauren.” He shakes his head. “That shit is beneath me.”

“What, like you don’t constantly antagonize me?”

“You mean argue with you when I have a different opinion?”

I glare at him and he grins back down at me.

“Well your friends are dicks.” I mumble.

“Yeah? Your friends can be pretty smug and condescending too.”

“That’s different!”

“What because you don’t play sports? So it’s OK for you to use your intellect and your vast store of snark to put people down?” I start sputtering, but he continues. “Like the other day in class when Jasper suggested that Matt had too many football-related head injuries to understand the symbolism in *A Raisin in the Sun*?”

I cringe. That had been pretty bad. Jasper can be a complete ass. “Oh like Matt cared,” I say weakly.

“Maybe he did,” Connor says. “Maybe I found him crying in the locker room after school.”

“Did you? Oh my god!”

But Connor starts cracking up. “No! Matt’s inability to understand *A Raisin in the Sun* likely goes back earlier than football. Like possibly to birth. He didn’t even know he was being insulted.”

“Fuck you!” I reach out and push him on the arm and he does a little side step to evade me. I turn to swat at him again, but he’s stopped, standing next to an older Volvo, rootbeer brown.

“Well,” he says, “this is me.” He has a funny look on his face that I can’t quite read.

I glance from the Volvo to him. “This is not you.” I know what his big, stupid truck looks like.

He keeps eye contact with me as he slips in the key and unlocks the door. I peer at him, confused. “It’s my mom’s,” he finally says.

I walk around the car, realizing I recognize it. I’ve seen it around town tons of times and I always notice it because of the Woodstock, ERA NOW and *I Believe You, Anita* stickers on the bumper. My other best friend, Jana, and I have expressed respect and solidarity for the owner of this car on several occasions.

“*Your* mom?” I say, my eyebrows at my hairline.

“Yes, Lauren.”

I am in such a strong state of disbelief and confusion that I can’t quite speak. *Does Connor Ryan have a cool mom*?? But then a thought occurs to me and I stop and squint at him. “Wait, why are you driving it, though? Where’s your truck?”

He mumbles something about gas mileage, but I know I’ve got him.

“No!” I point at him. “You’re just too ashamed to drive that huge raised thing into the City. This car is cooler here.” I pat the Volvo’s boxy fender, fully chortling now.

“No, it’s the gas mileage!” Connor raises his voice but I can tell he’s full of shit because the tips of his ears are red. “And my truck is not raised. It’s just a four wheel drive!”

“Whatever, Connor.” I deploy the ultimate teen girl comeback simply because I can.

Connor is silent for a moment, and then he crosses his arms. “You know you’re pretty closed-minded.”

“ME??”

“Yeah, and you’re a snob.”

“WHAT!?” I’m not the one who’s ashamed of where I come from.”

“Oh yeah? What’s this outfit?” He looks me up and down slowly and I suddenly feel a bit warm.

“This is something I wear.”

“I’ve never seen you dressed like this. All in black, leather. Lots of makeup. And what’s with that shirt?”

“This is another film by the director of the one you liked!! ” I jam a finger at my solar plexus. “And fuck you for criticizing my makeup!” I’m actually angry now. And maybe a tiny bit hurt.

Connor opens his mouth, but then he closes it. I notice him breathe in. “I didn’t say it looked bad,” he finally says, his voice softer and his eyes on mine. I feel a weird flutter in my chest. “I’m just pointing out that you took pains to seem a little different too.”

I take a really deep breath and his eyes cut away.

“Well,” I say after a bit, feeling sort of at a loss. “I’m just up there.” I point to my Honda and he nods.

“You heading back to town?”

“Yep. I have to go meet Jana. She’s at this party.” I shrug. I don’t want to go, but Jana made me promise I’d wingwoman for her and she’s already texted four times since we left the theater.

“OK,” Connor says, opening the Volvo’s heavy door. “I guess I’ll … see you around.”

“Um, yeah. OK. See you Monday, I guess.” I duck my head and give the world’s most awkward wave before scuttling up the street to my car.

When I get in, I just stare into space for several minutes. What the *fuck* just happened?? I take deep breaths until my phone buzzes again. Jana with an all caps message demanding my ETA. I text back and tell her to chill the fuck out, put The Flaming Lips back on and crank the volume.

As I pull out of my spot, I notice Connor is still there. Is he *waiting* for me? I shake my head, trying to rid it of any additional ridiculous thoughts. But I notice he doesn’t leave until I do.

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It’s really dumb to be driving in the same exact direction as someone and trying to act like you don’t notice them for over an hour.

Especially since the one time I chance the tiniest glance over at Connor, he fucking *waves*. A rogue thought crosses my mind that if a guy I didn’t know who looked like Connor waved at me from that Volvo, I would probably be *very* excited. Argh! I command my brain to stop and concentrate on being a responsible driver.

I even manage to ignore Connor (even though he’s right behind me) until I exit to Los Robles“s quaint downtown. Gliding confidently into the first left turn off Main Street, I wait for Connor to pull up beside me to go straight, to where I know his house is. I even prepare myself to look over and give him a dignified chin flip.

But to my chagrin, he gets into the lane behind me…and then proceeds to follow me turn for turn all the way out to the party.

I slam my door as he’s unfolding himself out of the Volvo. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming to Brody’s too?” *Why can I not keep my voice from being shrill and accusatory tonight?*

“You didn’t ask. And you didn’t say what party you were going to.”

But his grin is totally shit-eating.

*Asshole.*

I look at him for a minute and he looks at me and widens his eyes. “Come on,” he finally says, hitching his head toward the house.

“You want to walk in together??”

“Why not?”

“Are you HIGH?”

Connor sighs. “No one will notice, Lauren.”

“Uhh, people will most definitely notice.” But then I think about it and it starts to tickle my funny bone. Fuck it, whatever. It will be worth it if even *one* of the LRHS cheer squad sees us. “OK,” I finally say. “But don’t be surprised if it ruins your cred, especially if someone figures out that’s your Volvo.”

He grins at me.

I just look at him. “What?”

“My cred is very strong.”

I look down and shake my head.

“What, no comeback?”

“Nope, your douche-baggery has robbed me of speech.”

To my surprise, he snorts a laugh and he’s still chuckling as we get to the door. It’s just kind of standing open, so I shrug mentally and walk in, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible.

The music hits me first, *The Joker* at top volume, of course. Then I’m accosted by the perfume of spilled beer and a raucous wave of sound that quickly resolves itself into voices chanting Connor’s name.

*Jesus H. Christ.*

I duck my head and pivot, intending to dart away through the living room as quickly and stealthily as possible, but at that moment some drunk kid comes careening backward out of the kitchen with a tray of jello shots in his hands. He’s coming straight toward me and he’s big and I’m not and he’s moving too fast for me to get out of the way. I desperately try to shift my weight so he won’t take me out completely, but his foot tangles with mine and I know we’re going down, jello and all.

My last thought is a forlorn hope that this moment *won’t* define the rest of my high school career, when I feel strong fingers wrap around my upper arms and then a quick backward motion that takes me totally off my feet and pulls me against something warm and steady.

I take a rapid breath, noting a really good scent (clean, spiced?) has replaced the beer bouquet, and watch as the drunk kid miraculously rights himself *and* the tray of shots.

The crowd shouts its approval, but I hear only the soft words in my ear. “You all right?”

Connor’s head is bent to mine and the clean spiced thing intensifies. His hands tighten on my bare arms before he sweeps his palms lightly up and down my skin.

We both breathe in and out.

I get fucking *goosebumps*.

Traitorous body.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Totally.” I pull away, not quite able to look at him. But the damage is already done. I can hear it in the sudden silence that has replaced the noise. I know what I’ll see if I glance up; a forest of shocked, slack-jawed faces.

“Connor!??” A shriek comes from the direction of the pool deck, startling everyone into action. Connor drops my arms. I practically leap away. A low hum resumes in the room along with the opening strains of *Sweet Home Alabama*.

“Babe, what the fuck are you doing!?” The dulcet/acid tones of Jessica Riley, Connor’s ex, (though she’s never quite gotten the message that they’re no longer together) give voice to what everyone must be thinking. I look at her and she’s staring daggers at me, one hand propped on her hip and the other flicking her shiny black hair behind her shoulder in a gesture that somehow reminds me of a scorpion about to strike.

I am not about to stick around for this, so I mutter a quick ‘thanks again,’ and scurry off down a hall to my right, hoping it goes somewhere. I think I hear Connor say my name, but it’s drowned in something Jessica’s saying and I do not stop. My one objective now is to find Jana, do whatever the fuck she needs me to do and get the hell out of here as quickly as I can. This whole night has been a mindfuck of epic proportions and I desperately need to go home, put on a Steely Dan tape and *zone*.

Jana is not easy to locate, but I do finally find her at the firepit. After all her aggressive texting, she’s surprisingly difficult to pry away, but I manage to draw her into a nearby bathroom via a combination of force and hissed threats.

“What the fuck?” she’s saying as I slam the door.

“Right back at you. You text me every three minutes to get me to come to this hellscape and then you can’t even be bothered to talk to me??”

“I was trying to listen to Flynn play guitar! We’re at a crucial moment as you could clearly see out there.”

Oh, of course. Flynn. Jana’s newest obsession. Stoner/skater musician with long hair and pierced septum. He *had* been yarling through a shitty version of *Jeremy* as I’d approached the fire. I should have fucking known. For a staunch feminist, Jana can be depressingly feeble about boys—or girls—as the mood strikes her.

“*Flynn* is why you brought me out here?”

“Yeah! I needed you to keep me company until he got here!” Jana tucks the shiny curtain of her black bob behind one ear and leans into the mirror to check her eye makeup. She’s going through a kind of Louise Brooks phase right now—all dark eyes, red lips and dramatic chokers.

“You really are the worst,” I say. “The worst friend, the worst feminist, the worst—”

She sticks her tongue and blows a raspberry at me. She knows I don’t mean it and would go to the ends of the earth for her, even if I do dismay at the way her (healthy, positive) sex drive takes over at times. “Don’t hate because I want to get laid, Lauren.”

I take deep breaths and let my eyes flutter shut. “All right. So. You don’t need me any*more*, though. I’m free to go.”

“No, you can’t go because you’re my ride!”

“*What*!??”

“Please, Lauren. Flynn doesn’t have a car, so we have to give him a ride. And I was hoping,” her voice turned wheedling, “that if you are into an early night, that we could just drop you and I could borrow your car??”

“Oh. My. God.” Jana makes a ‘please’ face at me and I glare at her for several seconds then stick my finger in her face. “NO sex in my car.”

“EW, of course not. Your car is way too small anyway.”

Ah yes, the hidden advantages of the 1992 Honda Civic.

She presses her palms together in a begging motion. “Please, Lauren? I really like him and we’re actually talking between songs. He’s very impressed with my deep catalog Neil Young knowledge—thanks to you and my dad.” I laugh in spite of myself, then grumble something that sounds like OK. Jana shrieks and hugs me and I grudgingly hug her back. I guess one hour won’t kill me. I’ll just find a quiet corner outside somewhere, stare at the stars and contemplate what my life has become.

Jana squints at me as she pulls back. “Oh. And what the *fuck* did I hear about you coming to the party with Connor Ryan?”

“How did that already— ? *God!*” I gesture wildly. “He just walked in behind me. It’s a long story, but it’s nothing more than that.”

“That’s not what I heard.” Jana is giving me this look, so I cave and explain to her what happened, the whole night in all its absurdity. But the strange thing is that my explanation doesn’t make her look go away.

“What?” I say.

Jana’s eyes are narrowed. “I just don’t buy it. Him showing up there randomly.”

“WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!?” I can feel my eyes practically bugging out of my head.

“You guys have that tension thing going on…” Jana rubs her chin. “He’s constantly messing with you. And you talk about him a lot. Spencer and I have discussed it.”

“Discussed *what*?” My mind is reeling.

“How we think your fighting thing could actually be that you’re hot for each other.” I make a strangled sound, but can’t quite speak. “And you’d be good together,” Jana continues, smoothing her eyebrows in the mirror. “You’d steer him away from his douchey tendencies and introduce him to the world outside of the basic crew.” She lifts a disdainful shoulder toward the rest of the party. “And he’d wouldn’t let you steamroll him—he’d challenge you, which is hot. I’m sure the physical stuff would be incredible.”

My mouth is hanging open, but I close it with a snap. “I don’t want to be plucked out of the crowd by the popular boy like some pathetic 00’s version of *16 Candles*!”

“I mean, of course not.” Jana rolls her eyes. “You’re the catch. And you’d be choosing him too.” She gives her hair a final pat and turns from the mirror, while I reel internally.

“But anyway. You are in*sane*.” I finally say, looping my finger in circles around my ear.

“No, I’m not. You’re both smart. He’s fucking gorgeous. You’re adorable.” Jana reaches over and tugs on my hair. “Especially when you take this out.” Her hand comes away with my ponytail holder in it and she steps behind me and starts undoing my braid.

“What are you—?” I’m twisting around and ducking.

“Stop it.” She swats and me and I sulkily subside until the whole mass is loose in a halo of gold corkscrews around my head.

“I look like fucking *Felicity*,” I pout.

“Exactly.” Jana arches a brow. “Want some lipstick?” She pulls a shiny gold tube out of her tiny purse.

“NO! This is not some makeover montage!” I take a look at my ridiculous hair, huff and reach for the doorknob. “One hour,” I say, glaring at Jana as she repaints her lips. She waves me off and I stalk toward the back yard.

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I find a beer, a deck chair and a quiet spot. Well, mostly quiet. I can still hear Flynn growling through grunge hits of the 90’s, but at least that crew is around the corner. The only company here is a friendly tuxedo cat who keeps nudging against my hand.

I scratch his cute little head absentmindedly as I look up at the intense carpet of stars dotting the sky and get that feeling smallness I always do.

Jana’s words go round and round in my head and I don’t want to give them credence, but a very insistent inner voice keeps asking if Connor weren’t Connor, if I didn’t have so many objections to who he is and what he represents, would things be different?

I let myself imagine for a second a world in which Connor is a drama nerd instead of a jock, or a debate team leader—or god help me, if he were in a band. *I’d be a fucking goner.* The idea asserts itself with the finality of truth.

I groan. Shit, maybe I *am* a snob.

“That bad, huh?”

I scramble up as Connor’s voice sounds from over my right shoulder.

“Wha? Hey!” I say, brilliantly.

“Hey.” Connor drops into the seat next to me with a sigh and kicks his long legs out. What the fuck is he doing here? Did he come to *find* me?

“Why are you hiding out?” He asks, rolling his head over to look at me. The dim light does interesting things to his features, an observation I’m immediately annoyed at myself for making.

“Uhhh. Just killing time. Waiting for Jana to be ready to go.” I’m also avoiding showing my face after our little stunt at the front door. But I’m not about to tell him that.“Why are *you* hiding?”

“Two drunk sophomores are stalking me, Matt keeps trying to get me to play 7 minutes in heaven with a bunch of cheerleaders, and Jessica is being…persistent.”

“Poor baby.”

“It gets annoying, OK? They don’t even know me. They just want to be seen with me.”

“Wow, Connor.”

“I’m serious!”

I snort and he gives me a ‘what the fuck’ gesture.

“Do you even hear yourself??” I flop back on my seat, shaking my head.

“What?” He sits up. “It’s true. And it sucks. The last three girls I dated, we never had single real conversation. If I’d tried to take them to something like those movies tonight they would have thought I was insane. I’m tired of it.”

“Bet you managed to sleep with them, though.” I swear it slips out before I can stop it. *Shit*.

“Pardon me. Who is the asshole now?” He folds his arms and I can’t tell if he’s amused or really pissed at me.

“Sorry, sorry.” I hold up my hand. “That was totally out of line. I’m just annoyed because I want to leave and Jana’s holding me hostage.” I lean forward, mouth moving before brain again. “But *did* you sleep with them?”

*“Lauren*!” But he’s laughing now.

“Fuck, sorry. I am definitely the asshole. One beer straight to my head.” I hold up my can.

Connor stops laughing and sits up. The question of why is he here with me and what is happening goes through my mind for the fiftieth time tonight.

“Let’s go, then,” he says abruptly.

I freeze. “What?”

“Give your keys to Jana if she’s OK to drive. I’ll give you a ride.” He’s standing up like this is no big deal.

“I don’t want to cut your night short,” I sputter.

“Dude, the stalking?” He gives me a look. “I’d like to get out of here too. Besides, we’re heading into the part of the night where people start puking in earnest.”

As if on cue, we hear a shriek in the distance. “Where’s CONnorrrr!!” He shudders. “Can we go *now*, please?”

I agree and scuttle off to throw my keys and a quick explanation at Jana. Her eyebrows go so far into her hairline I’m not sure they’re ever coming back. She glances at Connor waiting for me on the edge of the yard, then leans forward and whispers in my ear, “I fucking told you so. Use protection!” I punch her in the arm. Hard.

Connor and I manage to sneak around the side of the house without being detected and then suddenly we’re in the Volvo, which smells pleasantly of old leather and spearmint. I roll my window down because the night is really warm, and it’s weird to be sitting this close to him again, and I need something to do with my nervous energy.

“The stars are so bright!” I say, overloud. “Even this little bit out in the country.”

Connor cranes his neck to look out the windshield. “Yeah. And we’re even getting some light bleed from town.” He straightens up and looks around. “Wait, I think there’s a spot near here...” he mumbles. “Just past Castillo Road.”

“What?” I say weakly.

Connor is peering at a street sign. “There’s this big hill that’s part rock that blocks the light from town. The stars are so visible there. It’s insane. It’s right around here if I remember correctly, but the driveway isn’t marked.”

I immediately wonder if Connor is taking me to a makeout spot and my pulse starts racing. What the actual fuck? I realize I’ve started tapping my fingers when Connor looks over.

“It’s my dad’s friend’s property, Lauren.” I can tell he’s smiling even though it’s dark, and I again wonder if he’s laughing at me or with me. “I promise it’s nothing shady.”

“Uh, OK,” I say, not totally sure why I’m agreeing to this, but getting an inkling that it may have something to do with wanting to be alone with him or the night not to end or something, which is a bit mortifying. Jana’s voice sounds irritatingly in my head again and I wonder for the fiftieth time about what she said.

“There it is!” Connor’s voice breaks through my thought loop as he swings into a featureless driveway and starts inching up a gravel lane. “This is just a pasture. It doesn’t go to a house or anything.” He looks over again. “There will probably be cows.”

“Great. I love cows.” Yes, I am officially nervous.

“And there’s the cow gate.” Connor hops out and unhooks a big swinging gate, drives us through, then closes it with a clang. After a twist or two in the road, the cows appear and then a giant outcropping comes into view. It’s truly impressive, a huge hunk of rock just jutting up out of the field. The track curves around it and there’s a little graveled area with a picnic table and not much else.

“This is it!” Connor sounds excited. He cuts the engine, but leaves the radio on softly playing a country station.

“Is anyone gonna be mad that we’re here?” I get out gingerly.

“Nahh.” The owner Jim is my dad’s oldest friend. If he found us here the most he’d do is tell you embarrassing childhood stories about me.”

I laugh a little, trying to will myself to relax. It’s so quiet up here it’s almost like a vacuum of sound and the stars when I look up are truly amazing—so thick and bright that they almost outnumber the black around them.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“I know, right.” Connor is looking up too. “Wish I had my telescope. But you can actually see Aquarius there, it’s so bright.”

I am terrible with constellations but I squint at where he is pointing. “Oh…uh, yeah.”

“You can’t spot it, can you? Here.” Connor comes and stands next to me and proceeds to show me how to find Ursa Major from the big dipper and then outline several other constellations as well. It’s actually pretty cool and the most I’ve ever gotten out of looking at the night sky. It’s also kind of cute/funny how enthusiastic Connor is. He’s obviously got a lot of knowledge about this and is a little geeky about sharing it.

“You were an astronomy nerd kid, weren’t you?” I turn to him, grinning.

He squinches up his face. “Maybe.”

“You were!” I chortle “I bet you had telescopes and protractors and a rat tail. Monthly visits to the planetarium...”

He nudges my shoulder and laughs a little. “Guilty as charged. Spencer and I used to sleep out in my back yard and I’d wake up every hour to map the differences in star positioning.”

I laugh, but Connor’s face looks a little sad and it makes me wonder what happened between Spencer and him. Maybe I’ll ask him someday. Spencer always shrugs it off when I bring it up— says they’re still friends. But it’s clear they used to be a lot closer.

The radio suddenly sounds through the silence, an older country song that I love. I sing along absently with the chorus as I turn slowly in place still looking up at the incredible sky.

Connor makes a surprised noise.

“What?” I say.

“Lauren Keller knows a country song?”

“I know a lot of country songs! I grew up *here*, didn’t I?”

“I thought you were all riot grrl and that skank music.”

“Ska. And yes, I like that stuff. I like a whole variety of things, Connor. I’m not some stereotype.”

“Well, neither am I.” His voice sounds serious and I chance a quick look at him, but he’s turned and his face is in shadow.

“All I know,” he says and his voice is lighter now. “Is that I’d better have the radio dial back on NPR before I return that car to my mom.”

“This mom of yours sounds interesting.” I say, folding my arms and looking at him speculatively. “Maybe that’s why you’re not entirely a lost cause.”

He shakes his head then raises his brows. “I have two older sisters too, you know.”

I laugh at that, I can’t help it. “Well *I* don’t hate Country and I try not to be close-minded,” I sniff.

“Really?”

He sounds skeptical so I swat him. “*REALLY*!”

I’m still smiling at him, but his expression turns serious. “Really?” he says again, but much softer. He also steps closer, so close that we’re almost touching.

I feel the humor fade from my face and I have a split second to wonder what we’re talking about now before he’s bending his head and kissing me.

Connor Ryan is kissing me.

And I’m kissing him back.

This is the last rational thought that moves (on a current of disbelief and shock) through my mind. After that, I kind of lose the ability to think. I blame his lips and then his tongue. And my lips and tongue.

*God.* It’s so good. I feel like I’m zooming very fast on bike or jumping off a swing at the top of the arc. His arms go tight around me and he angles my head so he can kiss me more deeply. Then I’m pushing him back until we hit the Volvo. He groans a little and my hands are in his hair and I’m melting into hims as he wraps around me. At some point my fingers skim under his shirt to the smooth skin there and his run up my back. The kisses just get better and better until I realize we’re both panting in the stillness of the little clearing behind the rock.

Suddenly I pull back, staring into Connor’s dark eyes, which are soft and unfocused, his lips parted as he breathes heavily. “Wait! What are we doing?” I say, looking wildly around, realizing my hands are both under his shirt, gripping his waist. I loosen them. “Are your friends hiding in the bushes to make sure you won a bet or something? I’m not giving you my panties to take home.”

The corners of Connor’s mouth go up and he breaks into a soft laugh. “I’m pretty sure,” he says, ducking his head to mine again, “that we were kissing.” I feel his face ghost against my jaw and I stretch my neck to give him better access. “It felt like kissing,” his lips move on my skin and I shudder the slightest bit. “Really good kissing,” he finishes, trailing his lips down to the spot just below my ear. “And if any of my friends were in the vicinity I’d kill them on sight for interrupting this.” I can hear the smile in his voice just before he comes back to my lips again.

We’re occupied for a while before I pop up again. I can’t seem to help it.

“But we don’t even like each other! We’re enemies!”

“I like you,” he mumbles, bending to kiss me again.

“But we’re always...mmm...arguing,” I say, lips still on his.

“I find arguing...stimulating,” he says and his voice dips into a sort of growl that does things to my lower body. He pulls back and looks at me, a little crease between his eyes. “I’m serious, Lauren. I don’t like things that are easy. I like to be challenged.”

“Well so do I.” I say a little defiantly. “And I’m not just doing this because you chose me or something.”

“God, I hope not. I hope you’re choosing me too.” His eyes rove my face. He’s so fucking handsome, it should be a crime. “You *are* choosing me, right?”

That little question sends me over the edge and I reach up and practically devour his lips. I’m seriously contemplating the dimensions of the Volvo’s back seat when he pulls back.

“It’s getting late, “ he sighs. “I can tell by the angle of Orion.”

“Oh my GOD, you are a nerd!” I put a smacking kiss on his mouth and he laughs. “Speaking of, did you really like the movies tonight?” I ask, now having the extremely surreal thought that maybe he’d been just saying what he thought I wanted to hear earlier.

“Yeah,” he says, taking my hands and capturing them between his palms. “I really did. I want to be … friends with someone who is interested in stuff like that. Do more stuff like that”

“*Friends*, huh?” I tilt my head at him.

“I mean in a sense that there’s a meeting of minds as well as bodies,” he murmurs, going for my neck now. “God, you smell so good. I can always tell when you come into class.”

I have to admit that I squee internally at this.

“And I love your hair down,” Connor continues, lifting a strand and placing small kisses around the back of my ear. My whole body shivers. “Spencer says it’s pheromones. I’m attracted to you on a biological level.”

“But not a mental or physical level?” I let my hands wander under his shirt again and he breathes in sharply.

“No, those too.”

I puff out a small laugh. “Spencer is wise. And obviously very loose-jawed when it comes to you and me. “When did you talk to him?

 “A few times. Most recently this morning when he mentioned you were going to the film fest.”

I pull back and my mouth drops open. I poke a finger into Connor’s chest. He’s grinning hugely.

“You lied! You did know I would be there!”

“Lied is a strong word.” He frowns. “And I never actually said I didn’t know you’d be there. No, I prefer...prevaricated. Or maybe evaded the truth.” He taps his chin.

I shake my head with a grin. What a crock. “Why didn’t you just tell me?” I reach up with tentative fingers and brush back his dark hair. He leans into the caress and closes his eyes.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t an elaborate plan I made. I’d been wanting to ask you out for a while but I had no idea how to approach you. Spencer mentioned you going to the fest, so I just got in the car and started driving.” He shrugs a little. “I guess I wasn’t sure how you’d react. If you’d freeze me out or give me a chance.”

“I guess I gave you a chance,” I grumble, my chest very warm from what he’s just told me.

“I guess you did.” He reaches down and teases at my lips.

“I guess I like you too.” I say, still a little begrudgingly.

“Glad to hear it.” He starts kissing me in earnest again, his hands cradling my waist and neck.

“But this doesn’t mean I’ll stop arguing with you.” I pull back with a frown.

He chuckles. “I hope not.”

“Especially when you’re wrong, which is a lot.”

He bend his head and laughs against my lips. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”