



# Kiss Me Softly

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** The first time they met, Aurora was dating a man. The next time they met, she and Frankie had a one night stand. The third time they met, they were both dating other women. Then things really got interesting...

**Aurora**

When I move to Chicago, I'm thrilled to run into the woman who first made me question whether I was straight back in college. I've never forgotten the one night we spent together but once again our timing isn't right. We're both in relationships so we decide to just be friends. Except my feelings for Frankie aren't strictly friendly.

**Frankie**

When the woman I fantasized about for years comes back into my life it feels like fate, especially when we both suddenly become single. Our vow to remain just friends doesn't last long, especially with Aurora acting as my fake girlfriend to get my mother off my back. But what if the idea of being together is better than the reality? We're total opposites, can we make something work for the long-term?

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

## Prologue – Frankie

It's funny how your life can change in an instant. Like one day you're a dinosaur enjoying a tasty plant or hunting for a smaller dinosaur and bam! Here comes an asteroid. That's how I felt the first time I met Aurora. Like I'd been hit by a giant heap of space junk, changing me forever.

It was my senior year of college at Eastern Illinois University, and I was hanging out at Bubbles & Brews, a combination bar and laundromat that was one of the most popular places in the small town that was home to our school. It was kind of a dump, and at any given time one or more machines were out of order, but the ability to have a beer while your clothes tumbled in the dryer was a draw few college students could resist. Having a bartender who didn't look too closely at fake IDs was another draw.

I was sitting on a stool at the bar, kicking my short legs back and forth while I drank a Miller Lite and watched a rerun of Judge Judy on the television across the bar. Judge Judy was giving someone a lecture about not ditching their kids when someone cleared their throat.

“Excuse me, but the change machine isn't working.”

My head swiveled to follow the sweet voice coming from behind me. And there she was. The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in person. She was a vision. Blonde. Perky. And wearing an EIU cheerleading outfit for some reason. As far as I was aware, there were no sports teams playing here in the area between the bar and the washing machines. Her legs were a mile long and her breasts looked spectacular in her form-fitting shirt, but there was no doubt she looked out of place. Even in her

uniform she had the air of someone who came from money.

The girl smirked as I drew her attention, but the smirk fell from her face as our eyes met. I felt the oddest sensation. Like every cell in my body was being pulled apart and then put back together again. Or like I'd been hit by an asteroid.

I'd never believed in love at first sight before, but that day, I knew it was real. She wasn't my type. I didn't even know her name. But I still knew in what could only be called a moment of prescient clarity that this blonde cheerleader was my soulmate.

"Did you get lost on the way to the stadium?" I asked, nodding at her cheerleading outfit.

"All my clothes are dirty," she said, her voice suddenly less strong than it had been when she first walked up. "And now the change machine is broken. I just need to get quarters to do my laundry."

She held up a five dollar bill and looked at the bartender. "Can you make change please?"

Ralph, the grumpy old man who ran the place, just pointed to the sign above his head that read, "Bartender can't make change."

"But the machine is broken," she repeated.

Ralph shrugged. He couldn't care less about the problems of some random college girl.

"There's a bank a few blocks up," he growled, turning back to Judge Judy.

Her face fell.

“I might be able to help you. Let me see how much change I have left,” I said, dragging my backpack up onto the counter.

I dumped a bunch of change out of my change purse, then rooted around on the bottom of my bag, before finally searching my pockets. The cheerleader watched me avidly as I gathered all my quarters.

“I’ve got four seventy-five,” I announced after I’d counted it all up twice. “Will that do?”

“Yes!” She gave me a bright smile that made my nipples tighten, then she gave me the five dollar bill and started scooping up the change in her delicate looking hands. “Thank you so much. Let me get my laundry started and I’ll come back and buy you another beer.”

She sent an irritated look in Ralph’s direction. “Unless the bartender can’t break a twenty either.”

Ralph shrugged. “I can break a twenty, but I don’t got no quarters, missy.”

It was a lie. Not twenty minutes earlier I’d watched him empty all the change from the machines and lock it up in the safe underneath the bar. Not that I was going to say anything. If I got blackballed from this place I’d have to use the regular laundromat across town, the one that didn’t even have a Coke machine.

I turned in my chair, watching as the girl jammed two washing machines as full as she could, then added soap and fed the machines a few of the quarters I’d traded her for. Once she’d finished her task, she sashayed right back to me and hopped up on a chair, holding out her hand.

“Hi, I’m Aurora Marie Collins,” she said, her voice as formal as if she was meeting

the president of the United States. “I’m a journalism major. How about you?”

I gave her an amused look. She was adorable.

“I’m Francesca Louise Haberman, but my friends call me Frankie.”

I held out a hand and when Aurora slid her fingers across my palm I couldn’t help the little gasp that escaped my mouth. Her big blue eyes fixed on our hands, like she was trying to figure out what was causing the jolts of electricity that were arcing between us. I’d never felt anything like this before.

“Hey. Aurora. There you are,” a deep voice grumbled from behind us. “I been looking all over for you.”

Aurora and I released each other’s hands as a giant bear of a man strode towards the bar, standing behind Aurora and throwing one beefy arm over her shoulder possessively. His eyes flicked over my small chest and then my face before he dismissed me. Clearly I wasn’t his type.

## Page 2

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“Frankie,” Aurora chirped. “This is my boyfriend Sam. He’s a football player.”

Aurora

I was in line at the coffee shop when I heard a voice that sounded familiar. Sure enough, Frankie Haberman was standing behind me, scowling at something she was reading on a piece of paper.

Ever since she’d helped me out at the Bubbles & Brews last month, I seemed to be running into her everywhere, which was funny because I was quite sure I’d never seen her before that day she gave me her quarters. Frankie was an education major, and I was studying to be a journalist, so we’d never had any classes together or anything, but now wherever I went in town or on campus, there she was.

Frankie was what my brother would have said was ‘girl next door cute’. She was petite, with longish hair that she always kept pulled back in a ponytail, delicate features, and big brown eyes. Today, like most days, she was dressed in clothes that looked like they’d seen better days – loose overalls, a long sleeve tee shirt, and a battered pair of navy blue chucks. She wasn’t wearing a speck of make-up -- not that she needed it.

“Hiya Frankie,” I greeted her with a smile.

She looked up and returned my smile. I felt a funny feeling deep in my belly. There was something about her that made me feel kind of fluttery. I didn’t understand it. I wanted to be close to her, even though we’d chatted enough now for me to know that we had absolutely nothing in common.

“Are you here to study?” she asked.

“Yeah, you too?”

“Yeah.” She paused, then pointed over her shoulder. “I’ve got my stuff set up at that table in the corner if you want to join me.”

I felt a sense of excitement that was totally out of proportion to a simple study invitation.

“That would be great.”

I got to the counter, ordering a mocha with low fat milk and sprinkles.

“High maintenance,” Frankie cough-whispered behind me, making me laugh.

I’d laughed more with Frankie in the short time I’d known her than I could remember laughing with anyone else.

“Let me guess, you’re a black coffee girl?”

“Of course. I’m not fussy like you,” she said teasingly. “Plus, it’s the cheapest thing on the menu.”

We’d never talked about it, but I was aware that money was an issue for Frankie. I was luckier than her, luckier than most students really, because my parents paid for my tuition and gave me a generous allowance so I could focus on my studies instead of having to get a job.

“Add a black coffee to my order please,” I told the barista. “Large.”

“You don’t have to pay for my coffee,” Frankie protested.

“You can buy me a scone later.”

We camped out at Frankie’s table, sipping coffee and studying quietly for an hour until I couldn’t resist breaking the silence.

“How’s your studying going?”

Frankie looked up and for some reason I had the impression that she hadn’t been paying too much attention to her books.

“Um, it’s okay,” she replied. “I have an eidetic memory, so most classes are pretty easy for me.”

“Wow, that’s nice. I have to study my ass off just to maintain my ‘B’ average.”

I’d never been the best student, but I wasn’t the worst either.

“So are you going to any of the sorority and fraternity formals this month? My boyfriend and I are going to two of them.”

She gave me a look of distaste, and I couldn’t decide if she didn’t like my boyfriend, or she didn’t like the fact that I had a boyfriend at all. Or maybe she just didn’t like fraternities and sororities. She was pretty anti-establishment.

“I’m a lesbian.”



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On some level I guess I'd already known that, but I couldn't say why. But once I knew for sure, I had the strangest urge to lean across the table and kiss her, which was weird. I had a boyfriend. And I was totally straight, right?

Frankie met my eyes, and we just held each other's gazes for a few long, pregnant moments. Awareness crawled up my spine and I felt a throbbing feeling in my core. For the first time in my life, I wondered if I could be attracted to a woman.

Then I realized that I was already attracted to a woman. Frankie.

And if I was being completely honest with myself, I had to admit that I was way more into her than I was the guy I'd been dating for over a year now. I pushed that thought aside in the box in my mind labeled 'too confusing to think about right now' and dropped my eyes back to my notebook.

"Lesbians can't go to formals?" I asked lightly.

Although now that I thought about it, I didn't remember seeing any same sex couples at any of the events I'd attended in previous years. I knew there were gay and lesbian students here, and even an affinity group for those who chose to participate, but other than that, I was totally clueless about that segment of the student population.

"I've never been one for dressing up," Frankie finally said. "It's a waste of money and I feel ridiculous in dresses and fancy shoes."

She gathered up her books and shoved them into her backpack, suddenly eager to leave. I could tell that I'd upset her, but I didn't know why.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’ve got to get to class. I’ll see you around.”

Frankie

Five years later...

I walked around the crowded convention center, only half paying attention to the tables of vendors lined up in long rows. The annual education conference was one of my favorite events, but my real goal for visiting the vendor exposition was to hunt for good giveaways. Last year I’d scored a handful of chocolate, a nice compact umbrella, a charger for my phone, a water bottle, several stress balls, and an array of other trinkets. Living on a teacher’s salary, I was a pro at looking for freebies.

My eyes caught on a table at the end with a stack of little notebooks and pens. Ooh. I could use a new notebook for my bag. Unlike a lot of people who kept notes and lists on their phones, I preferred to track things in writing. I made a beeline over to the table, not even bothering to see what product or service they were selling before grabbing a notebook and dropping it into my tote bag.

“Kiss?”

I glanced up as someone waved a bowl of Hershey’s kisses in front of me. The person’s voice sounded familiar. I looked up into a pair of sky blue eyes, jolting as I recognized the vendor.

“Aurora? Is that you?”

My old college friend looked different from the last time I saw her. Aurora’s blonde hair was darker now, smoothed back into a low ponytail, and her make-up was much

subtler than she used to wear back in college. She was dressed in a black pencil skirt and a conservative white blouse that did nothing to hide her incredible tits. Tits that I'd spent a lot of time dreaming about during my senior year of college despite knowing that she was unavailable. And straight.

Aurora made a squealing noise. "Oh my God, Frankie!"

She rushed out from behind the table, pulling me into a tight hug. Since she was several inches taller than me, it had the effect of smashing my face against her cleavage. Not that I minded. I took a deep breath, smelling vanilla and something floral. It was nice.

Aurora pulled back and gave me a bright smile.

"I haven't seen you since before graduation," she reminded me. "What are you doing here?"

Before I could answer she rushed on, "Well, that's a stupid question. This is an education conference, and you were studying education last time I saw you."

"Yes, I'm a teacher now."

I glanced between her and the display behind her, which advertised tools to help kids with learning disabilities. An ID badge around her neck identified her as a marketing manager for the company.

"You're clearly not a journalist though."

She shook her head, her expression turning sad for just a second before it cleared.

"No, it was a nice dream, but I needed to actually make money," she explained.

“Plus, as you know, print journalism is dying and now everyone with an iPhone and a laptop is a journalist. Anyway, I’m working for an educational company in St. Louis now, managing their external marketing.”

I had the distinct impression that she was not excited about this change in her career.

“Do you live here in Chicago?” she asked.

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“Yes. I grew up here and after college, I didn’t want to live anywhere else.”

“Listen,” she said. “I’m not flying back to St. Louis until the morning. Any chance we can have dinner and catch up after I finish here? I’d love to hear what you’ve been up to these last five years.”

I glanced at my watch, although it was just for show. I didn’t need to be anywhere.

“Sure. That would be nice.”

Aurora looked like I’d just given her the winning lottery numbers. “How about I meet you at five thirty?”

“That works. There’s a bar up the street called O’Malley’s, we can meet there. Just turn right when you go out the front door, it’s about a block away.”

“Great. See you soon.”

I spent the next hour wandering around the rest of the tables before heading over to O’Malley’s to meet Aurora. She got there about two minutes after I did. The place was crowded with happy hour patrons, but after a short wait we were able to get a table in the restaurant. We sat on either side of a small table in the corner, then ordered drinks while we perused the menu. I noticed that Aurora had changed into jeans and a scoop neck sweater. It made her look softer.

We plowed our way through a couple of appetizers while we caught up on the last five years like we were old friends instead of two people who kept randomly running

into each other and hanging out together during our last semester of college. Hell, I'd never even gotten her phone number back then. Not that I needed it...

After a while our conversation turned to our lives now. I was surprised how easily we were able to talk.

"Are you still with Sam?"

I finally asked the question that had been on my mind since she'd hugged me in the convention center.

"Who?" Aurora paused. "Oh, you mean Sam, that guy I was dating senior year of college? Oh God no, I dumped his ass right before graduation."

My eyes dropped to her left hand, and she noticed. She gave me a flirty smile and I realized that I was just as attracted to her now as I'd been back in college, maybe more. Then she said something that changed everything.

"I broke up with Sam right after I realized that I'm bisexual."

Aurora

I watched Frankie's face carefully. She looked surprised, but also somehow not surprised. I wondered if she'd suspected my bisexuality before I did. If so, she'd never said anything. Then again, why would she? We weren't close enough for those kinds of conversations. Plus, it was my journey.

I wondered if she had any idea that it was meeting her that first made me consider that I wasn't as straight as I'd always assumed that I was. If I was going to see her again, I probably would ask her what she thought back then, but I was only in Chicago for one night, and I had a more important question.

“Do you want to come back to my hotel room and fool around?”

Frankie choked on her beer. “Um. What? Did I space out and miss something here?”

“Sorry, I guess that was a bit of an awkward segway,” I agreed, leaning forward across the table. The position displayed my cleavage to its best advantage. I was a big fan of working with my strengths.

She stared at me in shock.

I’d never been shy about voicing what I wanted, and Frankie was someone that I’d wanted for a long time. Ever since I pulled Frankie into a hug earlier today I’d been vibrating with excitement. I’d had countless fantasies about her over the years and seeing her in person only made it all come rushing back for me.

And unless I was totally misreading her, she wanted me too.

I studied Frankie as I waited for her to respond. She’d always been a thinker, unlike me who rushed into things and thought about it later.

Her hair was a little longer now, but she had the same heart shaped face, pale skin, and large brown eyes. In a nod to the conference she was wearing dressy black pants, a white button up, and a black and gray blazer. It was the least sexy outfit ever, but she’d always been a little bit of a tomboy.

To my surprise Frankie was wearing a touch of pink on her lips, some kind of a glossy lip stain that stayed in place even though she’d been eating and drinking. I’d never seen her wear any makeup before. I was dying to know how many times I’d have to kiss her to bring out her natural lip color.

When I couldn’t take the suspense anymore, I spoke again.

“So here’s the thing,” I started.

Frankie’s eyes lifted to my face.



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“When we knew each other in college, I was attracted to you. I had a huge crush on you, although I didn’t realize it at the time. I just knew there was something that drew me to you, made me think about you all the time.”

She looked surprised, and maybe a little bit pleased.

“I wasn’t aware of it back then, but now I know that my attraction for you is what made me start questioning my sexuality. A couple of months after graduation, I slept with a woman for the first time, and it was life changing. I’ve been pretty – flexible – with my partners since then. Now I date both men and women.”

“Wow.”

I waited for Frankie to say something else and when she remained quiet I continued.

“I’m very attracted to you, Frankie,” I continued. “Unless I’m completely imagining it, I think you’re attracted to me too. I’m single right now, so if you’re single too, why not have a little fun tonight?”

I gave her my brightest smile. It was the smile I used to wear when I was on top of the pyramid during cheerleading, a smile that had gotten me out of countless speeding tickets, especially when paired with a nice shot of my cleavage.

“You want to have sex with me?” Frankie clarified, as if she wasn’t sure that she was hearing me correctly.

I nodded. “I do. But I need to be clear that it can only be for tonight. I live in St.

Louis and I'm flying home in the morning. And I don't do long-distance relationships."

"Awfully bold of you to assume that I'd want a relationship," Frankie teased.

I felt a flush creeping up my cheeks. I wasn't always as confident as I led people to believe.

"I don't do relationships anyway," Frankie said. "So even if you lived in Chicago, I'd only be on board for something casual."

"It sounds like we're on the same page then," I said.

I reached across the small table and grabbed her hand. My skin tingled where we touched, and I knew by the way her eyebrows lowered that she felt it too. The restaurant suddenly seemed warm.

The waitress brought our dinners, and I stopped her before she could scurry away.

"Can we get these wrapped up to go please? And the check too?"

I turned back to Frankie. She was still staring at me like she didn't know what to make of everything.

"We can take our food back to my room," I said. "If things are as hot between us as I think they'll be, we're going to need our nourishment between rounds."

Frankie

I'd forgotten the way that the most outrageous things would come from Aurora's mouth. I was pleased to hear that she was bisexual now, and even more pleased to

hear that she wanted me, because I wanted her. A lot. Then again, I always had.

We sat in a kind of suspended silence while we waited for the server to box up our food. Aurora insisted on paying the bill, saying she could put it on her expense report, and I certainly wasn't going to argue with a free dinner. This was Chicago after all. Everything was expensive, especially for someone living on a teacher's salary.

As soon as our food was packaged up we headed out of the restaurant, walking back to the hotel at a brisk pace. After a brief stop at the store in the lobby to buy bottles of water and a six pack of beer, we headed towards the elevator. We stood side by side, not looking at each other and not talking, as if we were strangers instead of two old kind of friends who were about to have a casual fuck.

I wasn't kidding when I said I didn't do relationships. Been there, got the tee shirt with the picture of the broken heart. Two years in a relationship with a cheater had turned me off of any ideas of sticking with the same person long enough to catch feelings.

Knowing that Aurora was only here for one night helped ensure that I'd stay detached, which was good because I was pretty sure that if she lived in the same city as me, I'd be hopelessly in love with her again. Just like senior year of college.

"This is me."

Aurora tapped her key card against the reader, opening the door to her hotel room and setting the bag with our food on the counter just inside the door. There was a mini fridge underneath, and I put the water and beer inside to keep it cold.

Aurora paused long enough to kick off her shoes, then she grabbed my wrist, pulling me closer to her. My breath hitched in my throat as I looked up into her bright blue eyes. She really was stunning.

Then all thoughts flew from my head as Aurora pressed her lips against mine. They were as soft as I'd always imagined. I wrapped my arms around her waist and popped up on my tiptoes, trying to get closer.

With a grunt of frustration at our height difference, Aurora broke the kiss, turning us around. She grabbed my waist and lifted me onto the desk, kicking the chair out of the way so she could slide her hips between my legs. I opened for her willingly. She scooted closer, grabbing my shoulders and closing the distance between us again. I tightened my thighs against her hips.

This time when our lips met we were on the same level. Aurora tilted her head and slid her tongue along the seam of my lips, demanding entrance. The kiss immediately turned hot, our tongues tangling as we silently fought for control.

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She tasted like beer and something uniquely her and I couldn't believe that after all these years I was finally able to explore my attraction for Aurora. My heart was racing in my chest and my panties, damp since the instant I recognized her over that bowl of Hershey's kisses, were now soaked.

I grabbed her ass, one cheek in each hand, giving her a squeeze and pulling her closer. Aurora moaned against my lips.

I couldn't get enough of her. There was none of that typical hesitation or fumbling that often accompanied a first kiss. Even though we were learning each other's mouths, it almost felt like we'd been doing this forever.

Aurora's hands shifted from my shoulders, shoving off my jacket, and pulling my blouse out of the waistband of my pants. Then she made quick work of unbuttoning my shirt, shoving that off my shoulders in a heap behind me and leaving me in a plain, white bra. It wasn't a laundry day bra, but it wasn't a date with a hot woman bra either. I had been planning to attend a conference, not have a steamy interlude in a hotel with a woman I used to have a crush on.

We continued kissing as Aurora unfastened my bra, revealing my small breasts. She stepped back, looking at them hungrily. They were barely a handful, but they were round and perky. I'd never had any complaints about them. My nipples pebbled under her gaze.

Aurora lowered her head, coming back in for another kiss, but I placed my hand on her sternum, stopping her descent.

“How about we both get naked before we continue?”

Aurora

I practically ripped off my clothes, then Frankie and I fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, laughing at our own eagerness. I rolled her onto her back then latched onto one of her small breasts, teasing the nipple with my tongue. Her back arched and I pressed down on her chest, holding her in place until I got my fill.

As soon as I shifted back Frankie reared up to kiss me, her tongue tangling with mine. I rubbed my body against hers mindlessly as the kiss went on and on.

“I have to taste you,” I gasped as we finally broke apart, both of us breathing heavily.

“Me first,” she countered.

I rolled over and she made her way down my body, positioning herself between my thighs. Gripping my thighs, she spread my legs obscenely wide, then stared down at my pussy. I hadn’t been expecting to sleep with anyone on this trip, so I was glad that I’d recently done some grooming. Frankie’s face lit up with a smile, telling me she liked what she saw.

The first slide of her tongue traveled over the outside of my pussy. The second one slid in between my nether lips, licking me from bottom to top. It felt so good I couldn’t help the little gasp that escaped my mouth. Then Frankie started eating me out in earnest, her tongue moving deeper and deeper as she explored every inch of me.

It felt incredible. I loved it when people were good at oral. My entire body was vibrating with the need to come.

“More!” I gasped. “I’m close.”

She immediately complied, her tongue sliding into my opening as her fingers moved to strum my clitoris. I moaned embarrassingly loud as Frankie fucked me with her tongue, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

“Come for me, Aurora.”

Her words were a growl against my skin before she was pumping into me with her tongue again. At the same time she pinched my clit, then rubbed it vigorously back and forth until I succumbed to my orgasm. My back arched off the bed as I let myself go, gasping and riding the waves of pleasure until I was too sated to do anything but lay there panting and trembling.

Frankie pressed a tender kiss against my mound, then slid up next to me, pulling me into her arms for a little cuddle. I threw my arm over her waist and rested my head on her slim shoulder, enjoying the little tremors that followed my orgasm for much longer than I expected.

When I finally came back into my brain I realized that Frankie was watching me with an expression I couldn’t interpret.

“What?”

“You look beautiful with your hair messed up and your cheeks flushed pink.”

I rolled my eyes, not because I didn’t believe her words were sincere but because I knew I was a mess and one thing my mother had taught me was that it was important for a woman to look perfect at all times.

“What was that reaction?” Frankie asked.

“I know I looked like a mess right now.”

“Fishing for more compliments?” she teased.

I shook my head.

I’d been told I was beautiful a million times, and I guess I was, but I wanted to be more than that. More than just a beautiful woman. Beauty faded. I wanted to be measured by my value as a person. By my heart. My mind. My personality.

Frankie’s gaze sobered as she studied me. I avoided her eyes.



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“I see I hit a sore point for you,” she said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, it’s just...”

“What?” she prodded.

“I want to be more than just a pretty face.”

“You’re definitely more than a pretty face,” Frankie said.

She tapped the side of my head. “You’ve got a quick mind.”

She tapped my chest. “A kind heart.”

She tapped my mound. “And a freaking delicious pussy.”

I leaned over to kiss her. “How about you give me a taste of yours now?”

Frankie

Two and a half years later...

“You didn’t even say anything about my new dress.”

I resisted the strong urge to roll my eyes as Barbie’s baby voice pitched higher. Yes, her name was Barbie. I’d only recently learned it was a nickname. Her real name was Bonnie, but allegedly her childhood love of Barbie dolls led people to call her Barbie

instead. There was a fifty percent chance that the story was fabricated – I'd caught her lying to me about stupid shit before.

"It looks nice," I said placatingly. "It really brings out your eyes."

It was too tight and too short, making her look kind of cheap, but I wasn't going to say that. As my girlfriend preened I tried to remember what had attracted me to her in the first place. Oh yeah, a nagging mother and the realization that my thirtieth birthday was looming over me. I was officially old, I might as well settle down, right?

Barbie was the daughter of one of my mother's friends. I'd agreed to go out with her to pacify my mother who had been nagging me nonstop about my long-term single status.

Barbie was ridiculously girly and shallow, but she was hot as fuck and had a great rack, so I figured, why not go out with her once or twice and maybe have some fun? I figured she'd be good for something casual. Then I woke up the next morning and she refused to leave my apartment. It was like feeding a stray cat – as soon as I'd let Barbie in, it was impossible to get rid of her. With a few days she'd informed me that she was my girlfriend now. I didn't argue.

Yeah, I know, I was being passive. Inertia and my strong desire to avoid conflict had kept me dating her way longer than I wanted to. The truth was it was easier to date her than to argue about it, and if that wasn't the saddest statement about my life I don't know what was.

At least in the beginning the sex between us had been good – Barbie was the kind of woman who was up for anything in bed -- but the longer I spent with her, the more her annoying personality ruined that too.

I sighed. I really should break up with her...

“Frankie? Oh my God.”

I looked up in surprise as someone called my name. Someone who sounded a lot like the hottest one night stand of my life.

“Aurora?”

Like a mirage, Aurora stood there wearing a big smile. I leapt out of my chair to give her a hug.

“Oh my God! What are you doing here?”

“I just moved to Chicago,” she said. “Well, we just moved here. Together.”

I suddenly noticed the woman next to her, standing way too close to be just a friend. She was tall and broad, not really fat but definitely stocky in a butch kind of way. Her hair was cut short in a traditional man’s cut, parted on the side. She was totally not the type of woman I would expect Aurora to date, let alone move to another state with.

Then again, it’s not like I knew Aurora that well. Sure, I knew what it was like to kiss every inch of her body. I knew what it was like to have her ride my face until she came so hard she covered my mouth and nose with her juices. But I didn’t really know her as a person. Not when I’d only seen her once in like eight years.

“Hi, I’m Chris.” Aurora’s girlfriend lifted her chin but didn’t make a move to shake my hand.

“I’m Frankie.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

I heard a throat clearing behind me and remembered my own girlfriend. At least for now. I really needed to break up with her...

“Aurora, Chris, this is Barbie. Barbie, Aurora is an old friend of mine.”

I saw the corner of Aurora’s mouth quirk when she heard Barbie’s name and knew instinctively that she found it amusing. I didn’t blame her.

“Pleased to meet you,” Barbie said, her voice indicating it wasn’t true.

She hated to have my attention on anything else but her, even for a minute.

“Would you like to join us for dinner?” I asked, gesturing at our four-person table.

“We haven’t ordered yet.”

Aurora and Chris exchanged a look that I couldn’t interpret, then Chris subtly shook her head.

“We appreciate the offer,” Aurora said, turning back to me with a gentle smile. “But we’re here to celebrate Chris’s new job.”

“Of course you want to be alone for that,” Barbie piped up a little too eagerly. “Well, it was nice to meet you both, enjoy your dinner.”

Aurora and I locked eyes for a long moment. I could sense her hesitation to walk away. I felt the same.

“Since you’re living in Chicago now, maybe we can grab a drink sometime,” I suggested. “It would be good to catch up.”

It would be better to recreate that night we had in her hotel room a couple of years ago, but I kept that part to myself. We’d had sex that night so many times that I’d lost count. When I’d slipped out of her room in the morning so I could head home and get ready for work, it had just about killed me.

Then again, I knew it was better to make a clean break. If I’d spent too much more time with Aurora, I would have fallen for her again, even if she did live three hours away.

“That sounds good,” Aurora said as she dug her phone out of the pocket of her pants. “Give me your number and I’ll text you tomorrow.”

I rattled off my digits and a few seconds later I heard my own phone beep on the table.

“Now you have my number too,” she said, giving me another big smile.

She reached out and squeezed my forearm. I could feel the heat of her hand through the thin fabric of the shirt I was wearing.

“I can’t wait to catch up.”

I could tell by her face that she meant it as much as I did.

“Me too.”

Aurora

“Is that an old girlfriend?”

My head popped up from looking at the menu, frowning at the sharp jealousy in Chris’s voice. Lately they had been acting a little too possessive for my liking, making me wonder for the thousandth time if I’d made a mistake moving here with them.

I’d been desperate to get out of St. Louis, and ever since that education conference where I’d run into Frankie, Chicago had been calling to me. I’d been watching job boards and dreaming of moving up north.

I tried to tell myself it was because I really loved the city, but the truth was, part of me was hoping to see Frankie again. A big part of me. I’d been obsessing about running into her ever since we decided to move here. I just couldn’t believe it happened the very first time we ventured out to a restaurant. It was like fate.

Maybe Chris was right to be suspicious.

“Frankie and I were casual friends during our senior year of college,” I said. “We lost touch after graduation, but then I ran into her here in Chicago a few years ago and we hooked up. It was one night. I haven’t seen her since.”

I chanced a glance over to the other side of the restaurant. Frankie had her back to me but the girl she was with seemed perturbed. I wondered what had Barbie’s panties in a bunch, resisting the urge to roll my eyes at her name. She was clearly a princess, and completely wrong for Frankie. I glared in their direction.

“I can’t believe she’s dating that human doll.”

The words were out of my mouth before I realized what was happening.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“Why do you care who she’s dating if you haven’t seen her in years?” Chris asked suspiciously.

“We’re old friends,” I reminded them. “I just think it’s weird that Frankie is dating someone so vapid. And look at the way she’s dressed.”

I could see that Chris was getting irritated at my interest in the other table, so I decided to change the subject.

“Everything looks so good. What are you going to order?”

Chris stared at me for a long moment before going back to the menu. “I think I’m getting the pork chops.”

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. After our dinner, we headed back up north. Chris and I were temporarily staying with their mother and stepfather who lived in a cute little place in Roger’s Park. Emphasis on ‘little’. It only had two bedrooms and one bathroom for the four of us.

Our plan was to rent a place together, but I was starting to have some doubts about us living together. It was like everything that bothered me about my relationship with Chris was magnified since we got here.

The truth was, I was feeling that way even before we moved to Chicago. I figured things would be better once we moved here, but I had to face the fact that I just didn’t love Chris, not the way I should. I wasn’t going to make a life with them.

As I slipped into the tiny space left on the double bed next to Chris that night, they pulled me closer, banding one arm around my waist. I felt suffocated, moving away as soon as their breathing evened out and they fell asleep. Staring up at the dark ceiling, I resolved to get a job, find an apartment, and figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Pronto. It wasn't fair to me to stay here knowing that I wanted to break up with Chris.

I waited two days before I texted Frankie, not wanting to seem too eager.

Aurora:Hey Frankie, it's me, Aurora.

Frankie:Hiya. Nice to hear from you.

There was a long pause while I stared at my phone, wondering what to write next. I wondered if she was staring at her phone too.

Aurora:So maybe this is weird, but you're my only friend in Chicago, and we're not even friend-friends. But can we be? I could really use a friend right now.

Frankie:I have space on my roster for another friend. Do you want to grab a drink sometime and hang out? We can catch up on the last few years.

Aurora:I'd love to. How about tomorrow?

Frankie:Tomorrow works great.

I paused, then asked the question I was dying to ask.

Aurora:Will you be bringing Barbie?

Frankie:I've never been one of those women who has to bring their significant other



with them everywhere, so no. Why, are you bringing Chris?

Aurora:No.

Frankie:Good.

I stared at my phone some more, wondering what that meant. Then I decided to be honest.

Aurora:The truth is, we've been having some problems. I hope you're the kind of friend who doesn't mind talking about relationship woes.

Frankie:I'll listen to yours if you listen to mine.

Aurora:Deal.Does six o'clock work for you?

Frankie

I felt almost nervous as I walked into the bar where I was meeting Aurora. She didn't know too many places, so I'd selected a neighborhood bar about midway between where we lived, a couple of blocks from the elevated train station – or as Chicagoans called it, 'the El'.

I was wearing faded jeans, Doc Martins, and a plain black tee shirt that hugged my breasts, such as they were. I always felt sexy in this shirt. The minute that thought entered my mind I chastised myself.

You have a girlfriend, remember?

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

I really needed to break up with Barbie...

When I walked into the bar Aurora was already there, waving to me from a booth in the back corner. I headed towards her, noting that she was also wearing jeans. Hers were dark washed skinny jeans that she'd paired with a floral shirt and Birkenstock sandals. With her hair hanging loose around her shoulders, she had a bit of a Bohemian vibe. She was gorgeous.

We greeted each other with a quick hug, then I slid into the booth across from her.

"Did you order yet?" I asked, reaching for the laminated menu at the end of the table.

"Nope."

"This place has surprisingly good food," I told her. "A friend of mine used to live nearby and we spent a lot of time here."

The server came and we ordered beers and a basket of fried mushrooms to get started. I had a feeling we were going to be here a while.

"Before we dig into our problems, tell me what you've been up to since the last time I saw you," I suggested.

Aurora wrinkled her nose like she'd smelled something bad.

"Not much has happened since the last time I saw you," she said almost sadly. "I've been working at the same place, living in the same apartment, nothing exciting at all."

“But not dating the same person,” I reminded her. “You were single when we last saw each other.”

“So were you.”

I nodded in acknowledgement. I wouldn’t have slept with her if I wasn’t.

“Okay, since nothing is new in your life besides your relationship status, tell me about Chris,” I suggested.

“Are you sure you want to go into all that before we catch up on your life?” she asked.

“Why not? Chris is the elephant in the room, right?”

I winced as I realized that it probably sounded like I was making a fat joke about Aurora’s larger sized partner, but she didn’t seem to notice my poor word choice.

The server arrived with our beers and Aurora held up her glass for a toast.

“To friends, new and old.”

I repeated her words, clinking my glass against hers and taking a sip of my beer. Aurora followed suit, taking a healthy swig of her beer and leaving a trace of foam on her lip. Resisting the urge to lean across the table and kiss it off, I pointed to my own lips. She got the message immediately, using a napkin to wipe off the foam.

“Tell me about Chris,” I ordered. I could tell she was dying to get it all off her chest.

“We met about eighteen months ago, and we’ve been dating ever since,” she said quietly. “It’s never been a big love match. If you want to know the truth, I was

thinking about turning twenty-nine and how that meant I was going to be thirty soon, and then I thought, ‘My God Aurora, you’re going to die alone’ and next thing I know, I’m dating Chris. I’m not proud of it, but there you go.”

“People have dated for much worse reasons,” I said.

“It’s not been terrible dating Chris,, but they’ve just been there, you know? They seem to like me okay but that’s just it, I don’t want to just like each other. I want love and passion and all the things that go with it.”

“Did you have it in the beginning?” I asked curiously.

“No. I tried to convince myself that this was a grown up, mature love, and it didn’t need all the fireworks and drama,” Aurora explained, “but now that we’ve moved here, it’s like I’m seeing my relationship in a fresh new light. Moving to Chicago didn’t fix what was wrong in our relationship, it just shone a light on everything that’s wrong with it.”

She took another sip of her beer, then paused as she chewed on a mushroom.

“There’s nothing really wrong in our relationship. We don’t fight. We are generally respectful of each other. It’s just...boring, you know? There’s no passion or excitement. We’re better as friends than we are as a couple, at least in my mind.”

She looked miserable, so I decided to share.

“Do you want to know a secret?” I asked.

“Sure.”

Aurora leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, giving me a tantalizing glimpse of her spectacular cleavage. I flashed on the way she’d done that exact move when we went for dinner on the night we slept together. Suddenly my mouth felt dry.

I took another drink of my beer before confessing, “Your story is similar to mine. I’m just settling with Barbie, dating her because she’s convenient, and I know it.”

Aurora

“Why are you settling at all?” I asked Frankie in surprise. “I remember you telling me in no uncertain terms that you didn’t do relationships.”

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but I could swear that Frankie’s cheeks had turned pink.

“Cone of silence?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“To be honest, I’m dating her for similar reasons as why you’re with Chris. I’m stressed out about turning thirty, and my mother has been on my ass forever about settling down. She insisted on fixing me up with Barbie and I just thought, okay, I guess this is convenient. It’ll get my mother to leave me alone for a while anyway.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s so romantic.”

“I’ve never been that much of a romance girl.”

Her voice almost sounded wistful.

“Anyway, so I’ve just been... treading water with Barbie I guess. I don’t love her, but I don’t hate her either. The sex is pretty good -- although that’s been fizzling out lately – but other than that, we don’t have a lot in common. But I just haven’t had the energy to break up with her and deal with what I’m sure will be a lot of drama – from both her and my mom.”

“At least you didn’t move to another state with her,” I said. “I had this idea that moving away would make us grow closer, make the issues in our relationship go away, but instead it’s shining a spotlight on what’s wrong with us.”

I leaned back in my seat with a heavy sigh. Frankie’s eyes dropped to my breasts before popping up to my face again.

“Y’all live together, I assume?”

“Sort of,” I responded. “We’re crashing with Chris’s mother and stepfather while we look for an apartment.”

“Why don’t you tell her that you want to get your own place?”

“They.”

I corrected the pronoun automatically.

“Why don’t you tell them?” she amended.

“I guess I could,” I said slowly. “We were living separately in St. Louis although

they'd been trying to get us to move in together for a while now. I could tell them that I changed my mind about moving in together and that I need more time before going to the next level. But I'm going to have a hard time getting an apartment before I get a job."

"I'll keep my ears out for an apartment and a job for you," Frankie promised. "I live in a studio, otherwise I'd offer for you to stay with me."

"Well I appreciate the thought, and any leads you might have. Now tell me how your teaching is going."

The rest of the evening passed quickly. We finished our mushrooms and ordered burgers to go with our second round of beer. Just like it always had, conversation flowed easily between us. It made me remember that night in my hotel room where we spent hours talking in between having sex. I remembered the conversation as fondly as the physical part, oddly enough.

I glanced at my phone as it vibrated on the table. It was another message from Chris, wondering when I was coming home. They'd texted me like five times since I got here even though they knew I was seeing Frankie. Chris hadn't been happy about me going without them. For some reason they didn't seem as needy and jealous back in St. Louis.

Or maybe they had. Maybe I was the one who was different now.

"I should probably head out," I told Frankie regretfully. "Chris is burning up my phone wondering when I'll be home."

"Yeah, me too. My cat is probably laying on the ground in a big orange puddle, wasting away from starvation."

“Ah, so your cat takes after you,” I teased.



“How so?”

“Dramatic and always hungry.”

“Ha ha.” Frankie pulled out her credit card and put it on top of the check. “Tonight’s on me.”

“Oh no, let’s split it,” I protested.

“This is your ‘welcome to Chicago’ dinner,” she explained. “Fortunately you’re a cheap date.”

“I guess I should have ordered that third beer then,” I joked. “Thanks for dinner though, and the conversation. I appreciate both. Let’s keep in touch, okay? I meant it when I said I could use a friend.”

Frankie reached across the table and squeezed my hand in hers. We both paused as that lightning sensation traveled between us. I had the sudden urge to kiss her, but then I remembered that I wasn’t single, and neither was she. It had to be muscle memory from that night we spent together, right?

“You’ve got a friend in me,” Frankie finally said, her voice husky. “I’m here for you, Aurora.”

“Thanks,” I said softly, my throat feeling tight all the sudden.

She dropped my hand, and I immediately felt sad.

“You’re taking the El right?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s walk together then.”

Frankie

The next month passed quickly. Aurora and I fell into the habit of texting each other a few times a day, chatting about our lives or sharing memes, which I enjoyed more than I would have expected. I was never one for texting more than I had to.

Aurora and I met for dinner twice, both times hanging out way past the time we needed to eat a simple meal. The third time we had dinner Aurora shared that her partner Chris was irritated at how much time she was spending with me.

“This is only the third time we’ve hung out,” I protested.

“I know, but they’ve been really jealous since we moved here,” Aurora told me. “I saw this some when we lived in St. Louis, but it’s gotten worse lately. I think that Chris’s mother is really riling them up now.”

“How so?” I asked.

“She’s always making little digs about why we aren’t married, and why do I hang out with other women, as if there are twenty women I’m spending time with. You know how a few days ago my new friends from work invited me for happy hour?”

I nodded. Aurora had recently gotten a job at a public relations firm in the Loop, as we called a particular part of downtown Chicago. She’d been excited when two of her coworkers invited her to join them for a ‘get to know you’ happy hour at the end of

her first week.

“I got home, not even that late, like maybe seven-thirty, and Chris’s mom is waiting in the living room like I’m a kid who stayed out past curfew,” Aurora explained, her voice rising with her agitation.

“She’s like, ‘Are you cheating on my baby?’. Then Chris came downstairs and started ragging on me about how come I want to spend time with other people even though I’ve literally been home with them every night since we got here other than that happy hour and the couple of times you and I met for dinner. They freaked out when I told them I was meeting you again tonight, making a bunch of accusations about me cheating with you.”

Aurora really looked upset. Pure anger flowed through my body. I was dying to leave the bar, head up to Roger’s Park, and punch Chris in the face. Of course they were like a foot taller than me and probably had a hundred pounds on me. That didn’t mean I couldn’t cause some damage. I was wiry and I’d been trained to take down a grown man in our teacher classroom safety training.

“I’m sorry, Aurora, that really sucks. What are you going to do?” I asked, striving to keep an even tone.

“My first paycheck is next Friday. As soon as it hits my bank, I’m going to start looking for an apartment,” she said. “I have to get out of that house.”

“Oh! That reminds me, I think there’s a studio opening up in my building,” I shared. “Mrs. Matthews – she’s this little old lady on the first floor who keeps track of everyone in the neighborhood – she told me today that the guy who lives in the unit over mine is moving out. Do you want me to ask the super?”

“Oh yeah,” she gushed, “That would be wonderful.”

“You haven’t even seen the building,” I reminded her.

I’d never asked her to come over, partly because I couldn’t imagine sitting on the couch knowing that my bed was just on the other side of the half wall that made a quasi-bedroom in my apartment. Of course, having her living just upstairs from me probably wasn’t my best idea either. Although it would be fun to be neighbors.

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“You live in Irving Park, right?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“If you live there I’m sure I’ll like it,” she said. “Let me know what you find out.”

“I will.”

I hesitated for a minute.

“What is it?” Aurora said, picking up on my change of mood right away.

“Do you, um, do you need to borrow money to get an apartment?” I asked, my words all in a rush. “I know you just started your job.”

To my horror, Aurora’s eyes filled with tears.

“Oh my gosh, you are so sweet. I actually have money saved up for the deposit and several months of rent,” she responded. “I just figured I’d wait until payday to get a place so that I had a paycheck to show the landlord. But I really appreciate the offer. It’s very sweet.”

“No problem.” I brushed aside her gratitude. “When are you going to tell Chris that you’re not moving in with them?”

“The day I get the keys to my new place,” she said. “Just in case it goes badly.”

“You might not want to mention that I’m your neighbor.”

Aurora

“Don’t bother calling me, you cheating bitch! We’re done!”

I winced as Chris screamed loudly out the front door of the walk-up, catching the attention of everyone on the street. I dragged two suitcases and a couple of bags towards my waiting Uber, saying a little prayer of thanks that I’d left most of my stuff in storage in St. Louis. It made it much easier to get out of this place.

To say that Chris hadn’t taken it well when I informed them that I didn’t want to live together was an understatement. They’d been furious, accusing me of cheating and telling me that we were breaking up.

I wasn’t sure why they were surprised by my moving out. I’d been dragging my feet about us looking for an apartment together, finding excuses not to go. It had to be obvious that I’d been having second thoughts.

Things hadn’t been good since the move. We’d scarcely kissed since we moved here, and we hadn’t had sex in months, not since St. Louis. Looking back, things were bad between us even before they asked me to move here with them. I wasn’t sure what I was thinking agreeing to move with them in the first place.

Then again, I liked Chicago better than St. Louis and my new job was a million times better than my old one, so it wasn’t all a bust. And then there was Frankie. We’d been growing closer since I moved here, certainly closer than we’d been in school, and the more time I spent with her, the more I liked her.

If I was totally honest, I was falling in love with her. Or maybe back in love with her, since I was half in love with her back in college, even if I hadn’t been aware of it. But

I needed to keep my feelings to myself until they passed.

Frankie still had a girlfriend. And despite Chris's accusations, I wasn't a cheater. I was moving into her building, and dating a neighbor would be complicated, especially when we broke up – and there was always a break-up. Plus, I needed a friend more than I needed a girlfriend, especially after the acrimony of this break-up.

My best plan was to keep my relationship with Frankie firmly in the friend zone.

“You made it!”

Frankie was sitting on the stoop when my Uber pulled up in front of my new apartment building. She grabbed a few of my bags and helped me drag my stuff up to the third floor. One thing about living here, I'd get my cardio in since the building didn't have an elevator. I was embarrassed by how much I was huffing and puffing by the time we got to the third floor.

Frankie of course was perfectly fine.

I used my key to open the door, looking around my new home curiously. I'd seen the apartment right after the last tenant moved out, but it had been filled with a bunch of junk that person left behind and not in the best condition. The super had promised that after the unit was cleaned he was planning to repaint and refinish the floors, and I was pleased that he'd kept his word. The walls were pristine, and the newly finished floor gleamed in the sunlight coming through the window.

My new place was what they called a jumbo studio, a little larger than a regular studio unit. It was partially furnished, which was great considering that I'd sold most of my furniture before I moved here. The furniture was in decent condition too.

The apartment had giant bay windows in the front, looking out over the residential

street below. I was already planning to get some cushions to create a little reading nook on the ledge below the windows. I imagined myself cuddling under a blanket reading a book while the snow fell outside.

The living area was separated by a half wall that provided some private space for sleeping, large enough for a double bed and nightstand. A couch was pushed against the living room side of the half wall. It was navy blue with a slipcover that looked like it was from Ikea, a small table with a lamp on one side. There was no coffee table or television set in the room, but I definitely could work with what I had here.

On the other side of the main living room there was a series of built in shelves and cabinets, adding a lot of storage. The small kitchen was in the back of the apartment, a window over the sink looking out to the fire escape and the courtyard behind the building. Frankie had told me that in the summer the landlord hosted a barbeque for tenants in that space.



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The kitchen appliances were a little older but in good condition, and when I walked over to the counter I saw that the super had left a ‘welcome to the building’ card along with a small box of candy and a mini bottle of champagne. It was a nice touch.

“That’s so sweet,” I said, pointing it out to Frankie.

“Yeah, Jimmy the super is a good guy,” she said. “He’s been working for the landlord for years and they take good care of their tenants. It’s why they so rarely have turnover here.”

Frankie pointed to the bags we’d dragged up the stairs.

“How about we unpack your stuff, then I’ll introduce you to my favorite neighborhood bar?” she suggested. “I can tell by the look on your face that you’ve had a rough day.”

I huffed out a breath, wondering if she could tell I’d been crying in the Uber on the way over here.

“Yeah, suffice it to say that Chris didn’t take the news of my moving out very well.”

Given the way they’d reacted, I was glad I decided to wait and break the news to them the day I was moving out. There was no way I could have stayed in that house after all the terrible things Chris said to me.

Even their mother had gotten in on the act, screaming at me the entire time I packed my stuff to leave. I was pretty sure that the older woman would have taken a swing at

me if she thought she could've gotten away with it. She'd never liked me.

Frankie stepped closer and pulled me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around her and relaxed for the first time in weeks. Her head fit right underneath my chin, the smell of her coconut shampoo filling my nose.

"Today is the first day of your new life," Frankie said brightly as we pulled apart. "Now unpack your shit so we can start drinking."

Frankie

The next few weeks fell into a rhythm. Aurora and I continued our regular texting, but with her living right on top of me now, we were free to hang out more.

The day after she moved in I went with her to look for some items she needed for her new apartment. The two of us ended up dragging a wooden chest from an antique shop six blocks away in order to save the delivery fees, nearly killing ourselves getting it up to the third floor.

A few nights a week one of us would invite the other to come for dinner. We'd either cook together or order takeout and watch a movie or just talk. I'd never been much of a conversation person, and having to talk all day as a teacher made me want to talk even less outside of work. But with Aurora I could talk all night and still want to do it some more.

When Aurora joined a yoga studio in our neighborhood she dragged me along, insisting that now that we were approaching thirty it was more important than ever for us to stay flexible. I bit my lip to keep from suggesting that the right kind of sex could help with our flexibility too.

Then I reminded myself that I had a girlfriend, although I'd seen Barbie only three

times since Aurora moved upstairs, all of them in public. Meanwhile I'd seen Aurora for at least a little while every day since she'd moved into my building.

"I really need to break up with Barbie," I said one night as we sat on Aurora's fire escape drinking a beer and staring the glimmer of the lake in the distance.

"You really do," she agreed. "You don't seem to like her very much, and it's not like you spend a lot of time together."

I bumped my shoulder against hers. "That's because someone is always insisting that we order Chinese takeout."

Aurora loved Chinese food. I swear she could eat it every single day.

"She could join us if you really wanted her to," she said, although I could tell by her tone she was unenthused about that idea.

"Barbie doesn't like carbs," I said.

That was another thing I didn't like about my girlfriend – her constant diet and food talk.

"She sounds like my mother," Aurora said.

"What's up with you and your mother?" I asked. "You never mention her. Is she still with your dad?"

"Yeah," Aurora nodded. "They're high school sweethearts. They've been together for like forty years now. My mom is... well, she was the head cheerleader in high school and the prom queen too."

“You were a cheerleader,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, but I never really liked it that much. It was a way for me to connect with my mom, you know? She wanted this perfect daughter who always had perfect hair and perfect makeup and the perfect body and I did my best to make myself into what she wanted.”

“And?” I prodded.

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“It wasn’t enough for her. There was always something for her to criticize. It drove me crazy.”

She sighed deeply and drained the rest of her beer.

“When I told her I was bisexual after college she acted like I was doing it just to hurt her. She told me it was ridiculous.”

Aurora pitched her voice higher to imitate her mother.

“For God’s sake Aurora Marie, make up your mind. You either like men or you like women, it’s not natural to like both. Why are you always trying to embarrass me?”

“Wow, that’s kind of harsh.”

I’d only ever liked women, but I had enough bisexual and pansexual friends to know that their preferences were just as valid as mine were.

“Anyway, I never cut her off or anything, but now we mostly communicate through text. It’s safer that way.”

“And your dad?” I asked.

“Dad’s always been more interested in my brother than me. And now that he’s got three grandsons, he’s in hog heaven.”

I felt a stab of sadness. My mother was super annoying with all her meddling, but I

knew she loved me. And my father was one of my best buddies. Neither of them had batted an eye when I came out to them. They'd always just accepted me exactly the way I was.

“Well now you’ve got your fabulous new city life,” I reminded her. “Things are looking up for you.”

She smiled. “They really are. I’ve got a great new job, an apartment I love, and a great new friend.”

“Really? Who is she?” I teased.

“You, silly.”

My phone beeped and I looked down to see another whiny text from Barbie.

“Is that Barbie?” Aurora asked.

“How did you know?”

“You looked annoyed.”

I sighed. “I really need to break up with her.”

“Why don’t you? You’ve been saying that ever since I moved here. What are you waiting for?”

I pulled my knees up to my chest and rested my chin on my knees.

“It’s going to be a whole scene with her,” I said. “I just know it. And I really hate drama.”

“Well if your plan is to just ignore her as much as possible and hope she breaks up with you, it’s not working.”

“You’re right,” I told her. “I need to stop fucking around and talk to her about how I’m feeling. It’s not fair to me to expect Barbie to read my mind. Although as soon as my mother knows I’m single, she’s going to be trying to fix me up again. I’ll be back to her dragging strange women with her every time I see her. And the nagging about me being single and how she wants to have grandchildren. So. Much. Nagging.”

“Why don’t you just introduce me to your parents and say I’m your girlfriend?” she asked.

I looked at her in surprise. “Are you suggesting that we start fake dating to avoid my mother’s matchmaking?”

Aurora shrugged. “Why not? It’ll take care of your Barbie situation and give you some breathing room with your mother until you meet someone you really want to date. Then we can stage a breakup.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I already met someone I wanted to date, and she was sitting next to me on the fire escape. But I didn’t want to mess up our friendship. Aurora was too important to me.

“That might be your best crazy idea ever,” I said.

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She reached out a hand. “Okay, fake girlfriends?” she asked.

I’d read enough romance books to know that this had a high likelihood of going very, very wrong, yet I couldn’t say no.

“Fake girlfriends,” I agreed, shaking her hand. “I’ll talk to Barbie tomorrow and hopefully I can let her down easy.”

Aurora

I was coming back from the grocery store the next day when I heard the yelling coming from Frankie’s apartment. I paused on the landing, trying to figure out what was going on.

“I can’t believe this!”

A loud wailing sob followed.

Frankie must finally be breaking up with Barbie. I could hear her voice, but I couldn’t make out what she was saying. Barbie however was clear as day, her loud voice high pitched and shrill.

“I thought we had a good thing. And now you tell me you’re in love with someone else? Oh my God!” The last word ended on another long wail.

I heard footsteps and headed towards the stairs up to my floor, but the door was flung open before I got away.



“You!” Barbie pointed a shaky finger in my direction. “I knew you were hot for my woman when I saw you staring at her in the restaurant that night.”

I glanced over at Frankie for some indication of what she wanted me to do, but she was frozen in place like a statue. I was learning that my friend was incredibly bad at conflict. With a sigh, I set my groceries down and walked over to Frankie, grabbing her hand in mine, ready to play the part of fake girlfriend.

“I’m sorry Barbie,” I said with what I hoped sounded like sincerity. “But I’ve loved Frankie since we were in college. We tried to fight our feelings, but isn’t it better that she was honest with you now instead of stringing you along?”

Frankie finally came out of her trance.

“You’re a beautiful woman with a lot to offer,” she told Barbie. “You’ll find someone new in no time.”

Barbie turned with a huff.

“You’re not even that good in bed,” she yelled over her shoulder as she clattered down the stairs.

Frankie winced.

We waited until we heard the door on the main floor open and close before looking away from the stairs. Frankie looked super freaked out, like she’d been through hell with the breakup. Her eyes were wide and unfocused.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

“I need to process all this,” she said softly. “And maybe lay down.”

“Okay then, I’ll let you go. Text me if you want to do something later.”

I gave her a side hug then walked back to my groceries before turning back towards her.

“And by the way, you are fantastic in bed. I still masturbate to memories of that night at the convention hotel.”

Frankie’s mouth dropped open in shock and I suppressed a laugh as I walked upstairs.

A couple of hours later I heard a knock on my door. Frankie stood in the hallway holding a large pizza box, a six pack of beer and a package of Oreo cookies balanced on top.

She’d changed into baggie sweats and pulled her short hair into a stubby ponytail and while she was still pale, she looked much better than when I left her earlier.

“Hey,” I said.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, dipping her chin in the direction of the food. “I guess I should have texted first.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Come on in. I’ll get some plates.”

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We set up the pizza box on the wooden chest that I used as a coffee table, deciding to watch something light while we ate. I loaded up season two of *Modern Family* and handed Frankie a napkin. We watched two episodes in silence, eating pizza and laughing at the TV family's antics. Finally Frankie reached for the remote, pausing the show and turning to face me.

"I suck at breakups," she said.

"No kidding," I said, faking shock.

She rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, I hope you meant it about being my fake girlfriend, because my mother has already sent me four texts asking about who this woman is that made me give up a woman like Barbie."

"I can't believe your mother thought you two were a good match in the first place."

"I think she was getting desperate," Frankie said. "She was running out of friends with lesbian daughters to fix me up with."

We both burst out laughing.

"Are you okay though?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's a relief. I'm grateful that you helped give me a push. As hard as it was breaking up with her, dating her was almost harder, you know?"

“Believe me, I know.”

“Are you still getting messages from Chris?” she asked.

About a week after we broke up Chris had taken to texting me every few days. Sometimes they begged me to give us another chance, other times they sent vitriolic attacks.

“I blocked them from my phone and email last week,” I said. “I don’t need to read messages about how terrible I am.”

“Good plan,” she said approvingly.

“So when do I meet your parents?” I asked.

She winced. “Wednesday night? Mom wants me to bring you with me when we have dinner.”

“That works. She’ll get over what happened with Barbie faster if she meets me,” I said. “Besides parents love me.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” she teased.

I met her eyes and we both froze, staring at each other for way longer than we should.

“Can I ask you something?” Frankie said softly.

“Yeah?”

“Is it true what you said before? That you think about that night?”

I knew I should say no. I knew I should keep the focus on us just being friends. But I also didn't want to lie. I hadn't meant to say what I'd said earlier – it just kind of came out of my mouth without my brain engaging – but I also wasn't sorry about it.

“Yeah, it's true,” I said. “It was – hands down -- the hottest night of my life.”

Frankie

I stared at Aurora, conflicting emotions passing through me. We'd never talked about that night, not in all the time we'd spent together since she moved to Chicago. But every time I was with her I could feel the attraction between us. It was like a living, breathing thing, growing in intensity every day.

I'd told myself I was imagining it, or maybe it wasn't mutual. Sometimes when our hands brushed, or when I caught Aurora staring at me when she thought I wasn't looking, I wondered what she thought. If she wanted to be more than just friends. Then I reminded myself that she was coming out of bad breakup, and I had a girlfriend.

Both of those obstacles were behind us now.

“It was the hottest night of my life too,” I said finally.

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A flash of relief crossed her face, as if she was worried that it wasn't as good for me as it was for her. Silly woman. I wasn't a good enough actress to fake that. Nobody was. Although I had wondered a time or two if I'd built it up in my memory to be more than it was.

I leaned closer and as if we were connected by a magnet, Aurora moved too. We met in the middle of the space between us, our faces only a few inches apart. Then by some unspoken agreement we closed the distance between us, moving together.

I pressed my lips against hers, holding still for a few beats, waiting to see if she'd push me away. When she didn't, I licked along the seam of her lips, sliding my tongue inside her mouth and sliding it against hers. Aurora groaned softly, her hands grasping my shoulders, eliminating more of the space between our bodies.

My entire body felt electrified, as if I'd been in hibernation and someone brought me back to awareness with a jolt. We pulled apart, both of us breathing heavily, and without thinking about it, I threw my leg over Aurora and straddled her lap.

Then our mouths met again in a frantic mash of teeth and lips that left me feeling hot and needy.

"Fuck, Aurora."

I ran my lips down her neck, nipping softly at her skin while her hands ran up and down my back. I lowered my hands, cupping her breasts and giving them a squeeze that made Aurora gasp. Her breasts were full and heavy, and I couldn't get enough of them. I plucked her nipples through her shirt, feeling them hardening into sharp

points that I couldn't wait to get into my mouth.

But then Aurora pulled back.

"Frankie," she panted. "We need to stop."

It was like someone had thrown ice water over my head. I leaned back to stare at her.

"Why? What's the matter?"

"You've had a traumatic day," she reminded me. "You're hurting right now. I don't want to do anything that you'll regret later."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I'd only regret it if we stopped now, then I remembered that over the last couple of months Aurora had become my best friend. She was my person now. I'd listed her as my emergency contact when I went to the doctor last week.

If we did something now and it didn't work out, I'd lose her. We wouldn't be popping up and down to each other's apartments every day. We wouldn't be exchanging memes or joking around on text when we were on a break from work.

Losing a girlfriend was one thing. Losing a best friend was something completely different.

"Your friendship is the best thing in my life now," she continued, echoing my thoughts. "I don't want to lose you if things go badly."

I sighed, moving back to my side of the couch, immediately missing the warmth of her curvy body.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” she said firmly. “We were both involved. Obviously there’s still a strong attraction between us.”

That was the understatement of the year.

We sat in silence for several minutes before she said, “Do you want to watch another episode of Modern Family?”

I shook my head, feeling suddenly exhausted from the wild swings of emotion I’d experienced the last few hours.

“I’d better go home and go to bed,” I said regretfully. “Today’s been... a lot. Do you want the rest of the pizza?”

“Let’s share it.”

Aurora took a few pieces of pizza for herself for later, then gave me the box with the rest of the pie and walked me to the door. She wrapped her fingers around my biceps, giving me a squeeze.

“Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Where are those Oreos?” I asked. “I’ll definitely need those.”

As I headed back down to my apartment I couldn’t decide if I was relieved or sad that she’d stopped us. Then I wondered how long either of us could hold out before we gave in again.

Aurora



“So how did you two meet?”

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We were at a steakhouse in Evanston with Frankie's parents. Her father was tall and distinguished looking, and other than greeting me he'd been mostly quiet. Frankie's mom was petite like her, with similar features and the same brown hair, although Mrs. Haberman's hair was mostly silver. She'd been peppering Frankie with questions and opinions since we got here. She seemed well-meaning, but nosy.

"We met at a laundromat in college," I answered. "We hung out some but then we lost touch until I moved to Chicago a few months ago. We ran into each other in a restaurant."

I thought it was best not to mention the time we had the one night stand when I was visiting the city.

"We were both dating other people, so we decided to be friends, but eventually..." I grabbed Frankie's hand and pressed my lips to her knuckles, "we realized that there was more than friendship there."

Her mother's eyes bounced between us, and I had the sense that she knew something was missing from our story.

"I'm just surprised you and Barbie didn't work out," her mother said. "You seemed perfect for each other, and you'd been dating for a while. Her mother says she's devastated."

"I never should have gone out with her in the first place," Frankie said firmly. "We have nothing in common and the truth is, we didn't even like each other that much."

Mrs. Haberman started to say more but her husband interrupted, changing the subject.

“Where do you live, Aurora?”

“She moved into the apartment above mine,” Frankie volunteered, clearly done with personal questions. “Can we order now? I’m starving.”

The rest of the dinner went well. I put on my full cheerleader charm, and by the time we were done eating, Frankie’s mother had warmed up to me. I could tell she was still annoyed about Frankie dumping Barbie but was holding out hope that I’d be the one her daughter would finally settle down with.

We said goodbye outside the restaurant and Frankie and I walked a few blocks down to the El station, hopping on the train back to our neighborhood.

“Well that went well,” I ventured as we found seats on the train.

Frankie nodded. “Yeah, you did your fake girlfriend duty tonight, thank you.”

I bumped my shoulder against hers. “Any time.”

The next couple of weeks went by quickly. Just like before the Barbie breakup and what I was thinking of as “The Kiss” we hung out pretty much every night other than if one of us had plans with other friends. We spent our weekends grocery shopping, watching movies, and wandering around the city as Frankie taught me about my new home city.

But as much as we tried to keep things on a platonic level, the attraction between us was burning out of control. Every random touch, every stolen glance, every minute we spent together made it worse. My vibrator had never had this much action before.

Finally it came to a head.

It was a Friday night and once again we were sitting on the fire escape having a beer and decompressing from our work days. Frankie's summer school cohort was ending soon and she was looking forward to having a few weeks off after having a challenging group of kids this term. She taught at an 'alternative' high school for kids who'd been expelled from mainstream schools. Her classes were a mixture of kids with behavior problems, mental health challenges, and lived trauma.

"I just wonder sometimes if I'm even making a difference with these kids," Frankie told me. "They have so much stacked against them."

"You can't save them all," I reminded her. "But isn't it true that sometimes having even one adult who cares for them and believes in them can make the difference?"

"Yeah."

I scooted around to face her, my crossed legs pressing against the outside of her thigh in the small space.

"You're making a difference for someone, even if you never know who it is."

She gave me a smile. "You're a good friend. I'm glad you moved to Chicago."

"Me too."

We looked at each other long enough that the atmosphere changed, the space between us becoming heated in a way that had nothing to do with the muggy summer temperature.

Without thinking about it, I reached out a hand and slid Frankie's hair behind her ear,

then dropped my hand to her shoulder. Her pupils dilated.

“Aurora?”

“Yeah?” My voice sounded scratchy from the emotions that were nearly choking me.

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“Tell me again why it would be a bad idea for us to act on this... this attraction between us.”

I stared at her for a long moment before whispering, “I don’t remember.”

Frankie leaned closer, her brown eyes sparkling with mischief.

“How about I make you remember something different?” she asked.

“What?”

“What it feels like to come on my face.”

Frankie

It was like my words broke down the wall of restraint between us. We flew together, beer bottles tipping over as Aurora’s lips crashed down on mine. Taking my head between her palms, she bit my lower lip, demanding entrance into my mouth and I willingly ceded control to her.

But I wasn’t passive. I shoved my hands between us, sliding underneath the hem of the tank top she wore, sliding up her soft belly until I could cup her breasts in my hands.

The kiss somehow turned hotter, and I couldn’t help but moan against the onslaught of her lips. We broke apart to catch our breath, but still we were moving, stroking, staying close.

“I’ve missed this,” I whispered as I gently nipped the shell of her ear.

“Me too. Do you want to go inside?”

“Yeah. I do.”

Aurora met my eye. “Are you sure? There’s no turning back from this. It will change everything.”

“Sometimes change is good,” I said, pushing to my feet.

I reached a hand down to help her stand, then found our empty beer bottles. Following Aurora back into her apartment, I set the bottles on the counter, then grabbed Aurora’s hips and pushed her back against the counter. Pulling her head down, I gave her a long kiss.

She was laughing when she pulled away.

“You’re too short, that hurts my neck.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d always been petite, but most of the time I didn’t mind. Except for times like these.

“Take me to your bed,” I ordered.

Aurora smirked. “Getting bossy, are you?”

She shrieked with laughter as I gave her a smack on her ass. “Get moving.”

“I’ll race you.”

This is what I'd been missing with every other woman I'd been with. The ability to have fun. To laugh. To just enjoy each other. I'd only ever had that with Aurora.

Aurora pushed me on the bed, dropping on top of me to claim my lips again. I pulled her shirt up as far as I could with her pressed against me, then reached behind her to unhook her bra.

"We have too many clothes on," I complained.

She rolled off me and we both practically tore off our clothes before rolling to face each other. I slid down enough to take one of her pert nipples into my mouth, teasing it with the tip of my tongue. Meanwhile Aurora slid her hands down my body until she reached my mound.

"Open," she said.

I lifted my top leg, resting it on hers, and Aurora slid her hand between my lower lips.

"You're so wet for me already," she said approvingly.



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Her fingers started sliding up and down my channel, spreading my moisture and exploring my folds. I rolled my hips towards her, meeting her fingers, trying to get her to where I needed her most, but she continued to tease me.

I bit down hard on Aurora's nipple, making her yelp. Her fingers never wavered though. After what felt like months of foreplay with this woman, I was already close to breaking apart. I cried out as she slid a finger inside my opening, pumping in and out. Twisting her hand, she added a second finger, then pressed her thumb against my clitoris. Then she bit my lip. Hard.

My toes curled and my back arched as an orgasm hit me like a tsunami. Everything inside me seemed to light up as I rode Aurora's hand, whining and gasping as she prolonged my pleasure.

When Aurora had drained every ounce of pleasure out of my body I flipped over on my back, staring at the ceiling with wide, dazed eyes. If I'd had any doubts that we were good together that night in the hotel, those were assuaged now. I'd never come so hard, so fast before in my life.

I turned my head as she slipped her fingers out of my pussy. Aurora looked at me as she lifted her fingers to her mouth, licking my arousal off her skin.

"Delicious."

My pussy spasmed with an aftershock.

"I think you've killed me," I joked. "I can't move."

Aurora snuggled closer. “I guess my work here is done.”

I pressed my lips against hers, kissing her softly, then gave her a smile.

“My lips still work.” I rolled over onto my back and waved my hand at my face. “How about you hop on up?”

Aurora didn’t hesitate. She pushed to her knees, then straddled my waist, leaning down to kiss me before shifting up higher. When her knees were planted on either side of my head, she gripped the headboard behind me and cautiously lowered herself over my face.

She moved slowly, but I was having none of that. I gripped her hips and pulled her downward.

“I want you to smother me with that pretty pussy,” I said, right before she did just that.

I used my fingers to spread her lower lips, then turned all of my focus onto bringing her pleasure. Her pussy tasted just as delicious as I remembered, and I eagerly lapped up her juices. When she was starting to tremble above me, I speared my tongue into Aurora’s opening, fucking her with it.

With her thighs pressed against my head, sound was muffled, but I could still hear Aurora chanting my name like it was a prayer. She was grinding her pussy against my face, chasing her release.

I shifted slightly until I captured her clitoris between my lips, then I sucked it inside. She was close now and when I bit down softly on her swollen little bud, Aurora froze for a good ten seconds. Then she was shaking and shuddering above me, crying out with the force of her orgasm. I continued licking and teasing her pussy through it all

until she finally fell off me, collapsing sideways on the bed.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “We are never leaving this bed again.”

She scooted down to rest her head on my shoulder, her arm going around my waist to hold me close.

“We’ll need to leave to get groceries eventually,” I teased.

“Nah, that’s why they have delivery.”

Aurora

“Just so we’re on the same page, I’m no longer your fake girlfriend, right?”

Frankie looked up from stroking circles around my belly button. I’d always felt self-conscious about my soft belly – it remained stubbornly rounded no matter how much ab work I did – but Frankie seemed to like it just fine. Earlier she’d kissed her way over every inch of my abdomen.

“There’s nothing fake about what we’ve been doing all weekend,” she said fervently. “You are definitely my real girlfriend now, so I hope you’re okay with that.”

“More than okay,” I confirmed.

It was Sunday night, and we’d spent the entire weekend holed up in my apartment eating take out, watching movies, and having sex. I was pretty sure I was permanently dehydrated.

“I need to go downstairs and do some work,” she said regretfully. “I have papers to grade and if I stay here I’ll never get anything done.”

“Go on then,” I said, cupping my breasts up like a gift. “I’ll just take care of myself while you’re gone.”

“Well, maybe I have time for one more go, but it’ll need to be fast.”

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Later that night I lay in my bed alone, the weekend's events running on a continuous loop in my mind. I felt almost giddy about the change in my relationship status with Frankie, but also somehow content. There was a sense of rightness about it that I hadn't had with anyone else I'd been with.

I wondered what would have happened if we'd been in the same city back when we met at the conference. Would we had gotten together more than once? Or gone our separate ways and hoped to not run into each other again because it would be too awkward?

I was glad we were getting a second chance. Or maybe it was a third chance? I just hoped we hadn't made a mistake crossing the line. Surely we could stay best friends even while we were lovers?

The next few months went well. Just like before, we spent most evenings together, although now we had frequent sleepovers. The passion burned brightly between us, but we still just loved to hang out, exploring the city or staying in.

We visited with Frankie's parents once or twice a month, generally for dinner. Frankie said she could only take her mother in small doses, although she went to a Cubs game with her dad twice during her summer break. Her father wasn't much of a talker – Frankie said it was because he couldn't get a word in around her mother – but even though she looked a lot like her mother, her father was the one she was closest with. Their personalities were the most similar too.

I took a few days off at the end of August and Frankie and I went on a road trip, heading up to the Wisconsin Dells for a long weekend, stopping to see the sites along

the way.

We soon learned that we were very different travelers. I was the kind of person who wanted to plan everything and make the most of our vacation time, where Frankie liked to just go with the flow and see what she felt like doing each day.

Frankie and I worked it out and we were both able to enjoy our trip, but it highlighted one of the many differences between us. Differences that started to make little cracks in our relationship the longer we were together.

Things that I laughed off when we were just friends became annoying once Frankie became my girlfriend. Like her fear of conflict. She could never articulate when things were bothering her, so she withdrew. There were times I could see that she was upset or annoyed about something, but it was almost impossible to drag it out of her. Meanwhile, I was a verbal processor who liked to talk about my feelings ad nauseum.

There was also the significant difference in our incomes. As a public school teacher, Frankie's income was shockingly low. Because of this, she 'lived poor' as my mother would say. She did everything she could to avoid spending money. She never wanted to buy anything at full price, and would spend hours, days sometimes, searching for the best price on anything she purchased.

I made good money – enough to live someplace much nicer than our building full of studios – and I was admittedly a clothes horse. Frankie couldn't understand my excitement about getting a designer dress or a new handbag when she wore the same clothes that she'd worn for years. Clothes that she'd bought from thrift shops.

The stark differences between us boiled over in early October, leading to our first full-blown fight.

"My boss bought a table at the annual Chicago Marketing Professionals Gala," I told

Frankie one night over dinner. “It’s two weeks from Saturday.”

She looked up from her food. “What’s that?”

“It’s a big event to celebrate successful marketing campaigns. Everyone in marketing attends, as well as CEOs and officers from the largest corporations in the city.”

“What happens at the gala?” she asked.

“There’s a fancy dinner, then a few boring speeches, and a presentation of the top marketing campaigns of the year,” I explained. “They give an award to the best one, then there’s dancing. Oh, and alcohol. Lots of alcohol.”

Frankie shuddered. “That sounds like a terrible way to spend a Saturday night.”

“Really? Because I was hoping that you’d be my date. I’ve been telling my coworkers about you and they’re all eager to meet you.”

My girlfriend looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know, Aurora. I hate shit like that. I suck at small talk.”

“You don’t have to talk,” I teased her. “You just have to look pretty.”

Her expression didn’t lighten. “Would I have to dress up?”

I nodded. “Yes, of course. It’s fancy so the guys will be in tuxes or nice suits and the women will wear dresses, either cocktail or formal wear.”

“I don’t even own a dress,” Frankie reminded me. “Formal or otherwise.”

“That’s okay. I figured we’d go shopping for dresses and shoes, then we can make an

appointment at the salon the morning of the banquet to get our hair and nails done.”

Frankie was staring at me like I’d suggested that she walk naked down Michigan Avenue.

“Can you take someone else?” she asked. “One of your other friends? I really don’t want to do something like that.”

“Don’t you want to support me?” I asked, feeling hurt by the immediate shut down.

“It’s not that I don’t want to support you Aurora,” she said stubbornly. “It’s about you asking me to do things that you know will make me uncomfortable.”

“That’s part of being in a relationship,” I reminded her. “You do things for the other person, things that you probably wouldn’t do otherwise. Like I go to dinner with you and your parents. Plus it’s good to challenge yourself sometimes. It’s how you grow.”



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“You don’t like my parents?” she asked in shock.

“Your parents are fine, but they wouldn’t be my first choice in dining companions,” I said. “I’d go with you if there was a teacher dinner or something.”

Frankie pushed her chair away from the table so fast that it tipped over. “I’ve got to go.”

“What? Go where?”

“I have stuff to do,” she said evasively.

“You’re just taking off in the middle of a conversation?” I asked incredulously.

“I’m sorry Aurora, I don’t want to be made up like a doll and hang out with rich assholes all night. I just can’t do it. Find someone else.”

Then she was rushing out of my apartment while I watched open-mouthed.

Frankie

I was a coward. I’d rushed out of Aurora’s apartment two days ago and completely avoided her since then, wanting to avoid further confrontation. I kind of figured that she’d text or come down and tell me not to worry, that I didn’t need to do anything that made me uncomfortable, but I hadn’t heard a peep from my girlfriend.

Now my impulsive escape from her apartment was turning into something else. The

longer it dragged on, the worse it was. Were we fighting? Were we broken up? I had no idea. I had no idea what Aurora was thinking right now. Of course if I'd just talk to her I would know. She never shied away from sharing her feelings.

It was one of many ways that we were different. I loved talking to her – I could talk to her for hours – but I wasn't the kind of person who talked about my emotions. I was like my dad in that way. He'd never said he loved me, never shared if he was sad. He was the type of guy who showed how he felt about you with his actions, not his words.

It drove my mother crazy. Just like Aurora, she was a verbal processor.

All I knew was that I missed my girlfriend. I missed talking to her. I missed snuggling with her. And it was all my fault.

I needed to fix this, but still I waited in vain for Aurora to come to me, even though I was the one who'd ran out on her. After nearly a week I realized that it was up to me to take the next step, so I swallowed my pride and knocked on her door. She answered immediately, as if she'd heard me coming.

"Hey." I gave her a searching look.

"Yes?" Aurora raised her eyebrows, her face a cold mask I'd never seen before. She stood in the doorway, holding the door partly open, making no move to let me in.

"Sorry I ran out the other night," I said quietly. "And I'm sorry I can't go to your event with you."

"Can't or won't?" she asked.

"Um."

“Is there some reason you ran out of my apartment the other night when we were in the middle of a discussion and then didn’t call or text or come by since then?” she asked.

My stomach gurgled uncomfortably. I figured I’d apologize, and we’d be good. I wasn’t expecting Aurora to still be upset with me. I was an idiot. Of course she was mad. I’d be really angry if the situation was reversed.

“You know I’m not really good with conflict,” I said. “I mean, if it wasn’t for your encouragement I’d still be dating Barbie.”

“Are you saying that it’s my fault you broke up with Barbie?” she asked incredulously.

“Well no, I didn’t mean it that way,” I said “I’m just... well, I could tell you were getting mad at me about the gala thing, so I thought it was best to distance myself for a few days until you got over it.”

“So whenever we don’t agree on something, your plan is to ghost me for a few days and then pop up here like everything’s fine?”

I was frozen in place, trying to think of the best way to fix this. But I drew a blank.

“Listen Frankie, if we’re going to have a relationship, we need to be able to have discussions,” she said with exaggerated patience. “We need to work through disagreements and consider each other’s views. And that also means that sometimes we will need to do things we’re not excited about, because that’s part of the deal when you’re a couple. I love you Frankie. I’m in love with you. But I don’t want to always be the grown-up in this relationship.”

“That’s not fair,” I protested. “It’s one event that I don’t want to go to.”

“It’s more than the event. You can’t talk about your real feelings. Ever. You don’t want to have conversations about anything bad. You completely shut down when you think there’s the slightest hint of conflict. I don’t know what all that’s about, but it’s not bringing your best self into this relationship.”

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Her eyes bounced between mine. “Do you even love me? Because I have no idea.”

My mouth opened and I tried to force the words past my lips, but I remained silent.

Tell her you idiot! My brain screamed at me. Tell her she’s the one you want to spend the rest of your life with. You’re going to lose her!

But something held me back. Aurora’s question hung in the air between us like a dark cloud until she finally released a heavy sigh.

“That’s all the answer I need then. Goodbye Frankie.”

She closed the door, and I remained right where I was, staring at the wood and trying to figure out how I’d managed to make this situation even worse. Then I went downstairs and drank whiskey until I fell asleep.

The next morning I did something I rarely did voluntarily: I headed to my parents’ house. My father opened the door.

“Hey Peanut, did we know you were coming?”

I shook my head. “No. I uh, I need some advice.”

“I’ll get your mother.”

Ten minutes later I was at my parents’ kitchen table drinking tea and telling my parents about the fight with Aurora.

“Aurora is right,” my mother said when I finished. “When you’re in a relationship, you have to do stuff you don’t like to do. Do you know how many damned Cubs games I’ve gone to with your father? I hate baseball. But I go because it’s important to him.”

My father gave her a fond smile.

“I think she’s more angry about me not wanting to talk, and avoiding her all week,” I confessed. “I knew we needed to talk, but I just, well...”

“You hoped that she’d come around and be the one taking a risk?” my mother asked. “Or that she’d just cool off and everything would magically be fine?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Did you know that your father and I almost got divorced once?”

I looked at her in shock. My parents were the most in love couple I’d ever seen.

“What? Why?”

“Because your father refused to talk to me, and I got tired of taking on all the emotional labor in our relationship.”

“How did you resolve it?” I asked.

My father spoke up for the first time. “I learned how to have hard conversations and talk about my feelings, at least a little bit. It turns out that my fear of losing your mother was much bigger than my fear of opening up.”

Mom leaned forward and met my eyes. “I know after what happened with She Who

Shall Not Be Named you probably want to avoid conflict, but there's going to be disagreements in every relationship. You just need to learn how to have them in a healthy way. Now let's figure out how to fix things with Aurora."

Aurora

As the weekend approached I was dreading the marketing gala.

Normally I loved getting dressed up and going to a fancy event, but I felt weird about going alone, knowing that all my coworkers were bringing dates or significant others. My work friends would be full of questions about why I hadn't brought the girlfriend that they'd heard so much about. And what was I supposed to say? She didn't care enough about me to put on a dress and make idle chit chat with strangers for a few hours?

I hadn't heard a peep from Frankie since she came up to my apartment last Saturday. Sometimes when my apartment was quiet I could hear her moving around in the apartment below me, making me want to cry.

But I wasn't going to shed tears over this. I deserved to have a good relationship. My entire adult life had been a series of unsatisfactory boyfriends and girlfriends I didn't think it was too much to ask to have a partner who would talk to me about their feelings. At least a little. A relationship had to be more than fun and games and sex.

Determined to have the best time I could have, all things considered, I put on my new dress, curled my hair into soft blonde waves, made up my face, and shoved my feet into an adorable pair of heels that I was sure I'd be regretting by the end of the night.

I paused as I heard a knock on the door. Who could that be?

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When I opened my door, I got the shock of my life. Frankie stood there – or at least I was pretty sure it was Frankie. She looked so different that I thought I might be hallucinating.

“Frankie?”

She gave me a small smile. “Hi.”

The woman before me looked stylish and elegant. She was wearing a royal blue dress that hugged her petite figure. It was a satin material with a fitted bodice and a sweetheart neckline. The dress nipped in at the waist and flared out at her knees. She was wearing black leather shoes with a Mary Jane strap across the foot and chunky two inch heels. A thin silver bracelet adorned her right wrist.

Her hair was different too. Her normally brown hair had gold highlights now, and it had been curled into loose waves that gave it a fullness it didn’t usually have. Someone had given her a smoky eye, a subtle application of foundation that evened out her skin tone, and dark red lips.

“You look... different,” I said inanely.

She looked a little unsure. “My mom and I went to the salon this afternoon, then she helped me with my make-up.”

“And the dress?” I asked.

“We went shopping yesterday at Nordstrom’s.”



My mouth dropped open. I couldn't reconcile the woman in front of me with the tomboy in thrift store clothes I was used to.

"Do I look okay?" she asked, a tinge of nervousness in her voice. "For your gala, I mean? My mom said this was the kind of outfit you wear for a fancy event."

"You're coming to the gala?" I asked in confusion. "I thought we were broken up."

She shook her head. "We had an argument, and I know that we need to talk. I'm ready to talk. But first I want to go to this gala with the most beautiful woman in Chicago on my arm. The woman I love."

When I didn't respond, she took my hand. I let her.

"I mean it, Aurora. I love you. I'm so sorry I hurt you, but I promise that I'll do better. I don't want to lose you."

I surged forward, pressing my lips against hers, but she pulled back with a laugh.

"We have to save the kissing for later. I have no idea how to get this shit back on my face if we kiss it off. Now are you ready to go?"

"Yes," I said, suddenly feeling lighter than I'd felt in two weeks.

I grabbed my purse, making sure that I had my key and my phone, and took Frankie's outstretched hand. We walked downstairs and called an Uber to take us to the hotel where the event was happening. We could have taken the El, but we were way too dressed up to risk brushing against a dirty subway car. Not to mention that with both of us wearing high heels, we would be an obvious target for some mugger hoping for an easy score.

“Did I tell you that you look beautiful tonight?” Frankie asked as we walked into the hotel. “Your dress is very elegant, and I love what you did with your hair.”

“Thank you,” I said, doing a little spin. “I’ve been primping all day.”

The next few hours passed quickly. We joined my coworkers for a cocktail in the atrium, then headed into the ballroom to find our table for dinner. My office mate’s husband was a big Cubs fan, so he and Frankie spent half the dinner talking about everything that had gone wrong this past season.

After sitting through the awards ceremony, which definitely wasn’t the most exciting part of the night, the dancing started. I’d never danced with Frankie before, and I had no idea if she even liked dancing, but as soon as a good song came on I grabbed her hand and pulled her out onto the dance floor. She wrapped her arms around my waist, and I put my hands on her shoulders, and then Frankie and I were swaying to the music, lost in our own little world.

“How long do you think we need to stay here?” she whispered after our second dance.

“Now that the ceremony is over we can leave whenever you want,” I said. “Are you peopled out?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but more importantly, I want to go back to your apartment and have make-up sex. I hear that’s one of the benefits of having a fight.”

“You heard right. Let’s go.”

Frankie

To say that I was relieved that my gamble worked out was an understatement. All

week I'd been tempted to go up to see Aurora and talk things through, but my mother had convinced me that showing up at her door and making a grand gesture would be the best way to show Aurora that I was all in.

My mother was right.

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She was also right that the gala wasn't as horrible as I'd imagined it would be. Other than the part where they did boring speeches and awards, I'd mostly had fun. I didn't even mind being dressed up. Not that I wanted to do it every day, but I was surprised to learn that it was kind of fun to get dolled up and do something different to my hair.

Aurora looked gorgeous. She was wearing a fitted red dress with little straps on the shoulder and a scoop neckline that tastefully highlighted her cleavage. I wasn't sure what she was wearing underneath that thing, but her tits were higher than I'd ever seen them, making my mouth water.

Like me, she'd curled her hair and put on makeup. She looked glamorous and sophisticated, fitting in with all the wealthy people in attendance at the gala. I'd been proud to have her on my arm.

We Ubered back to our building, then headed upstairs to Aurora's apartment. The minute we got in, she kicked off her shoes.

"Oh thank God," she breathed. "These shoes always kill my feet."

"Why did you wear them then?" I asked.

She looked at me like I was an idiot. "Did you see them? They're gorgeous and they make my legs look a mile long."

I kicked off my own shoes. They were more comfortable than I'd been expecting – something else my mother had been right about – but I was still glad to ditch them.

My bare feet had scarcely touched the floor when Aurora pushed me up against the front door. Her head descended, swallowing my gasp with her mouth, as she gave me a rough and claiming kiss. Her hands slid down my sides, pushing my skirt up to my hips, then she gripped my thighs and boosted me up against the door.

My heart was racing so fast I thought I'd pass out. I wrapped my legs around her hips and my arms around her shoulders, holding on as I felt Aurora move her hand down between our bodies. She made a sound of approval when she reached the damp fabric of my panties, then shoved the crotch aside. Without preamble, her fingers speared my opening, starting a punishing rhythm that had me on the brink of orgasm within seconds.

"Aurora!" I cried out her name as she boosted me a little higher and sank her teeth into the skin at the juncture of my neck. I rolled my hips, chasing her fingers.

It was all too much. The stress of our separation, the anxiety about attending the gala, the foreplay of dancing, and now this rough, dominant side of Aurora. I broke apart with a long wail, my eyes closed as I focused on the waves of pleasure rolling through my body.

When she lowered my feet back to the floor, my knees buckled until Aurora caught me.

"Well that was fun," she said, her tone mischievous as she took in my dazed expression.

"It would be more fun if we were both naked," I replied smartly.

"I need you to help me get out of my shapewear," Aurora said. "If you weren't here I'd probably have to cut myself out of it. I've been stress eating all week."

She slipped her dress over her head, then I helped her tug off the strapless corset bra and girdle thing she was wearing.

“They left marks,” I said, tracing my fingers along the angry looking red lines on her torso.

“It’s the price I paid for looking this good,” she said lightly. “I need to use the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

I took off my dress but left my underwear on so Aurora could see it. Usually I only wore utilitarian cotton garments, but this underwear was lacey and girly. Uncomfortable too, if I was being honest, but I’d worn it specifically to seduce my girlfriend. I stretched out on the bed on my side, trying to adopt a sexy pose.

Aurora walked into the alcove where her bed was and stopped, a big smile on her face.

“Well, look at you in your sexy underwear.”

She walked to the edge of the bed and rolled me onto my back with gentle hands on my shoulders, then lowered her head to give me a kiss. Her hair fell in a curtain around us as her lips met mine. Our heads were in reverse positions – her forehead over my chin – and I was surprised how good it felt to kiss in this position.

When we broke apart, I sat up and pointed to the bed behind me.

“My turn now. Lay down.”

Aurora crawled up the bed, completely self-confident in her nakedness, and then slowly rolled over with her feet braced on the mattress, knees bent. I pushed her knees apart, spreading her legs wide, then slipped between her legs.

I started on the outside, kissing and nipping at her pussy lips, before moving inside to explore her folds with my tongue. I lapped her from bottom to top, over and over, until she was squirming beneath me. When I knew she was close, I focused my tongue on her clitoris, circling it while I teased around her opening with my finger.

Then I did something she didn't expect. Instead of inserting a finger inside her opening, I spread her arousal lower until I was pressed against the puckered entrance of her ass. Aurora gasped as I slid just the tip of one finger inside her ass while sucking her clit into my mouth. That was all it took to make her come so hard that moisture dripped down my chin.

I teased her through one orgasm, then fucked her with my tongue until she had a second one and begged me for a break. Then, and only then, did I slide up her body and snuggle into her side.

"I really like make-up sex," I told her, pressing a quick kiss to the closest breast.

Aurora

“Ireally like make-up sex.”

I chuckled weakly, still recovering from my orgasms. Sex with Frankie had always been good, but what we did tonight was next level.

“I need to tell you something,” she said, her voice turning serious. “I need to explain why I freaked out.”

I pushed myself up to sit against the headboard and she moved to sit cross legged in front of me. She was still wearing that incredible sexy underwear set. I pulled a sheet up to cover myself. I couldn’t have serious conversations naked.

“Remember when we had that night at the hotel a few years ago?” she asked.

“Like I could forget it,” I said dryly.

“That night I told you I didn’t do relationships,” she started.

“I remember.”

“It wasn’t totally true. I mean, it wasn’t a lie,” she hastened to add, “but my comments were a reflection of the fact that I’d just gone through a terrible break-up.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering where this was going.



“I was dating this woman Debi for two years. I thought we were in love, so when the critical comments started, I figured it was someone who loved me trying to help me improve, you know?”

“What kind of comments?”

“She hated the way I dressed. Hated my hair. It annoyed her that I refused to wear make-up. I started changing to please her, but it was never enough. I... I lost myself in the relationship. Then I found out she was cheating on me.”

“Oh shit.”

“She’d been cheating for most of our relationship, with a woman who was married to a man but hadn’t come out to her family yet. When I found out about the cheating, I confronted Debi. I was really angry, yelling at her about how she betrayed me, and she...”

Frankie paused, sounding choked up. She was blinking rapidly like she was trying not to cry.

“She hit me.”

“What?!?” I yelped.

“Clocked me right in the face, hard enough that I went flying into a wall. I had a huge bruise on my cheek. She told me I’d better not argue with her again. Said I was lucky to have her.”

Suddenly Frankie’s aversion to conflict was making a lot more sense.

“Oh my God, what did you do?”

“I moved out the next day when she was at work,” she said. “I blocked her phone number and email and went up to stay at my parents’ house. I was so embarrassed that I’d let myself date someone like that, especially when she came to their house and started pounding on the door, screaming and demanding that I talk to her.”

Frankie took another deep breath.

“I tried to get a restraining order, but the judge had a bias, didn’t believe that domestic violence happened in lesbian relationships. I knew the woman that my ex was cheating on me with, so finally I threatened to go to her girlfriend’s husband and tell him everything. That’s what made Debi finally back off and leave me alone.”

“I’m sorry that happened,” I said, reaching over to rub her shoulder. “That sounds horrible.”

She nodded.

“I thought I was over all that, but when you wanted me to get a makeover and go to the gala, it brought it all back like I wasn’t good enough like I was, and I freaked out,” she explained. “But I had a long talk with my parents and then I had two sessions with the counselor who I was seeing after my break-up with Debi, and I realized I was having a trauma response.”

“That’s understandable.”

I hated that she felt like I wanted her to change for me when I thought we’d just have a fun day getting dressed up and doing something fancy.

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“I love you Aurora, more than anything, and while I can’t guarantee that I’ll never freak out again, you have my word that I’ll try to do better every day to be the woman you deserve. Because you’re it for me. You’re the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

I realized I was crying and smiling at the same time.

“I love you too Frankie. I think I have loved you ever since you gave me quarters at Bubbles & Brews, even though I didn’t understand it at the time. We just need to commit to communicating with each other and we’ll be all right.”

She popped up onto her knees and then straddled my lap.

“That’s not all I’ll commit to,” she whispered, her lips only an inch away from mine. “With you, I’ll commit to forever.”

“And so will I. So will I.”

Epilogue -- Frankie

Eighteen months later...

“Are you ready, Peanut?”

I smiled at my father. “Yeah, I really am.”

The music changed and I wrapped my hand around my father’s arm. Just like we’d

practiced, Dad and I walked up the side aisle of the event center. On the other side, Aurora was walking up the aisle with her own father. While neither of her parents had been thrilled about their daughter marrying a woman, they'd put aside their prejudices to participate in our big day.

We reached the front of the aisle and turned to walk across the center towards the officiant. Across from me, Aurora and her father made the same turn, her eyes widening with surprise when she saw me.

My father chuckled softly as he saw my fiancée's reaction.

"You wore a dress," she whispered as we met in the center. "I thought you were going to wear a suit."

"I wanted to surprise you," I said.

"I would have happily married you if you were wearing sweatpants."

"I don't own sweatpants," I reminded her with a smile.

I'd upgraded my wardrobe quite a bit since Aurora and I got back together. Not because I thought I needed to change for her, but because I realized I didn't have to wear other people's cast-offs to make a point. I'd never be fashionable like Aurora, but I definitely dressed more professionally than I used to.

Today I was wearing a simple off-white dress with short sleeves and a matching belt around the waist. It ended just above the knee. With it I wore the same black shoes I wore to the gala. No sense in buying another pair of dress shoes when I dressed up like once a year.

"You look beautiful," I told her.

Aurora's dress was white lace, cut low in the back and highlighting her cleavage in the front. The skirt flared out near her ankles. She looked like a princess, just like she'd always wanted for her wedding. Her blonde hair was up in some elaborate up-do, and she'd done something to her eyelashes that made them seem much longer than usual.

"Are we ready?" the officiant asked.

"Yes," we said in unison. We turned our heads to share a smile.

"In that case, let's get you two married."

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