



You've Got (Chain) Mail

(Sweet Sports Kisses #6)

Author: Audrey Carnes

Category: Sport

Description: Two best friends, one secret love, and a battle for the heart.

Honor

Wes has always been my knight in shining armor.

But I never expected him to become an actual knight—armor, sword, and all!

Watching him fight in his new sport of armored combat sparks a strange new feeling.

Wait a minute! I can't actually be attracted to my best friend, can I?

Wes

Twenty years ago, I fell in love with the smartest girl in kindergarten.

But I didn't have the guts to tell her.

So I settled for best friend instead.

Over the years, my love for Honor has only grown stronger.

And keeping it a secret is pure torture.

I don't want to risk ruining our friendship, but I'm at my breaking point.

Will I fight for Honor's heart and risk everything for love, or will I let fear continue to keep us apart?

You've Got (Chain) Mail, a sweet friends-to-more-romcom novella, is book 6 of the Sweet Sports Kisses multi-author series—a sweet/clean romcom sports collection set across the U.S. Each story is connected through the Play It Forward organization, bringing heartwarming romance, humor, and just the right amount of competition. If you're looking for no-spice, kisses only with the perfect amount of swoon, then this series is for you!

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

Watching a swordfight while wearing elf ears wasn't on my bingo card for this weekend, but here we are.

"Don't say I never did anything for you," I say to my best friend, Wes, as I buckle myself into the passenger seat of his car.

He frowns, his hand hesitating over the gearshift. "If you don't want to go..."

"I do! I want to see what all the fuss has been about."

He looks me over. "Are you sure you want to wear that?"

"What's wrong with this? I just bought it.

" I smooth my hands over my "Renaissance maiden" costume, freshly purchased off the internet.

With its ribboned corset top and flowing green skirt, it does things for my plus-sized figure that modern clothes don't.

Those sixteenth century fashion mavens might have been on to something.

I completed my look with press-on jewels on my temples and elven ears.

If there were a best-dressed competition at this shindig, I would win it.

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” Wes says, rubbing the back of his neck. “You might be cold, is all.”

I stare at him. “It’s June.” We might live in Washington, a state not exactly known for its balmy weather, but still.

“Also, it’s a bunch of dudes and…” His voice trails off.

I glance down at where his eyes have dropped. Okay, it’s a corset top and when you’re a fluffier girl, your cups generally runneth over in the chest area. But there’s nothing actually revealing about it—certainly no more than what other women will likely be wearing at the event.

I roll my eyes. Wes is just being overprotective, per usual. “Whatever, prude. Are we going, or what?” I gesture for him to get on with it, and he shifts the car into drive with a shrug.

Last fall, I had invited Wes to go to a Renaissance Faire at our county fairgrounds. I had thought it would be a quirky way to spend an afternoon, strolling amongst the “lords” and “ladies” and eating ye olde treats. Maybe buy a bejeweled fairy wand or magic bath “potion.”

While I was distracted by the wares for sale, Wes had gravitated to the sounds of clanging metal, where two men dressed up in actual suits of armor hacked away at each other with swords. He had barely budged during the fight and afterward, asked a million questions of the fighters.

At the time, I had thought it was just normal Wes-style curiosity.

IT guy by day, fascinated consumer of every historical fact known to man by night, Wes loved nothing more than a good documentary that went waaayyyy into the

weeds.

Want to know how Genghis Khan's army cleaned their teeth on their rampage across Europe?

Wes could tell you. Sudden deep-seated need to know the exact type of musket used by early American revolutionaries? Wes's your guy.

Before I knew it, Wes was trying on steel armor and swinging a mace like he meant business. Meanwhile, I did my best to eat a turkey leg without looking like a cavewoman. This wasn't the first time I had watched Wes do a deep dive into a niche interest.

In fact, our friendship had first started in kindergarten over a shared book of turtle facts.

I had never told him that I had been more interested in the cute boy rather than the book.

I made the mistake of giving him a kiss on the cheek at recess; his look of horror was one I'd never forget.

Thankfully, he was willing to overlook my faux pas, and my early crush had changed to friendship.

Of course, there was that one time in middle school when I had mistakenly offered to practice kissing with him, and he had turned me down flat.

Ouch. Fool me twice, shame on me. I made a vow to myself to never think of him in terms beyond friendship.

A dozen years later, he's closer to me than a brother—and certainly more valuable than some schoolyard crush.

I would never do anything to jeopardize our friendship.

Which is what brings me to riding in Wes's car out to the boonies for a scene out of A Knight's Tale.

The interest he'd shown at the renaissance faire turned out to be more of a long-term obsession than a passing fancy.

Before long, he was telling me about joining up with a local group to practice fighting.

He started training with them multiple nights a week.

Most recently, he had dropped several thousand dollars on an entire suit of armor from a company in Ukraine.

This from the guy who ate Kraft mac and cheese for most meals and shopped at Goodwill for his clothes.

Every conversation revolved around his new hobby.

Not that I was jealous of a hobby. After all, Wes listened to me rhapsodize for years over my fantasy books. I could nerd out with the best of them.

When Wes's armor finally arrived, I figured it was as good a time as any to incorporate myself into his new world. I invited myself along to his next group training fight and here we are.

“So, talk to me about this event. Do I have to call you Sir Wes today? Or milord ?” I cackle just picturing it. “Should I curtsy in your presence?” I mock bow in my seat.

“No, we don’t do any of that silly stuff,” Wes scoffs.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t mind being Lady Honor, or perhaps Her Royal Majesty.” I trill the “r” and adopt a fake English accent, just to poke at him. Half of our friendship is needling each other.

Wes cocks an eyebrow. “I mean, if you want, I can tell people to call you that, but they’ll think you’re weird. I mean, weirder than you actually are.” He smirks.

“Disappointing. I’ve been practicing being regal at home.” I do the royal wave.

“It’s mostly just fighting, sorry.”

“Fine. Who all is going to be there today?”

“The Seattle Vagabonds, the Bellingham Barbarians, the Portland Death Jesters, and my team, Olympia Onslaught.”

I blink. “Gee, sounds like a really fun crowd. And you all just get together and hack away at each other until you’re tired?”

Wes huffs a laugh. “Not exactly. There are duels, pro-fights, and then the melees, my favorite part.”

“Melees?” I ask, looking out the window as we climb into the mountains.

“It just means the group fights where teams of four or five go at each other.”

Sounds like a bloodbath. “Don’t people get...hurt?” Nothing about this is enticing, but I want to be supportive of Wes. Goodness knows he supported me during my regrettable OneDirection phase.

“Sometimes, but nothing major. That’s what the armor is for. You’d be surprised what kind of damage you can take in steel.”

I wince. I’d prefer no damage, thanks, not to me, and not to my bestie. “And people do this for fun? As a hobby?”

“It’s a sport,” he says firmly, giving me a look.

I cross my arms. “A real sport? With rules?”

“The rules are mostly that any armor must be historically accurate and some safety guidelines. Like you can’t strike at the neck or the back of the knees.”

“Well, I guess they’ve thought of everything, then,” I quip.

Wes laughs, knowing me well enough to hear the dry sarcasm in my tone. “Everyone’s there just to have fun, so no one is going to go crazy.”

“Are there any women fighters?” This seems suspiciously like something that only men would do.

“Yes—and we could always use more.” He gives me a pointed look.

I laugh. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll be happy standing on the sidelines, cheering you on.”

Wes clears his throat. “I appreciate you coming. Really. It means a lot.”

I flush, confused by the tender look in his eye. “Anything for my bestie. What are best friends for, if not to accompany each other on random, medieval-themed adventures?”

“Right,” he says, turning back to the road. A muscle tics in his jaw.

I stare at his profile, wishing I could read his mind.

The old Wes would have laughed. We used to joke about everything; I could spend hours in his company and never feel awkward or bored.

I’ve kept no secrets from him—from my first kiss to that time I had unexpectedly gotten my period in school and Wes had loaned me his gym shorts so I could escape to the nurse’s station.

Nothing was off-limits. No conversation was ever strained.

But now, the distance between us feels like a physical cut and I hate it.

I hate that the person driving this car feels like a stranger.

I can’t put my finger on exactly when it started, but the creeping sense of separation has been coming up more and more ever since last fall.

The only culprit I can point to is his new hobby.

I lean back in my seat and straighten my spine. Well, I’m not going to lose my best friend without a fight. I’m going to find out today what’s so great about this sport and find a way to get my best friend back.

“So, do I get to tie a ribbon around your ax or something?” I joke to lighten the mood.

Wes laughs again, and a little bit of the tension in my shoulders lifts. “That’s in jousting, and no. That’s for someone’s love, anyway. Not best friends.” His fingers tighten around the steering wheel.

“Right. Well, I’m sure she’s around somewhere.

Maybe one of these lady fighters. They sound rad and all, but do they know every detail of the epidemiological causes of the black plague?

That’s the real test.” Having once endured a one-man dissertation from Wes on a car trip to Vancouver that I’ve never let him forget, I’m going to bet they don’t.

Wes chuckles. “I’ll try to slide it into conversation.”

“If anyone can, it’s you.” It’s true, but it’s also one of the things that I love most about Wes. I love his nerdiness and his love of facts. I love how excited he gets about learning new things. I love him .

As a friend.

Obviously.

By the time we cross over the mountain pass, I’ve learned five new things I didn’t previously know about historically accurate armor and we’re back to the easy, comfortable banter that we both enjoy.

“Here we are,” Wes says. He turns off the main road onto a dirt road.

We’re out in the middle-of-nowhere Washington at what looks like an idyllic family farm.

Acre upon acre of apple trees span the grounds.

Once we reach the farmhouse, though, it looks like a strange mishmash of a movie set and a neighborhood barbecue.

Tents are set up over a long buffet table of food.

People wearing full suits of armor, looking like they stepped straight out of the Middle Ages, practice fighting moves or stroll around eating a bag of chips.

“Wow,” I say, trying to take it all in.

Wes grins. “Come on, I’ll introduce you around.”

As soon as I get out of the car, I immediately realize why Wes questioned my outfit.

Zero people are dressed as elves or even maidens.

In fact, it’s a far different crowd than the usual faire-goers.

These people are pierced and tattooed, with ripped jeans and black hoodies, like they randomly stumbled out of a hard rock concert and decided to become reenactment actors.

Several people eye me. I straighten my spine, refusing to be intimidated. If this is Wes’s new scene, well, I’m going to find a way to fit in. Just maybe in different clothes next time.

Wes introduces me to a few people, but the conversation quickly turns to an excited discussion about fighting techniques that feels like they’re speaking a different language. I stand awkwardly next to him, wishing I could hide out in the car.

“I’ve got to go get suited,” Wes says to me. “You good here? I brought a chair for you, Your Majesty.” He winks at me as he unfolds the chair. “And a blanket, a pillow, and your favorite snacks.” He pulls out a bag filled with extra toasted Cheez-its, caramel corn, and cinnamon-flavored candies.

“How kind of you, good sir,” I say with a smile. “May you fight bravely in battle.”

Wes laughs and shakes his head. “I’ll be back soon.”

I smile to myself as I get comfy with the blanket and pillow, open a box of Hot Tamales, and pull out my book. As I settle into the saga of a battle between elves and druids for the one true power, I sigh happily.

I truly have the best friend in the whole world, and nothing could ever change that.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

I'm in trouble.

When I told Honor that her outfit might be a problem for a bunch of dudes? I was talking about me. I'm the dude.

From the moment I saw how delectable she looked in that dress with the tight corset top, I had to avert my eyes or risk giving away my secret.

I'm in love with my best friend.

It's a secret that wants to tip off my tongue every time I see her, and yet it never feels like the right moment. The right moment is definitely not now, in the middle of a fight.

Still, I have to stop myself from looking at every guy here suspiciously in case he's eyeing the, uh, attributes of my girl.

There's a word to describe a guy who's been secretly in love with his best friend for twenty years: Pathetic.

I sigh as I start to unpack my armor. I feel like a kid at Christmas, unwrapping each piece, and yet my mind is split, thinking about Honor sitting by herself.

This is the problem. Every day, every thought, is split. I can only give half of my attention to anything, because the other half is solely concentrated on Honor.

I haven't always been this bad. Throughout school, I convinced myself that it was totally fine and appropriate to have a secret crush on your best friend. We spent all our free time together anyway and "dating" mostly consisted of hanging out at the mall and holding hands.

In high school, Honor started dating someone before I could work up the courage to ask her out.

So then I asked someone out just to double date.

Back and forth we went, and it just never seemed like the right time.

At some point, I just accepted that this was the extent of my relationship with Honor and it was all that it was ever going to be.

But I can't accept that any longer. Every relationship, every date, has only proven to me that Honor is the one that I want to be with. When I go to sleep, it's Honor that I think about, and when I wake up, it's Honor that I want to see.

I've tried to tell Honor a million times—through hints and insinuations, testing the waters to see if she felt the same way without ruining the most important relationship in my life. But all I've done is torture myself.

Last fall, I had decided I was finally going to grow a pair and tell her straight out.

But I still couldn't. If I told her and she rejected me, our relationship possibly wouldn't recover.

I'd have lost the person I love most in the world.

Just the thought is horrific, and the fear sometimes wakes me up at night in a cold

sweat.

Luckily for me, I found armored combat at just the right moment.

Not only was I genuinely interested, but it gave me an excuse to do something without Honor.

I could feel Honor's hurt at my sudden abandonment, but I couldn't handle the push-pull of wanting to blurt out my feelings and not being able to.

So, rather than tell her the truth, I ran away.

Great job, Wes. Very brave.

I pull on my custom-made leather boots and thread the leather cord to fasten the armored sabatons over top.

Next, I step into my padded chausses and tie the fabric belt around my waist. I attach the greaves to protect my shins and cuisses over my thighs, securing both with leather straps and buckles.

I pull on the padded gambeson, fastening with fabric ties down the front.

Then I buckle on the brigandine, or armored chest piece that protects my chest and back.

I'm glad that Honor's here, even if I'll lose the excuse of the sport to avoid her. I've come to love Buhurt and my team. Having the person I love the most involved with the sport I love the most is the best of both worlds.

By the time I get to the arms and shoulder pieces, I need assistance.

Putting on a suit of armor is often a two-man job; hence, why knights often had squires.

Unfortunately, the only person free is Mike, my least favorite person on the team.

He comes off as a bit of a blowhard, more interested in bragging about fighting rather than actually training.

“So, who’s your friend?” Mike asks as he helps me fasten the vambraces and rerebraces over my arms.

I glance at him, instantly tense. I definitely don’t like any guy’s attention on her, but particularly not this guy. “That’s Honor.”

“Are you two dating?”

My hackles rise. I know where this is headed, and I struggle to control the hot fury flooding through my veins. “No,” I say, the word scraping against my throat like a rock. “We’re just friends.”

Mike winces. “Friend-zoned, huh? Ouch.”

“We’ve known each other since kindergarten,” I retort, as though that makes us blood related. It galls me to use this as an excuse as this is exactly the mindset I fear Honor has that’s been keeping us apart.

Mike nods his head. “Is she seeing anyone?”

Even if I weren’t in love with her, this guy would be the last guy in the world that I would want her to date. Still, I already know that she won’t give a guy like Mike two seconds of her time after he opens his big mouth and sticks his foot in it. In fact, I

can't wait to watch her do it. "Nope."

I put on my helmet and secure it with the Simon strap to the back of my armor, happy to have the visor covering my eyes so I don't have to keep looking at Mike. Wiggling the helmet to make sure it's seated comfortably, I fasten the chin straps.

"Well, put in a good word for me," Mike says as he gives me a hearty slap to my back.

I pick up my ax and give it a few twirls to loosen up my wrist. "Sure, dude," I say, with a smirk he can't see behind my helmet. "I'll be sure to do that." Over my dead body and only to watch her destroy you.

I walk out to the list—a rectangular wooden structure made out of two by fours that marks the boundaries of the fight, much like a boxing ring.

The current fighters are just finishing up and as much as I want to watch with interest, my eyes are instead drawn to Honor, still sitting with her nose in a book.

With her attention focused elsewhere, I'm able to give in to the impulse to watch her as I'm seldom able to do when it's just the two of us.

Her beautiful chestnut brown hair is long and wavy, flowing under a braided flower circlet that adorns her head.

Her cute, upturned nose is tilted downward and there's a slight blush on her cheeks, which makes me wonder what she's reading.

Knowing her, likely some fantasy book involving a heroic elven lord protecting his kingdom from evil forces.

She's so beautiful. I struggle to understand when she makes comments that put herself down, particularly about her weight.

To me, she has the most gorgeous figure imaginable.

When she says negative things, I can only protest so much without giving myself away, when what I really want to say is this: you're perfect. Don't you dare change a thing.

As if she can hear my thoughts, her head pops up and she looks directly at me.

A shock wave runs through me as I immediately panic that she can see the longing on my face.

Then I remember I'm wearing a helmet, and she probably doesn't even realize it's me staring at her.

I lift my hand to wave, but she doesn't wave back.

"For our next pro-fight, we have Xander from Seattle and our newest rookie fighter in Olympia Onslaught, Wes!" says Harold, who's serving as emcee for the event. The crowd applauds as I raise my fist.

Honor's eyes widen and she drops the book on her chair as she stands. My chest expands and I strut into the list, knowing that she's watching me.

I take a moment to size up my opponent. Xander is a bigger dude, with several inches and probably fifty pounds on me. This won't be an easy fight.

Harold waves a flag, indicating that the fight is starting, before ducking outside of the list. Xander and I advance toward one another, each eyeing the other.

Eager to prove myself, I start with some quick attacks, starting with an ax blow to Xander's head and a rapid shield strike to the body.

Each time I strike, Xander responds by blocking, then immediately swings out with his arms to try to grab me.

I can tell he wants to claim an immediate victory by throwing me to the ground.

But that opens him up to my own move. I fake an ax strike and instead, when he goes to grab me, I hip-toss him, using his own momentum against him.

Xander hits the ground. I immediately pounce, raining down blows against him with both my ax and shield.

The crowd is cheering around me, and while I can't see her, I can only imagine that Honor is one of them. The thought spurs me on, and I get so caught up in making my strikes, I forget to guard myself.

Xander wraps himself around my leg and yanks me off balance.

I tumble to the ground and before I can get back up, Xander is on top of me.

He hits me repeatedly with his mace and punch shield.

Each blow by the mace against my helmet sends a loud ringing sound through my ears.

The repeated punch shield strikes against my chest, knocking the wind out of me.

I try to buck Xander off and shield my body, but he's too strong. I can't budge him. He wails against me until I can barely breathe.

“Stop fight!” Harold yells.

Xander instantly stops pounding me. For a second, I just lie on the ground, trying to get my bearings as I do an all-systems check for any injuries.

I’ll have a nice bruise to my mid-section tomorrow, but otherwise, I’ll live.

I roll to the side and sit up. Xander offers me a hand up and I grab it, staggering to my feet even as my ears are still ringing.

“We have a winner!” Harold announces, holding up Xander’s arm. I clap along with the crowd, then reach out to shake his hand. Xander is definitely the far better fighter, and it was an honor to fight him.

“You did well, young’un,” Xander says. “You almost got me.” He winks.

“Give me a few more months to train,” I say, “then I want a rematch.”

“Oh, you think you can take me that soon?” Xander asks, his eyebrow raised.

“We’ll find out.”

“I like your attitude,” Xander says. “You can fight me anytime you need another lesson in defeat.”

Chuckling, I turn to look at Honor. The smile slides from my face when I see her. Honor stares at me, white-faced, her fingers clutching the wooden boards of the list.

Uh-oh. Maybe inviting Honor here wasn’t such a good idea after all.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

I think I'm going to throw up.

I could barely stand to watch my best friend getting absolutely pummeled into the ground. I don't understand the people cheering this maniac on. I almost jumped into the fight to throw myself over Wes's body.

Wes detaches himself from the referee—umpire? What do they call these people who are supposed to maintain the rules? Whatever they call him, he obviously wasn't doing a great job—and hurries over to me.

“Are you alright?” he asks me.

I run my eyes over him, checking for any broken bones or a limp. “I should be asking you that. Are you hurt? I thought that guy was going to kill you.” I shudder, remembering how the other guy had hit Wes repeatedly.

Wes laughs. “No, not at all. We were just having a good time.”

I blink. “A good time? You just got your butt handed to you.”

Wes winces. “Gee, thanks, Honor. You always know just what to say to make a guy feel good about himself.”

“Sorry. I was just so worried about you.”

His expression softens. “Sorry about that. I didn’t think you’d be so upset.”

I open my mouth to respond, then close it. He’s right. Why was I so upset? “I don’t want to see my best friend get hurt,” I finally say. It’s a true statement, and yet something about it just feels off in my chest.

“Right,” he says. If I didn’t know better, I would almost say he looks disappointed, but that can’t be right.

A moment of awkward silence falls between us. Which in itself is weird because we’re Wes and Honor—we talk about everything. We definitely don’t do awkward silences. Everything about this is strange.

“What do you think about my armor?” Wes asks.

“You look...really good,” I say, realizing as the words come out of my mouth that it’s true.

The man standing in front of me looks nothing like the scrawny, geeky Wes I’ve always known.

My best friend is a nerd, spending more time sitting in front of a computer or reading a book than working out.

In high school I had always been jealous of how he could eat and eat and never put on a pound, whereas I could run for days and never budge a pant size.

In college, we dressed for a Halloween party as Dorothy and the scarecrow.

The stranger in front of me with Wes’ face and voice is a man with breadth of shoulders and chest. Wes had told me he was working out a lot with his Buhurt team

to be better in the fights, but with his usual baggy hoodies and jeans, I hadn't clocked the change.

The armor adds further bulk and definition, and a certain... presence that feels intimidating.

Wait, what? Wes...intimidating? And why am I breathing so rapidly? What is this fluttery feeling in my belly? Are these nerves that I'm feeling? Around Wes ?

"Honor," Wes says, with an urgency that makes me think it's not the first time he's said my name.

I blink. "What?"

"Are you okay? You're looking at me like you've never seen me before." He looks around, before grabbing my snack bag. "Are you feeling okay? Do you need snacks? A drink?"

I shake my head, trying to mentally gather myself, but I can't tear my eyes from him. Holy smoke, I'm attracted to Wes. The thought clangs through my head like a discordant bell.

Oh, no. No, no, no. I cannot be attracted to Wes. Wes is my best friend. He is not boyfriend material.

"I've got to go to the next event for my team, but why don't you sit down?" Wes asks me, his brow wrinkled in concern. "Forget about the fighting. Read your book."

I look down on the book, another in my favorite fantasy series. Aha! The book is clearly the problem. I've been reading too much romantasy and now any man in armor is looking like a main character snack.

“I came to support you,” I say, the tension in my belly easing now that I’ve identified the problem. Well, Grandma did always tell me that reading too much fantasy was going to give me strange ideas. Turns out she was right.

“Okay,” Wes says. “But sit down if you feel faint.”

I smile. The voice, the tone, the caring words—that’s all the Wes I know. Whatever flutter I’m feeling is obviously a passing issue. I’m good. We’re good. All is fine.

Ten minutes later, though, I’m no longer so sure.

Wes had looked positively heroic in the melee, charging into the group fight with a raised ax and leveling a path of destruction.

He tossed grown men to the ground in a way that no IT programmer ever should.

He’s commanding in a way that stirs something in my belly.

Wes has always been cute, but he’s a whole other animal now.

In the end, Wes stands victorious with his teammates, tearing off his helmet to lead a victory whoop that sends a thrill down me. Wes winks at me and my heart does the equivalent of a triple twist Olympic dive. Oh no. I cannot be forming a crush on Wes.

My mind spirals as I think about all of the implications—the horrible implications.

“Hey there,” I hear to my side.

I tear my eyes away from Wes to see another man standing next to me. He’s wearing the same colors as Wes, so I assume he’s on his team. “Hi,” I say, forcing myself to overcome my natural shyness. Don’t be weird, Honor.

“You’re Wes’s friend, right?”

“Best friend,” I say automatically. The words clang discordantly in my head and send a guilty flush up my cheeks. I’m not feeling so best-friend-y right now.

“Right,” the guy chuckles. He holds out a hand. “I’m Mike.”

I shake his hand. “I’m Honor.”

“Honor,” he says, rolling my name around his tongue like he’s tasting a fine wine. “I like it. Just like I like your outfit.”

I eye him, feeling a strong flirtatious vibe coming off him. And there’s a lot to eye. He’s a conventionally attractive guy—thick dark hair, carefully trimmed stubble, strong jaw. Not to mention he’s wearing a suit of armor, which is apparently my new, ahem, interest. “I like yours, too.”

Mike grins, running a hand through his hair. “Cool. Are you from Olympia?”

I nod, not really sure how much information to give a random stranger. But if he’s on Wes’s team, he’s probably okay. Wes wouldn’t hang out with guys he thought were awful.

“Have you ever been to Cup of Swords?”

“Is that the medieval-themed bar downtown? Wes has mentioned it a couple times.”

“Yeah, some of the guys get together to stage some fights in front of it once a month. It drums up business for the bar and also gets attention for our team.”

“Makes sense.” I glance back at Wes, only to find him glaring at me. Or is he glaring

at the guy next to me? I frown at him and make the universal “what gives?” shoulder shrug.

“So, what do you think?” Mike asks.

I struggle to pull my attention from Wes, who has started walking in our direction. “What do I think about what?”

Mike laughs like I’ve made a great joke, his mouth open wide and flashing teeth white enough to be used as street signs. “Grabbing a drink with me at Cup of Swords.”

I blink. “Are you asking me out on a date?” The words pop out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Mike laughs again. “I mean, if that’s what you want to call it. I just call it getting a drink.”

Something about this guy feels off. He’s too groomed.

I don’t go for guys who are pretty boys.

I go for guys who are, well, like Wes. Nerds like me.

Mike seems like the type of guy who would have girls asking him out, not the other way around.

And definitely not a plus-sized girl wearing a Renaissance maiden costume with elf ears.

Don’t let your insecurities get in the way of opportunities , I can practically hear my

mother saying.

“What’s going on?” Wes asks, approaching.

“I was just asking this fair maiden to get a drink with me next time we’re at Cup of Swords,” Mike says confidently.

I can already tell from Wes’s expression that he doesn’t like the idea.

But before he can say anything, I speak up.

“Sure, why not? Sounds like fun.” And if part of my rationale is seeing Wes again in his medieval element rather than Mike, well, what of it?

Can’t a girl hang out with her best friend?

“Great!” Mike says, grinning. “It’s a date. I’ll get your number from Wes and set up a time.”

“Great,” I echo.

Mike strolls away. Wes stands, arms crossed, staring at me with a displeased expression. The whole thing feels awkward, and I feel vaguely guilty, like Wes caught me doing something I shouldn’t have.

“Great job on the fight!” I say brightly. This at least is the truth. “You were amazing!”

Wes’s shoulders drop slightly. “Really? Yeah, I guess I did get some solid hits in there.”

I roll my eyes. “No need for false modesty. You were like a Viking in there, throwing punches, swinging your ax.” I put up my fists like a boxer and feint a left-right hook.

Wes laughs. “I think Viking is the wrong time period but thank you. I’m glad you liked it. After the first fight, I wasn’t so sure.”

“Me neither,” I say. “I guess I only like to watch when you’re winning.”

“I’ll try to win more for you then,” Wes says.

He smiles at me and the tenderness in his eyes sparks warmth in my chest that blossoms to a slow flush that covers my whole body. My heart rate picks up pace, rapidly thrumming in my ears.

It’s not Wes, it’s just the suit of armor, I repeat to myself. And soon enough, maybe I’ll believe it.

“Solid plan,” I say, deflecting. I glance at my watch. “Are there any more fights?”

“Just one more melee, and then we can pack up. Is that okay?”

“Absolutely!” I don’t have to fake enthusiasm. Might as well immerse myself and fully explore this interest in men in armor. Because it can’t just be an attraction to Wes. It can’t be.

Liking Wes romantically would mean an end to our friendship.

I can still feel the emotional slap of rejection he gave me in first grade.

That was before I even knew him; it would be so much worse now.

Not because he'd be rude to me. No, if anything, Wes would be just as awkward and embarrassed by my attraction.

Rather than rejecting me, he would be nice about it. I shudder with humiliation.

He might even go so far as to pretend interest back, just to not make me feel bad. Because that's the kind of friend that Wes is. He would never do anything to hurt me. I trust him implicitly, but that also means I can't ever even hint to him that I have the slightest attraction to him.

I watch Wes walk back to his team, shaking myself when I realize I've been staring. Whatever has come over me is going to pass. I just have to wait it out.

And find someone else to fixate on. Luckily, thanks to Wes's friend Mike, I already have a plan to do just that.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

An hour later, Honor and I are back in my car, speeding back to Olympia.

I couldn't have hustled her out of there any faster, looking over my shoulder to see if Mike was going to come after us.

I had already had to endure him smacking me on the shoulder and thanking me for "putting in a good word." As if I ever would.

Honor quizzes me on various aspects of fighting and armor as we zip along the highway. I answer, but my mind is distracted. All I can think of is how I had felt when I had seen Mike with Honor.

Watching Mike move in on Honor had made every muscle in my body tense. I had wanted to stomp over there and forcibly separate them. I had wanted to punch Mike in the face, which was shocking in itself. Outside of Buhurt, I have zero violent tendencies, and yet my hands clenched into fists.

But most of all, I had felt betrayed. By Honor. I had no right to feel that way, and reminding myself of that cooled my jealous rage, if not my frustration. But the frustration was only at myself, for being too big of a coward.

Instead of saying what I truly wanted to say to Mike, I practiced what I wanted to say to Honor. I love you. I think I've loved you for years. Don't go on a date with Mike. Go on a date with me.

But it couldn't be a simple statement. She would be shocked and unprepared, surely.

I need to explain to her what happened, even if I'm not entirely sure myself.

I know we've been best friends forever. But it all started when we took a spring break trip to San Francisco and we went out to dinner and you looked beautiful and looked at me in a way that felt new and...

No, that wouldn't work. And it wasn't even true: I loved her a long time before that.

"Hellooo, earth to Wes, are you even listening to me?" Honor asks.

I startle. "Sorry, what did you ask me?"

"I was asking why you and your teammates have different styles of helmets. Seems like there would be one style that history would have proven worked best."

Ah, a Buhurt question. Safe ground. "Depends on the type of fighting you want to do. If you're more of a dueler and you're worried about big openings in your helmet because you don't want a sword to come through, you want something with smaller eye holes or breathing holes.

But if you're doing something that exerts a lot of energy like melees or pro fights, you prioritize your sight and breathing over protection.

There's a trade-off between visibility and protection. "

"That makes sense. I thought it was just one style looked cooler than another."

I grin. "That probably plays a role, too."

“What about the one that Mike wore?”

I tense at hearing his name. I don't want to hear his name coming from her mouth.

“What about it?”

“It looked like it had Viking horns on it. Is that useful for something?”

Useful for Mike being a total tool. “No, it's just for looks. And it probably is a detriment to fighting,” I couldn't help myself from adding.

“Why would he wear it then?”

Because he's more interested in cosplay than actual sport. “I guess he likes the look,” I say, grinding my teeth to keep the words I want to say from coming out.

“And what about the weapons? How do you decide what type of weapon to wield?”

I hold back my frustration. I don't want to talk about Buhurt.

I want to talk about us . “In dueling, there are categories of weapons, so you don't really have a choice.

But in pro-fights and melees, it's up to you.

The general deciding factors are: do you want a really long weapon to strike people, or do you want a short weapon that is easier to grapple with? ”

“Do you practice with both, or do you just have an ax?”

“Right now I just have an ax, but I ordered the sword for the tournament at the end of the summer.” I keep my answer short. “Honor, I—”

“Ooh, there’s a tournament?” she asks, her eyes lighting up.

I can’t get a word in here. I need to tell her how I feel. “The Midsommer Faire in August. It’s happening in Bonney Lake.”

“Midsommer Faire! Are you going to fight in it?”

“Probably. But look—”

“Maybe I’ll come and watch you fight. Although I don’t know if I can take it again, especially if you and Mike are fighting against each other.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, momentarily distracted.

“You told me about the fighting, of course, and showed me some videos, but it just wasn’t the same as actually watching it. Watching you get hurt, I mean.” She twists a piece of her skirt in her fingers.

“I wasn’t really hurt,” I protest. “The armor takes a lot of the damage.”

“Okay, liar. You were limping by the end.”

“Barely,” I mumble.

“And I can only imagine it would be ten times worse watching both my best friend and my boyfriend in a fight.”

My jealousy immediately surfaces. “Mike isn’t your boyfriend.”

“Not now, but who knows?”

I should have told Mike off as soon as he mentioned Honor's name. "You can't seriously like him, right?" The words are out before I can call them back.

"Why not?" She blinks at me.

A thousand thoughts buzz through my head, none of them good. "I just don't think he's your type," I finally say.

She crosses her arms. "And who do you think is my type?"

Me. I shift in my seat. "Someone more like...me, I guess." It's so close and yet so far from what I truly want to say.

Honor laughs. "Someone like you? What does that mean? A shy IT nerd with a sudden penchant for medieval life? When's the last time you went on a date? If I were waiting for someone like you, I'd be waiting for the rest of my life. Mike came right up and asked me out on a date."

I shift again, my insides curling. I know she doesn't mean it unkindly, and yet the truth of it scrapes like rocks in my guts.

I have to tell her how I feel. The familiar fear of her rejection sends a metallic taste down the back of my throat, but I swallow it down.

Even if she rejects me, at least I will have an answer instead of this awful unknowing.

I take a breath. Be strong, Wes. You can do this. Tell her you love her. I gather my courage again. "We've been friends for a long time," I begin.

"Best friends," Honor interrupts.

“Right, best friends.”

“I just don’t want you to think that you’re the same as all my other friends,” Honor interjects.

“Well, that’s exactly what I’m trying to say.”

“Is it? That’s nice. I really appreciate having you as my friend, too.”

Ugh, this conversation is getting off track again. “Look, what I’m trying to say is that I love you.”

There, it’s out. I steal a glance at her. Is this it? Is this the moment that will change my life? Will she return my feelings or reject me?

Honor clasps her hands together. “Oh, Wes, that’s so sweet. I love you, too.”

“You—you do?” I can barely keep my eyes on the road.

“Of course, dummy! Didn’t I just say that you were my best friend?”

My heart sinks. She loves me...as a friend.

“That’s why it would be so cool if Mike and I actually like each other. If I’m honest, I feel like I’ve been cut out of your life since you started Buhurt. This way, maybe I’d be more involved.”

Guilt spears through me. I had cut her out. “I’m sorry you felt that way.”

She shrugs. “No worries. I know you don’t think Mike is right for me but let me be the judge. Maybe he’s not my type, but I won’t know that until I get to know him.”

She's right. I'm the one who's been the coward, who's avoided her when she did nothing wrong. I can't interfere just because someone else has asked her out. If I'm right, she'll go out once with Mike and never want to again. I can wait.

And if I'm wrong and she turns out to hit it off with Mike...well, then I guess we were never meant to be more than friends in the first place. It will kill me, but I will have to accept it.

"Okay," I say. "You're right. You should make your own decision about Mike."

She smiles. "Great! But I hope you'll come to Cup of Swords, too. I could use a wingman." She winks.

My fingers curl around the steering wheel. Not only do I have to be silent while she goes on a date with another guy, but I also have to play wingman, too? Somewhere, the universe is laughing at me. "I'm sure Mike would rather have you to himself." Even saying the words makes me want to throw up.

"C'mon, Wes. I don't know him at all, and you do. Please?"

"I don't want to be a third wheel."

"You won't be! Please, Wes, I need you."

And with those three words, the nails hammer into my coffin. "Fine. I'll be there."

"Thank you!" Then she leans over and kisses me on my cheek.

I bite back a groan at the irony of feeling her soft lips on my cheek in gratitude as I help her date another man. I'm cursed.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

What does one wear on a date at a medieval tavern?

I stare at the clothing in my closet. I don't want to re-wear my Renaissance maiden outfit, but nothing else looks even reasonably appropriate.

I finally settle on an off-shoulder peasant blouse with a drawstring neckline and a long skirt with boots.

Just like they did in the fourteenth century... just kidding.

I had asked Wes for help in selecting an outfit, seeing as this was his scene and all, but he had been strangely terse in his replies. In fact, he had been acting weird the whole week, ever since the fight last weekend. Or, more particularly, since the car ride home.

What makes it particularly odd is that Wes had been so sweet on the ride home, telling me that he loved me—as a friend, of course.

Just like I love him. Not as a potential love interest. And I definitely haven't been imagining him in his armor or anything all week.

Because that would be weird. Especially because I haven't been imagining Mike like that. Nope, just Wes.

Okay, so I have been imagining Wes in his armor. There's something about a broad-

shouldered warrior who also has a heart of gold that does it for me. Apparently.

But Wes is firmly and definitively my friend. No matter what games my imagination is playing. Tonight, I hope I'll fall firmly into like with Mike and Wes will be banished from my mind—at least in that way.

I smile at my reflection in the mirror. I've got this.

Thirty minutes later, I enter the Cup of Swords in downtown Olympia.

Heavy on wood-and-iron decor, there are flickering candles on each table and a drink menu that features mead and ale.

In the corner, two minstrels play a flute and a guitar—or is it a lute ?

Looking at the clientele, I almost regret not wearing my Renaissance elf outfit as I definitely would have fit in better in this crowd than I had at the Buhurt fight.

I spot Mike and Wes right away. Mike gives me a big easy grin, running a hand through his hair.

Wes smiles, but it looks decidedly forced and there's a tightness in his expression I don't normally see.

I quirk my eyebrow at him, and he gives a small shake of his head, a silent conversation passing between us.

“Hey guys,” I say, focusing on Mike.

“Thanks for coming,” Mike says. “Can I get you a drink?”

“A diet coke would be great,” I say.

“Are you sure? This place has some great drinks—real drinks.” Mike winks at me.

I frown. “A diet soda is a real drink.”

“Yeah, but I could ask the barmaid to throw a shot of something into it.”

“Honor doesn’t drink,” Wes cuts in, glaring at his teammate.

“No problem, just the soda,” Mike says, holding up a hand. He heads to the bar where a server in an outfit very similar to my maiden dress is pouring drinks. Wes stares after him.

“What’s wrong?” I ask Wes as soon as we’re alone.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. You look nice.”

“Don’t change the subject. What were you and Mike talking about when I walked in?”

Wes looks off to the side. “Just making sure Mike understood a few things.”

I narrow my eyes. “Like what?”

He shakes his head again. “Don’t forget you’re the one who wanted me to be here.”

“To help me.”

He looks back at me. “Trust me, I am.”

I look over at where Mike is, and see him leaning against the bar, grinning at the waitress behind the bar and running his hand through his hair.

I frown. Seems very friendly with the staff.

Mike laughs loudly at something the waitress said and my irritation increases.

Isn't he supposed to be on a date with me ?

Wes follows my eyes, then becomes very still, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "I'll go have a talk with him."

"I don't need you to have a talk with him," I say, my irritation immediately turning onto Wes.

"He's flirting with Sophie."

Oh, it's Sophie, is it? Apparently Mike isn't the only one interested in the barmaid. "I'm a big girl. I don't need you to manage my date for me."

"Sure seems like someone should," he grumbles.

"Seriously, Wes, what has gotten into you? You're acting like this is the first time I've gone on a date in my life."

"I'm just looking out for you."

"I don't need you to do that either."

"Then why'd you even invite me?" Wes asks.

“To be my friend!”

My response seems to make him even angrier. We glare at each other. Wes opens his mouth to respond, but Mike is already returning with my soda. “Here you are. Feel free to let me know when you want a real drink.”

Frowning, I take the drink. I’d actually like nothing better than to leave both of them at the bar and go home right now.

Mike looks between Wes and I. “Did I miss something?”

“No,” Wes and I say at the same time. Mike raises his hands defensively.

“I’ll just be over here,” Wes says, jerking a thumb at the other end of the bar before stomping off.

“Don’t worry about him,” Mike says, grinning as Wes walks away. “Your friend is just being very protective of you.”

“Best friend,” I say reflexively, watching as Wes parks himself at the end of the bar. “Seems like he’s gotten worse. What did he say to you when I walked in?”

Mike waves his hand. “Something about treating you like a lady, or he will make it hurt next time we are in a fight.”

My eyes widen. That doesn’t sound like Wes at all.

Wes is kind, patient, the last guy who would ever threaten violence.

At least until he started Buhurt. The whole sport seems to have sent him into a testosterone-fueled rage—at least, that’s the only reason I can think of why Wes would

be acting as crazy as he has been.

“Are you sure there’s nothing between the two of you?” Mike casually asks.

I almost choke on my drink. “No, why?”

“Just checking.” He pauses.

“No,” I repeat. “Absolutely not.”

Mike nods. “Good. Let’s not talk about him. I want to talk about us.”

“Me, too,” I say, holding onto my drink like it’s my lifeline. I scramble for something to get my date back onto the right footing. “Tell me why you started doing Buhurt.”

Mike starts talking and he never stops. I toy with my straw, all the while conscious of a pair of eyes drilling into the side of my head from the other side of the bar.

I can barely focus on anything that Mike says, but by the end of an hour, I know at least three things are true: (1) Mike can talk about himself for an hour straight without pausing to ask a single question about me; (2) his eyes stray to Sophie about every five minutes; and (3) I feel absolutely zero spark with him.

I inwardly sigh. So much for an interest in anyone in a suit of armor.

It’s a relief when Mike excuses himself to go to the bathroom. I stare at the drink in my hand, wondering if I can just slip out of the door and avoid both Mike and Wes.

“Hey there,” a voice says. I turn to see Sophie standing next to me. “Do you need a refill?”

I blink, realizing that there's nothing but melted ice in my glass. I stop. "I'm all good, but thank you," I say, waving her off.

She nods but doesn't leave. "Is that your boyfriend?" she asks, nodding toward Mike's empty chair.

I shudder. "No. Just a date. Why?"

"Because he gave me his phone number." She holds up her hand. Between two fingers is a receipt with a number written on the back of it. Her lips purse in a sympathetic frown.

I laugh, even as it cuts through my chest like knives. Perfect. Just perfect. I thought I was getting a knight with honor and instead I'm getting just your average, modern day turd. "You're welcome to him."

She shakes her head. "I would never go out with a man who tried to pick up another woman while he was on a date with me."

"Me neither." We share a look of mutual understanding. Sophie nods and moves back to the bar.

I sigh and look over at Wes. Our gaze immediately connects, and I have the feeling that he's been watching me the whole time, just waiting for me to signal for help.

Wearily, I get up and walk over to him. He patiently watches me approach.

Even as annoyed as I still am with him, there is something about just having him there that's comforting.

"Hey," I say awkwardly.

“How’s it going?” he asks, but the expression on his face looks like he already knows.

“Well, you were right. Mike’s a self-centered jerk.” I tell him what happened.
“Happy?”

“Not really.”

“No?” I quirk an eyebrow.

He shakes his head. “I never wanted you to be hurt. I would never be happy about that.”

“Even to be proven right?”

Wes stands. “Honor, I’d rather be proven wrong a million times over than have you suffer even a second of hurt. You’re worth far more than my ego.”

“That’s, uh, very sweet,” I say, mentally fanning myself.

“There’s nothing that I wouldn’t do for you, Honor. I hope you know that.”

His expression is so sincere, so earnest, that I don’t know what to say.

“And what’s more, I hope you know that you don’t ever have to waste your time on self-centered jerks. You’re better than that. You deserve so much more.”

“Wow, Wes, you’re going to make me cry.”

“Come here,” he says, opening his arms.

I practically leap into his embrace, hugging him for all I'm worth. He feels comforting and warm and surprisingly solid . I've hugged Wes before, and it was like hugging a baby bird—all sharp bones and fragile limbs. It almost felt like I might break him if I squeezed him too tightly.

But not now. Underneath his jacket are packed muscles that press firmly against my cheek. I am suddenly, disturbingly aware that my body fits against his just right. All of his hard edges have been rounded with muscle, and he feels good .

"I just want you to know that I'm always going to have your back," Wes says.

"You're amazing," I tell him, tilting my head back. "You're going to make some woman very lucky one day."

"I hope so." The look in his brown eyes is strangely tender. I force myself to step back, a flush rising to my cheeks.

"What's going on out here?" Mike calls out as he returns from the bathroom. "You trying to steal my date, Wes?"

I roll my eyes.

"Do you mind if I handle him?" Wes asks, his head dipped toward mine.

An hour ago, I would have protested that I could take care of Mike himself. But right now, I'm tired and all I want to do is go home. "Yes, please."

"I've got you. Text me when you get home safe.

" And with that, Wes turns to head off Mike, who's walking toward us with an unhappy expression.

Before I leave, I look back one last time at Wes.

He stands between me and Mike like a knight guarding against a fire-breathing dragon.

And no matter how much I know it's wrong and I don't want to ruin my friendship with Wes, my foolish heart does a little flip. My hero.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

“Alright, listen up,” I say. “You find yourselves standing at the entrance of a dark, foreboding cave in the middle of a forest. The trees are so thick around you that they blot out the sun. Suddenly, you hear a low growl coming from inside the cave. What do you do?”

Honor—or Elyse the Elven archer—says, “I pull out my bow and nock and arrow, ready for whatever’s in there.”

Zeke, my Play It Forward mentee currently playing Hagrid the giant, says, “I charge forward with my sword of power raised, shouting a war cry.”

I nod. “Alright, a figure emerges from the cave. The meanest looking orc you’ve ever seen is charging toward you, battle axe held high. Elyse, roll for damage.”

“I roll a five. Bummer.” She looks at me pleadingly. “But that can still cause damage, right?”

“Your shot goes wide. Bad luck.” I cluck my tongue at Honor, who glares at me. “Hagrid, roll for damage.”

“I roll an eighteen!” Zeke exclaims, pumping his fist. “Let’s go!”

“Hagrid, you land an almost-killing blow.”

“Almost? What? Bruh!” Zeke protests, his mouth dropping open. “Hagrid kills what

he aims at.”

“Okay, but maybe not 100 percent of the time,” I say, giving him a quelling look. “How about Hagrid learns to appreciate the value of teamwork? Elyse, roll for damage.”

Honor lets out a whoop. “Elyse is back in the game!” She blows on the dice before she rolls it, grinning. The dice bounces against the table before finally settling. The grin fades and she looks at me uncertainly. “I rolled a seven.”

“And that is just enough for a single arrow to hit the orc, delivering the final coup de grace!”

Honor squeals and jumps to her feet, dancing around. She runs over to me, throwing her arms around me as she jumps up and down. I struggle to hug her back, grinning like a fool. Zeke rolls his eyes behind Honor’s back, mouthing the word “pushover” at me.

At the grand old age of fifteen, Zeke quickly caught on to my not-so-secret crush on Honor and teases me mercilessly about it every chance he gets. Sometimes I wonder how Honor carries on completely in ignorance about my true feelings for her, when even a pimply teenager can see it.

“I’m going to grab us some more snacks for a victory party!” Honor says. She dances off to the kitchen, sashaying her hips as she goes.

“Don’t say it,” I say to Zeke, holding up a hand.

“You’re weak, bruh,” Zeke says, shaking his head. “First and foremost, my eighteen should have killed the orc. And then, you and I both know a seven wouldn’t be enough for a killing blow. You just wanted to give it to her.”

Zeke has braces on his teeth and fears nothing more than a high school essay assignment, but he's got the keen insight of an eighty-year-old.

"Look how happy it made her," I say weakly, gesturing toward the kitchen where Honor disappeared.

"You're whipped," Zeke continues. "It's sad. The girl isn't even dating you and you're totally whipped."

"It's called being a good friend," I whisper. "And lower your voice. She could hear you!"

"I love Honor, but you could stand in front of her and tell her to her face that you love her, and she still wouldn't hear you."

I clear my throat. If Zeke had been rolling dice, he would have rolled a direct hit right then.

"What?" Zeke asks, immediately sensing there's some hot tea about to spill.

I rub the back of my neck. "I kind of did exactly that."

"When?" His hand flies to his face, covering his mouth.

"In the car. On the way home from the fight. I told her I loved her. And she said she loved me too—as a friend." I wince.

"No!" Zeke stares at me, his eyes wide. Then he shrieks with laughter. He falls to the ground and starts smacking the floor, laughing hysterically.

"Okay, relax. It's not that funny."

He sits up, wiping tears from his eyes. “Oh, I’m so embarrassed for you. How humiliating.”

My eyes narrow. “Gee, thanks, kid. How kind. Remind me again why I hang out with you?”

“Because you two losers don’t have anyone else to play D&D with.”

I had connected with Zeke through Play It Forward, a national organization that pairs youth with mentors through sports.

I had heard about Play It Forward through the national Buhurt association and immediately applied.

I had always wanted to be a mentor but had never taken the initiative.

This opportunity seemed tailor made for me.

Zeke is a closet nerd who pretends to be cool but secretly loves anything fantasy and medieval related.

We bonded over Buhurt and that quickly turned into D&D game nights, bringing back memories for me from high school and college.

Honor had quickly joined in the fun. Other than Zeke’s excessive use of the word “bruh,” I love him like a brother.

“That’s it—you’re getting it.” I lunge at him. He scrambles away.

“What’s going on?” Honor asks, returning from the kitchen. “I heard laughter. What’s so funny?”

“Wes’s love life,” Zeke cracks, then races around the couch.

“What love life?” Honor asks innocently.

Zeke’s head pops up like a prairie dog. “Exactly.” He snorts and ducks back down under a blanket.

“There’s a real lack of respect today amongst America’s youth for their elders,” I note, leaping onto Zeke. He grunts under me.

Honor partially smiles, clearly feeling out of the loop. “Well, speaking of a love life, thank you again, Wes, for helping me out on my date with Mike.”

“You did what?” Zeke whispers. “You are so pathetic.”

“Shut it,” I hiss back, lightly elbowing him. I look at Honor and raise my voice. “No problem at all, Honor. I’m glad I was there to help you.”

“Did Mike take it hard?” she asks.

In actuality, Mike hadn’t taken it hard at all—he had just complained about paying for Honor’s drink, at which point I pulled a five-dollar bill from my wallet and passed it to him without comment. He immediately commenced flirting with Sophie, who I’m pretty sure only humored him for a tip.

“Well, he was disappointed, of course,” I tell Honor, not wanting her feelings to be hurt. “But he’ll be okay.”

“Oh, good. Sorry if I made things awkward between you and your teammate.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it.” I pause. “Are you okay? I

know you were looking forward to the date.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. It was a good learning experience that I shouldn’t go out with just anyone.”

That’s right. In fact, don’t go out with anyone—you should only go out with me . Maybe I can finally drum up the courage to try telling her again my feelings—and this time, make her listen.

“So I’ve decided to try online dating,” Honor concludes.

“What?” I ask, sitting up at attention. My heart starts racing at the thought of the dozens—maybe hundreds—of guys who will now be checking out Honor’s profile and contacting her.

Guys who might be rich, successful, handsome.

Guys who would have so much more to offer her than I ever could. Sweat instantly beads on my forehead.

“I’ve already got a profile up. Do you want to see it?” Honor asks.

“Sure,” I say, getting to my feet, all interest in pummeling Zeke forgotten. Zeke crawls out from under the blanket, his eyes moving between me and Honor.

“Take a look,” Honor says, turning her phone to face me. The first thing I see is a smiling picture of Honor out in a field— I took that picture of her and in fact, it’s on my phone in a secret album of Honor pics. She swipes her finger to scroll down the profile.

“Give me your honest opinion as a guy,” Honor says. “Will any guy message me?”

I stare at her beautiful, smiling face, which I have gazed at and dreamed about so often I know it better than my own. I swallow a lump. “They’d be crazy not to.”

She turns the phone back to herself, frowning at some imagined flaw. “But maybe I need a sexier photo, like one of those duck lip photos every woman seems to have.” She purses her lips.

“Don’t change a thing,” I instantly say.

Honor looks at me, a question in her eyes.

“You’re perfect just the way you are.”

Honor’s whole face lights up in a way that makes my heart ache. “That’s so sweet, Wes. This is why you’re my best friend and always will be.” She walks over to hug me as Zeke makes a gagging sound, which we both ignore.

I hold her closely in my arms, letting my eyes close for just a brief moment to memorize the feel of her so close.

When I open them, it’s to see Zeke’s derisive expression. “Tell her,” he mouths at me.

I subtly shake my head. At this point, if Honor isn’t seeing my true feelings for her, it’s because she’s willfully avoiding them. Something else will have to change.

Zeke mimes pulling his hair out and choking himself. I roll my eyes—not very mature, but neither is taking dating advice from a fifteen-year-old.

“I just hope these guys are as good as what their pictures look like,” Honor muses as she pulls away.

“You know that some guys will get on there with fake pictures? Hard to even know who you’re talking to these days.

I could be chatting away, thinking I’m falling in love, and be talking with someone totally different from who I think they are. ”

And just like that, an idea springs fully formed into my head. A way to get Honor to somehow forget that I’m her best friend and see me as a romantic prospect instead...without her ever knowing.

“What was that site again?” I ask, trying to sound only mildly interested.

“SwipeRight.com.” She eyes me. “Why? Thinking of making your own profile?”

“No,” I lie.

“You should! We could share horror stories! Maybe even go on a double date.” She seems way too excited at the prospect.

“I think I’ve had enough time playing your third wheel.” Time to play leading man.

“Right,” Honor says. “Sorry again.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I make a show of checking my watch. “Look at that. I think it’s time for me to get Zeke home.”

“Of course! I need to get going anyway. I’ve already gotten ten messages from potential dates.” She claps her hands as my gut clenches. Guys move fast in the online dating world, apparently. I need to move faster.

“Good luck with that. Tell me how it goes,” I offer as I hustle Zeke out the door. I

need to get him home and then figure out how to set up a profile on SwipeRight, find some fake pictures of a generically handsome man to upload, and write an irresistible message to Honor.

No sooner do we get into the car than Zeke turns to me. “So, when are we making you a fake profile to catfish Honor?”

I cast a quelling glance at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, c’mon, bruh, you’re so obvious.” He pauses. “Well, to anyone but Honor. She’s living deep in denial.”

“If I were going to create a fake profile—and that’s a big if—I certainly wouldn’t talk about it with anyone, and definitely not you.”

“So, you are thinking about it.”

I cast my eyes skyward. “Maybe.”

“I knew it!” He pumps a fist. “This is going to be epic. We’re going to make a great team.”

I sigh. “Fine, you were right, but there’s no we involved. You are going home to finish your geometry homework.” I pull out of my driveway and head toward the highway.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but you clearly need some serious help.”

“From a high schooler?” I scoff.

“What? The ladies love me.” His grin widens. “Look, you can think of it as

educational.”

“How?”

“It’s a social experiment. Can the game-less dude win his best friend’s love by pretending to be someone else? I can write an essay on it.”

I cross my arms. “An essay? For what class?”

“For my future college entrance application, titled, How I Became a Life and Dating Coach at 15. It will demonstrate my entrepreneurial talents. I’m talking Harvard, baby!”

I groan, covering my face. “Where did I go wrong in my life choices?” I mutter to no one in particular.

“Okay, forget the essay. I’ll consider this charity work. You’re kind of an overthinker, if you haven’t noticed. If we leave it to you, you’ll never get the train out of the station. You need me.”

“I don’t need you.”

“Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. Let me help you with this and I’ll finish all my homework assignments on time for the next month.”

“You should be doing that anyway.”

“Maybe, but I won’t, unless my amazing Play It Forward mentor comes up with an incentive I care about.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. This kid needs to go to law school because he could

sell snow to penguins. “Fine.”

Zeke throws up his arms like he’s a ref calling a touchdown. “Let’s go!”

Ugh, I hope I don’t regret this.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

It's true what they say: online dating is a total wasteland where hopes and dreams go to die. I stare at my phone with disgust and strongly consider throwing it away. Or at least deleting the SwipeRight app, which is a more sensible choice.

Seventy-two hours ago, I had started my venture into the online dating world with bright optimism.

Almost immediately after activating my profile, I had no less than a dozen men reaching out to get to know me.

A dozen ! I had excitedly clicked each one, hoping that my future husband was among them.

I'll get this whole thing wrapped up in the free trial period , I had thought.

But oh no, such was not to be the case. At least two guys were ten years older than me, another couple had profiles that clearly indicated they wanted little more than a hook-up, several flat-out ghosted me when I responded, another one made an inappropriate comment involving feet and a physically impossible act.

Frankly, it was enough to make me despair for the human race—the male gender of it, anyway.

One by one, each so-called “match” dropped off. Most of my prospects dwindled, as did my hopes.

I'm down to three: MrNiceGuy98, Dave234, and WhiteKnight1005. Well, at least there's three. Better than zero.

That's the kind of positive thinking that I'm taking with me back to Cup of Swords tavern to meet up with Wes.

He's been hounding me for information about my online dating, which is a little surprising that he's so interested; on the other hand, it's not surprising at all, given his overprotective instinct.

Opening the door to the tavern, my fantasy-loving heart flips.

I had been too nervous the last time to truly appreciate the tavern.

Now, it feels like I've stepped into a Lord of the Rings movie set...

with tabletop games and a few less elves.

A handful of couples and groups play games at their tables, their dice clinking against the wood.

My eyes immediately go to Wes, and my heart does an even bigger flip.

He leans against the bar, looking rugged and handsome in his jeans and bomber jacket.

I've seen Wes a million times and yet something about him is different now.

Something about the way he's filling out the jeans now that he hadn't before, or the way that he holds himself.

Get ahold of yourself. It's just Wes.

He turns to look at me, his face breaking into a smile. And it's official. I have a bit of a crush on my best friend. How inconvenient.

Still, I soldier forward, walking to join him even as my heart beats in my ears.

"Fancy running into you here," I say, just to say something and make the moment less awkward.

"Isn't that supposed to be my line at a bar?" he asks with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"Only if you were trying to pick me up," I say, and instantly regret it. Wes freezes, his brow wrinkling slightly. An awkward silence falls like a wet blanket between us until I break it with a slightly hysterical giggle. "Which you're not, obviously. Being best friends and all."

"Right," Wes says, still looking at me strangely. He pushes a cup toward me. "I got you your diet soda."

"Thanks," I say, taking a big slurp. "Want to play a game?"

He grins at me. "Always."

"Want to play Settlers?"

"You bet your sheep I do."

I two-finger blast him. "Better hold onto your bricks."

Wes laughs and so do I, relaxing into our familiar best-friend game banter. We grab

the board game from a stack and sit down at the table, pulling out the pieces. The dice clatter on the table and we both reach for it, our hands brushing lightly.

A flash of heat whips through me and I jerk my hand back, flushing. Wes gives me a questioning look. I shake my head at myself. Get yourself together. This is the same guy you once watched eat a beetle on a dare. Granted, he was ten, but the point still holds.

I busy myself laying out the hexagonal tiles, tokens, and settlements. Wes separates the resource cards and places them in piles. We've played this game a million times; I automatically hand him the red pieces and take the blue for myself.

"So, tell me about your venture into the new world of online dating," Wes says, getting right to it as he rolls the dice. "Met any interesting people?"

"Well, it's only been a few days, so I haven't actually met anyone yet. We've just exchanged messages."

"Good. Don't rush into it. You don't know who any of these guys are. If you do meet up with them, make sure it's in a public place and text me when and where. Don't let them follow you back to your car—"

"Okay, okay," I say, holding up a hand. "Chill out. These are regular guys, not Jack the Ripper."

His brow furrows. "You don't know who they are. They could be anyone."

I roll my eyes. "The first one's handle is MrNiceGuy. Does that sound evil to you?"

"Obvious front," Wes says. "He's just trying to get you to put your guard down."

I laugh. “His real name is Sam and he's an accountant who lives with a cute cat, has a dry sense of nerdy humor, and who likes the symphony.”

Wes huffs. “Right. More likely he'll tell you, ‘It rubs the lotion on its skin or it gets the hose again’,” he says, quoting *Silence of the Lambs* .

“Don’t be so cynical. We have already made plans to meet at an orchestra performance of Star Wars music.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow at 7.”

“If you need an excuse to escape from your date, I can always call you and pretend there’s an emergency.”

“I’m hoping I won’t need an excuse,” I say, giving him a look, “but thanks.” I trade him a brick for a wheat resource.

Wes rolls the dice. “Alright, so that’s the first guy, obvious murderer and possible rapist pretending to be a nice guy. What loser is next?”

I chuckle even as I shoot a glare at him. “The second wonderful guy I’ve been messaging is Dave. He’s a construction engineer who loves NASCAR, video games, and riding dirt bikes.”

Wes shakes his head. “Other than the video games, what do you have in common with this dude?”

I shrug. “Maybe nothing, but he seems like he’s a lot of fun. On his profile, he says the book he lives his life by is the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* .”

“Ah, yes, always remember to bring a towel,” Wes says.

“Exactly. See, you like this guy.”

“I like the book; doesn’t mean I like the guy. Seriously, you need to work on your standards.”

“Ouch!” I cross my arms. “Okay, smarty-pants, how about this? For favorite travel experience, he said it was a toss-up between attending the Daytona 500 and his nephew’s last birthday party. That is cute and wholesome. He sounds like a lovely person.”

“Sure, great guy. With whom you have nothing in common.” He rolls the dice for his turn and picks up a card.

I blow out my breath as I build my settlement. “You’re not being much help, you know. I’m trying to stay positive here, but you’re bagging on all of them.”

“I’m just waiting to hear someone who sounds worthy of you.” His gaze locks on mine, his brown eyes warm and sincere.

My irritation slips away as my cheeks heat. “That’s, um, very nice of you to say.”

“It’s the truth. So, come on, who else do ya got in the mix?”

I trade some wood with the bank. “WhiteKnight2005.”

Wes puts a robber game piece on my ore and steals a card. “A knight? Now we’re talking. Tell me more about this knight.”

“His real name is Todd. Looking at his profile, we already have so much in common.

He loves D&D and video games, just like me. He's also a self-professed nerd. He loves all the same things I do, down to my obsession with 90s anime."

"Sounds perfect for you," Wes says, his voice soft.

I make a noncommittal noise in my throat as I roll the dice.

"No?" he asks, his voice sharp. "What's wrong?"

"He's almost too perfect."

Wes's eyebrows shoot up his forehead. "Is there such a thing?"

"How many men do you know who love Sailor Moon and the Powerpuff Girls? You don't even love them like I do."

Wes stares at me, the wheels clearly turning in his head. He shrugs. "Obviously he's a man with even better taste than I have. Sounds like you have things in common. What's the problem?"

"He's also suspiciously quick to respond," I add. "As soon as I send him a message, he sends me a message back within ten minutes."

Wes frowns. "I thought that's what women want, isn't it? A guy who doesn't leave them hanging on read."

"Okay, but it's almost as if he's sitting at his computer, just waiting for me to message him. Which is weird, right? This guy doesn't even know me, and yet he already seems completely bought in."

"I thought women wanted a guy who doesn't play games," Wes shoots back, his

voice heated.

“Yes, but I haven’t even met this guy and it’s like he’s decided I’m the love of his life.”

“Maybe he can already tell it from your profile. Do people always have to meet to fall in love?”

I stare at him, incredulous. “Weren’t you just telling me that the first guy was secretly an ax murderer? And now you want me to fall in love with some other rando based on his response rate?”

“I didn’t say I wanted you to fall in love. I’m just saying maybe give the guy a chance.”

I sniff. “I can’t trust a guy like that when we haven’t even met.” My eyes narrow. “Why are you defending this guy so much, anyway? Do you know something I don’t?”

Wes’s gaze drops from mine. “No.”

“Are you sure?” I pry. His whole attitude is making my spider sense tingle.

“I don’t know anything.”

“You’re lying!” I say, pointing my finger at him. “You never can meet my eyes when you lie and the tips of your ears turn red. You know who it is.”

“I don’t!”

Sudden horror races through me. “Is it Mike?” Ugh, is this Mike’s way of winning

me back? Gross.

“Mike?” Wes asks. The horror in his tone mirrors mine. “No! Why would you think it’s Mike?”

“I don’t know, but you’re defending this guy a lot. I don’t know who else you’d be so eager to defend.”

“You think I would defend Mike? Who was rude to you? I never thought you should go out with him in the first place. Trust me, it’s not Mike.”

I frown, studying Wes’s face. It’s a face I know almost as well as my own. He’s meeting my gaze, but the tips of his ears are redder than a tomato. “Fine, maybe I believe you that it’s not Mike.”

“Good, you should.”

“Still, you know something that you’re not telling me.” I narrow my eyes.

“Maybe I just like the thought of you dating a fellow knight,” Wes says, shrugging. “Maybe he will want to join my team.”

“I’m trying to find a date, not recruit for your team,” I say drolly.

Wes grins. “Can’t it be both?” He winks. “Kidding, kidding.”

“Not funny. Now, if you’re done talking about my love life, I need to trade you some lumber for ore.”

“Deal,” Wes says, handing over a card. He rolls the dice, and we trade and build until finally I win—by a hair. Wes smiles, looking just as pleased as I am at my win. If I

didn't know him better, I would think he lost on purpose just to make me happy. But that's crazy...right?

Just as crazy as how he was acting earlier.

For a moment, a wild thought had floated through my mind as Wes had knocked down my online matches: that maybe he was jealous.

But that was quickly dashed by his championing of WhiteKnight.

Wes never approves of anyone I like, but now he likes some random guy off the internet?

Heck, he defended the guy so much, I almost expected him to say he wanted to date the guy himself!

None of this is helping my general confusion about dating...

or my strange new attraction to Wes. Every time our fingers brushed as we traded cards or reached for the dice, a tingle of heat raced down my arms to my belly.

It slowly grew to an awkward awareness of him that made me blush and stutter to the point that Wes asked me if I were feeling alright.

Ugh, what is happening to me?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

“Isn’t this great?” I say to Zeke, pointing to the stage below. An orchestra plays their instruments while behind them, a screen shows a montage of scenes from Star Wars . We are at the symphony. Because we are men of refined taste and an interest in the musical arts.

“Why’d you bring me to this snoozefest again?” Zeke asks, his nose wrinkled in disgust.

Okay, so maybe only one of us has refined taste and an interest in the musical arts. “To broaden your horizons, young grasshopper,” I say pointedly.

Zeke snaps his fingers and opens his eyes wide. “Oh yeah! You brought me to spy on Honor, your best friend that you’re in love with and too chicken to tell.” He smirks.

“Shh,” I hiss at him, glancing around wildly to see if anyone heard him. “Lower your voice!”

Zeke rolls his eyes. “Why? You’re not exactly flying under the radar.”

I try to shrink down into my seat, which proves impossible.

Okay, I had admittedly struggled to determine what to wear.

Usually, I would call Honor with these kinds of questions, but this time that was obviously a no-go since she, too, would question my sudden interest in the symphony

at the exact same date, time, and performance as she was going to on her date.

So, armed with the knowledge that the performance was Star Wars themed and wanting to be as incognito as possible, I had settled on what had seemed like a brilliant decision an hour ago: my Stormtrooper costume from Halloween.

Unfortunately, the symphony is apparently not the kind of event that one wears costumes to.

I could not have done a worse job at staying low key if I tried.

From the time I showed up at the Washington Center for the Performing Arts, I had drawn looks, laughter, and several people honking their cars at me as I walked down the street.

In fact, so many people asked to take a photo with me that I barely made it to my seat on time.

Zeke had watched it all with equal parts embarrassment and glee, pretending not to know me all the way until he got to his seat next to mine. Then he introduced himself and promptly asked if Darth Vader had given me the day off.

“Very funny,” I say to him. I pick up the pair of binoculars and scan the lower seats. I had managed to snag two seats to the performance in the balcony, but we are at the very top. We’re so distant from the stage, we might as well be in a galaxy far, far away. (Get it? It’s a Star Wars joke, heh.)

Zeke covers his face with his hand and groans.

“What?”

“You seriously brought binoculars? What are we, top secret spies now? What kind of super spy operation do you think we’re on, James Bond?”

“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice says from behind me. I turn to see a woman with gray hair and a pinched expression. “Can you and your young friend please be quiet? I’m trying to listen.”

“I’m sorry,” I immediately say. “We’ll be quiet.” I give Zeke a look, the impact of which is probably lessened by the Stormtrooper helmet.

Zeke mutters something under his breath and I elbow him.

We listen to the music for the first ten minutes.

I’m actually enjoying it—it’s hard not to appreciate the Star Wars score, classical music lover or not.

Zeke, meanwhile, gets out his phone after the first five minutes and puts his earbuds in.

I elbow him again and he elbows me back. We jostle back and forth for a minute.

“Excuse me again,” the woman from behind us—let’s call her Karen—says. “Can you two please stop being disruptive? I paid for my ticket just like you did, and I’d like to enjoy it.”

“Really sorry,” I say, freezing. As a lifelong rule follower, I’m horrified at being called out for misbehavior. “We both are.”

Zeke, however, rolls his eyes and goes back to typing on his phone.

I jerk my thumb at him. “Generation Z,” I say, by way of apology.

Karen does not look mollified. “And can you remove your Stormtrooper helmet? I can’t see around it.”

I hesitate. My helmet is how I’m making sure I don’t get caught by Honor. But Karen looks like she’s about to summon an usher over and I don’t want to get kicked out. I reluctantly pull it off.

Karen humphs and sits back in her seat.

I turn back in my seat.

“Surrendered already, huh?” Zeke says. “Really leaning hard into that cosplay. Respect.”

I ignore him and focus on looking around for Honor.

How hard is it to find one person? Scanning the theater attendees below me, my mind starts to spiral through what might be happening.

Is he touching her? Does he have his arm around her?

What if she feels uncomfortable and doesn’t know how to tell him? What if she needs rescuing?

I lean over the railing. There are several rows that sit beneath the balcony. They must be underneath me. I lean further.

“Uh, Wes?” Zeke says next to me.

“Excuse me, can you sit down?” Karen hisses behind me.

I ignore them both as I lean further over the railing to find Honor. Anxiety grips my chest in a vice. I need to at least see Honor and know that she’s alright.

“That’s it, I’m getting an usher,” Karen says.

“You might want to sit down,” Zeke mutters. “I think we are about to get booted from the theater.”

“Just one more minute,” I say, leaning further until I’m practically dangling over the railing.

“Sir, I’m going to need you to step back from the railing.” I glance over to see a stern-faced usher at the end of the aisle. Next to him, Karen’s wearing an expression like the cat who got the cream.

Where is Honor? Why can’t I spot her? If I’m about to get kicked out of the theater, I at least want eyes on her once. I lean forward again, but my fingers lose their grip on the binoculars. They slip from my fingers and drop down into the audience below.

I wince. “Look out!” I cry.

Every eye below turns to look at me...including a familiar set of beautiful eyes. She’s wearing her Princess Leia costume from Halloween—the long white dress with a hood (which is why I didn’t recognize her) from the original movie, not the Jabba the Hutt slave costume. Relief spreads through me.

“Hi,” I say, giving her a finger wave.

She appears, well, less than thrilled to see me. “Wes?” she asks. Her gaze moves to

the right and more shock colors her face. “Zeke?”

I eyeball the guy next to her. He could’ve been an understudy for The Emperor, Darth Sidious. He also has the good sense to keep his hands to himself. I had been worried for nothing. I let out my breath.

“Sir, you have to step back from the railing.”

I move back, holding up my hands. Three ushers are now waiting for me in the aisle, looking like they’re about to go hands-on. The crowd grumbles around us, a menacing swell of discontented noise. “I think it’s time to go,” I say to Zeke.

“Cool. Let’s bounce,” he says, getting up.

Ten minutes later, I’m escorted out of the building, having been banned for life from the facility and given a stern talking-to by the manager that I was lucky they weren’t calling the police on me. Zeke follows along behind us.

Honor is already waiting on the sidewalk in front of the performing arts center, her arms crossed. Her expression says she’s about to unleash a scolding worthy of Princess Leia herself.

“Wes!” she says as soon as she sees me. “What in the world were you doing?”

“Exposing Zeke to the finer arts?”

“Don’t involve me, bruh. This is all on you,” Zeke says, putting his earbuds back in. He leans against the wall in his best impression of a total stranger.

Honor points a finger at me, her eyes narrowed. “You are stalking me.”

“What? Me? Stalking?” I feign innocence. “Why would I do that?”

“Excellent question,” Honor says, studying me.

I start to sweat, cursing myself for putting the question in her mind.

“I can only think of one thing,” she says, raising a finger.

This is it. The moment of truth. I’m relieved, frankly, that she’s finally figured out my secret.

The truth will be out and whatever happens next, it will be better than this torture.

I steel myself and force the words out. “You’re right.

I love you and don’t want some internet rando getting anywhere near you.”

Silence falls between us. She stares at me. I can’t even breathe, waiting for her reaction.

Finally, Honor shakes her head. My heart falls straight through the ground.

“It’s just what I thought,” Honor says. “Your overprotective, big brother instincts have gotten out of control.”

Zeke groans behind us and slaps his forehead.

My chest deflates. “Yes,” I say, capitulating to my own cowardice. “That’s it. That is exactly the reason.”

Zeke mutters something that sounds a lot like, “stupid.” I glare at him.

Honor steps forward, reaching out to grab my hand. She looks at me with soulful eyes. “Wes, I’m a big girl. I can go on dates by myself. It’s the symphony, for goodness’ sake, not some back alley. He’s an accountant. I promise you this guy does not look like an ax murderer.”

“They never do,” I say, almost as a reflex.

“I appreciate that you care, but you’ve got to let me live my life, date whom I want to date. You don’t need to follow me, okay?”

“Okay,” I say. “But text me when you get to your car.”

“Nope.”

“When you get home?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll take it.”

Honor laughs and leans in to hug me. “What am I going to do with you?”

Marry me. “Just be safe.”

“Bye, Dad ,” she says, rolling her eyes as she walks back into the theater.

The sound of slow clapping comes behind me as soon as the door closes. “Wow,” Zeke says. “You’ve gone from best friend to dad. Congratulations. You’re on fire.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. ‘Watch your mouth, kid, or you’ll find yourself floating home,” I quote. I wave for him to follow me. “If you’re done mocking me, let’s go train. We

only have a month until the tournament at the Midsommer Faire.”

“Now you’re talking!” Zeke follows me to the park where we put on our soft kit gear and beat on each other with foam swords. It’s not quite as fun as steel armor and weapons, but it’s good for practicing techniques and a heck of a lot easier to get on and off, not to mention safer.

Yet even as we train, my mind stays stuck on Honor. If I’m going to win her heart, I’ll need to switch up my strategy.

Time to bring my A game.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

A week after my date at the symphony, I'm no further along in my quest for love.

Speaking of the symphony, what in the world was Wes thinking? After accusing my date of being a potential serial killer, the only person who turned out to be psycho was Wes , following me to the symphony and spying on me. Talk about crazy.

Okay, it was kind of sweet that he had wanted to watch out for me. And I guess it was kind of cute that he had also shown up in a costume.

It was also super embarrassing. What was he even thinking? His actions were like those of a jealous boyfriend.

For a second, my heart makes a funny squeeze. Wait a minute. Do I want Wes to be jealous?

No. I shake my head. Absolutely not. Wes is decidedly not on my list of potential suitors.

I review the list of Dates Who Are Not Also My Best Friend. The list is short, sadly.

MrNiceGuy was, in fact, nice and decidedly not a serial killer (thanks a lot, Wes), but there was zero spark with him.

If anything, I flinched when he tried to touch me; his hands felt moist and there was the vague whiff of onions on his breath.

I went out with him one more time just to be sure (my mom would say to give anyone at least two chances), but the second date only confirmed the first.

Contestant #1, MrNiceGuy, crossed off the list. Thanks for playing.

My conversations with Contestant #2, Dave, have been fun, but so far, super surface-y and mostly revolve around sports.

He also has a lot of spelling and grammar mistakes and likes to use the letter “u” instead of “you.” I don’t want to be a snob, but...

there’s only so much one bookworm can be expected to take. Each typo gives me an eye twitch.

Still, we’ve set a date for next week and I’m hoping I’ll feel the spark in person that I haven’t felt so far via email. Fingers crossed.

Contestant #3, WhiteKnight2005, is a different story. He went from emailing me twenty times a day to a more restrained two or three times. I don’t know what happened, but I can only assume he’s lost interest. Still, there’s something about him that keeps me coming back.

Like our shared love of The Princess Bride. How many guys do you know who also love that movie? I can think of one: Wes. But he’s the only one.

Anyway, WhiteKnight and I had a rousing debate over whether Westley truly poisoned both cups in the battle of wits and whether it was feasible for Westley to gain all of the skills necessary to become the Dread Pirate Roberts in such a short time (WhiteKnight’s response?

Inconceivable!) From that discussion, we moved on to other movies that we liked,

which led to books, then games, then random hobbies.

Despite the banter, WhiteKnight hasn't made any suggestion about wanting to meet in person, though, which makes me suspicious. He hasn't asked me for money yet, so I suppose that's a point in his favor for not being a catfish.

"Are you real?" I ask him via message.

"Real? As in, am I human or an AI robot?" he responds. "Definitely human. But then, a robot would probably be programmed to say that, wouldn't it?"

"Probably," I agree. "Maybe I should send you a picture and ask you to pick out all the squares that contain a motorcycle or a streetlamp or whatever. Apparently, that's the best test humanity can devise to identify robots."

"I agree, we're pretty much doomed. I, for one, welcome our new robot overlords (in case they're monitoring this conversation)."

I laugh. "You're right, this is exactly the kind of data that they would want to mine. Relationship development is an essential human function. Robots would want to study it to learn how to better mimic humans since they couldn't generate the complex emotions themselves."

"You laugh, but I've heard that dating sites are already using AI bots to pretend to be women on the sites so that lonely men have someone to chat with."

"I'm not sure whether to be sad for the men or offended that they can't tell the difference between robots and real women."

"Hmm, I see that you're struggling to process complex emotions. Maybe this whole time you've been duping me and you're the bot. Quick, solve a simple math

problem.”

I giggle as I type. “Very funny. I’m not a robot.”

“Ah, but you would say that, wouldn’t you? I thought we’d already settled that.”

“Okay, how can I prove it to you?”

“One moment. I’ll send you a picture of random blurry letters and numbers and you’ll have to tell me what they are.”

I roll my eyes. “Orrrrrrr...we could just meet up for coffee sometime.” I hit send and hold my breath.

Did I just...ask a guy out? This goes against every dating “rule” I’ve ever read, and yet I’m impatient to meet this guy at long last. He’s smart, funny, and obviously a huge nerd like me...

what if we get together and there’s no spark?

I’d rather find that out now than get my hopes up for nothing.

A minute passes, then two. It’s a much longer break than our prior rapid-fire exchange. I watch my phone.

“I’d love that,” he finally says.

“Great! When?”

“I’m in a really busy time at work so I can’t do it for a couple weeks. Is that okay?”

Disappointing, but I'm willing to wait. "Sure. But just so you know, until I actually meet you and can verify for myself, I'm going to assume you're a bot."

"I thought you were the bot," he says. "Wait. I see what you did there. Misdirection. Nice. I commend your creators."

I laugh. This guy is goofy, and I like that. "I'll let my parents know."

"That's what you call them? Creepy but I'm into it."

"You're so weird."

"Hey, I'm not the humanoid bot."

"OMG! I'm not a bot. I will prove it as soon as we meet."

"I'll prepare my series of tests."

"Fine. You do that."

"More seriously, what if I'm not what you expected when we meet?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you have this idea of who I am. What if when we meet, I disappoint you?"

I pause, staring at my screen. My heart squeezes at his question. Is this why he's been dragging his feet about meeting? Is he shy? Insecure? "I won't be disappointed."

"How do you know that?"

“Because I like you. Talking with you like this, I see who you really are.”

“Can you really see who I am through just a conversation?”

“Maybe I’m naive, but I think so.”

“And who do you think I am?”

Oof, we’ve gone from joking to serious in less time than it takes to say, “As you wish.” I ponder the question for a moment. What do I really know about this guy?

“I know that you’re funny, smart, and kind. I know that you care deeply about the world around you and that you have excellent taste in books, movies, and shows.” I add a wink emoji. “I’m sure I don’t know everything, but I know enough to know that I’d love to get to know you more.”

WhiteKnight sends a heart.

Later, I open his dating profile and look at the pictures. The guy in the photos is handsome, conventionally attractive. There’s no way this guy is afraid of meeting a woman for coffee for fear of rejection.

Maybe the photos aren’t of him.

A shiver of unease rolls through me. I run a reverse google search, which doesn’t yield any results. I let out a relieved breath, when another idea hits me. I run the photo through an AI image detector: 99% certainty the image is AI-generated.

Oh no. I want to hurl my phone at the wall as I stare in horror at the results. AI? WhiteKnight can’t be AI. He’s a real person. AI isn’t advanced enough yet to understand humor and respond the way a human would.

I can't believe that WhiteKnight is a bot, but it does make me think that he has created a false image of himself to use on the profile. It just leads me to wonder: Who am I really talking to?

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

“Have you ever been to a Star Wars symphony?” Honor messages me—that is, WhiteKnight—a week later. “A symphony featuring the music from the movies, I mean?”

I lie on my bed, staring at the light of my phone screen in my hand. I’ve worked a long day dealing with other people’s issues and at the end of it, nothing makes me happier than logging into the app and seeing a message waiting for me from Honor.

We have been messaging each other for weeks now. Communicating with her in the app is as routine as texting her as her best friend. I just have to keep my messages straight.

Never mind that she doesn’t know it’s me, that she thinks that she’s messaging a stranger.

Truthfully, the deception bothers me, but at the same time, I crave reading each message.

I can picture her lying on her bed, in her apartment, staring at her phone just like I am.

The connection tugs between us despite the distance.

“No,” I respond, feeling the rip of guilt in my belly at lying to her. “Let me guess, was it out of this world?”

“Ha ha ha,” she responds. “Cue slow clap. I bet you’ve been waiting ages to make that joke.”

“Only since the Clone Wars,” I quip.

Honor responds with the rolling eye emoji.

We’ve moved from emails to the app’s version of direct messaging.

I tried to hold back since she told me my alter ego was sounding desperate from my rapid-fire responses, but I can’t help myself.

It’s Honor . She’s chatting with me not as her best friend, but as a potential romantic partner.

Her messages are fun and flirty with zero awkwardness between us. I want it to continue forever.

“So, what about the symphony?” I prompt. “Did you go?” I of course already know that she did. I wonder what she’s going to tell me about it. Her date? Her crazy best friend who crashed it?

“Yes. Apparently, it’s not the kind of place you dress up in costume to go to.”

“Learned that the hard way, did you?” I quip, then freeze. Will that give me away? Will she wonder how I know that or just assume it’s a lucky guess? I want to unsend it, but that would be just as suspicious.

“Yes,” she responds, with no sign of suspicion. “Me and my best friend. I showed up as Princess Leia. He showed up as a stormtrooper. Super embarrassing.”

I chuckle. Indeed, it was. “Easy mistake,” I say. “I’ve done the same.”

“You have? When? What happened?”

My heart lurches in my chest. Oops, maybe I shouldn't have said that. It's so hard to think of what I can and can't say. I struggle to think of a story that might sound plausible. My heartrate ratchets higher with every minute that passes.

“Hello? I want to hear your story,” Honor messages after several minutes pass.

“C'mon, I told you mine. It can't be as bad.”

“Even worse,” I respond to buy myself time while I come up with a plausible story.

“Tell me! You can trust me. You can't even imagine the type of embarrassing situations I've gotten myself into.”

Oh, but I can. I either directly participated in each one or heard about it afterward.

“Kind of a troublemaker, are you?”

“Only the best people are,” she says, adding a wink face emoji. “How about you?”

“I'm a little more cautious, but I can be talked into some fun.” By you. It's no secret that Honor comes up with the ideas and then I tag along, mostly to make sure she doesn't get hurt or in too much trouble.

“Sounds like you need someone like me to liven up your life.”

I chuckle. “Maybe I do. Interested in the position?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether you play your cards right.”

My eyebrows fly up. Challenge accepted. “I’ll warn you that I’m a very good card player.”

“You know what they say about those who are lucky at cards...”

I chuckle under my breath as I type a fast response. “Yeah, yeah, unlucky at love. That’s what I’m trying to change.”

“Well, quit stalling and tell me your story already.”

“You won’t judge me?” I ask, still furiously brainstorming what story I could make up.

“Only a little.”

“Hey! You said I could trust you.”

“I’m just joking. I’m totally trustworthy, Random Internet Stranger. Spill the beans!”

“Thank you for reassuring me. I’ve always trusted the kindness of random internet strangers.”

“You should. I’m waiting...”

“Fine. I’ll tell you,” I finally type. “I went to a fancy party once. My friend messaged me and told me to ‘wear a penguin suit.’”

“Oh dear. I think I see where this is going...”

“Indeed. It turned out that I shouldn’t have taken him so literally. I was the lone penguin in a sea of black-tie tuxedos.” I add a sad face emoji.

Honor sends me shocked face and crying face emojis. “Oh nooooooooo!!! How awful!”

“Let’s just say that I waddled out of there as fast as my tail feathers allowed.”

“I want to both laugh and cry at that at the same time.”

“It’s okay, you can laugh at it. I do.”

“Thank goodness, because I’m laughing my butt off picturing you showing up in a penguin costume while everyone else is in a tux!”

“Pretty much.” The guilt of lying to her is only marginally assuaged by making her laugh.

“Too funny. Sounds like something my best friend would do, actually.”

My heart leaps right into my throat to see her mention me. It’s as though she can see me right through the phone line. “I can’t see a girl doing that,” I say, feigning ignorance.

“Not a girl. A guy. My best friend is a guy.”

“A guy, huh?”

“Why? Are you jealous?”

“I don’t know. Have you two ever dated?”

“No, never.”

“Why not?”

She doesn’t respond for ten minutes—the longest ten minutes of my life. I watch the bubble of words appear then disappear, appear then disappear. “It never was the right time.”

“When would be the right time? You’re on an online dating site now. Maybe now is the time.” My breath catches in my throat as I stare at the screen, waiting desperately for the bubbles to appear. What if she says I’m right?

A thousand years seem to pass before she answers.

“I don’t see him like that. He’s like a brother to me.”

My heart, racing at a million beats a minute, falls dead to the ground.

This is the rub. What am I doing here, flirting with her, when she probably will never see the real me as anything more than a friend?

One day, sooner than I want to think, I’ll have to reveal myself to her.

And what do I really think is going to happen?

Is she going to be happy about it? Or, more likely, she’ll get a disappointed look on her face and say, “Oh, it’s you. ”

I don’t think my heart will be able to take that. I’d rather never have done this at all

than to have experienced the hope of an actual romantic relationship with Honor, only to have that hope destroyed.

I barely notice that she's sent another message. My eyes refocus on it. "Besides," she adds, "aren't you supposed to be convincing me to date you?"

I'm trying. More than you know. "Just scoping out the competition."

"No competition there," she says.

Depression weighs me down on the bed. I can't keep up the charade for tonight any longer. I message Honor that I have to sign off for the night, then toss the phone to the side and throw an arm over my eyes, contemplating the mess I've gotten myself into.

A buzzing interrupts my self-pity party. I pick up the phone and check the screen. It's Honor again, but this time messaging the real me, Wes. Ugh. This is getting so messy.

"What are you up to?" she asks.

Oh, nothing. Just pretending to be a stranger so I can catfish my best friend and make her fall in love with me. Ho hum. "Working on the Play It Forward Day." At least, that's what I should be doing.

"What's that?"

"Every state's Play It Forward organization hosts a Play It Forward Day featuring one of the involved sports. They've chosen Buhurt for some reason, and I got tasked with putting together the event."

“Sounds major. What are you going to do?”

“We already have the Midsommer Festival coming up, so I’m going to see if they want to use that day. I’ll set up an event for youth to try out the sport with foam, just like Zeke does.”

“That sounds like fun! Can I come?”

“Of course. I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“Then I’ll be there! Whatever you need, you know you can depend on me!”

I stare at her message, while “No competition there” echoes in my head. I thumbs-up like her message. “Hey, I’m really tired, I need to catch some zzs. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just tired from training with Zeke.” The guilt at lying twists my guts again. I hate this. I don’t know how long I can keep doing it. I feel like a fraud.

“Okay, have a good night!”

I turn off my phone and send a prayer to whomever is listening above that I find a way to a happy ending with Honor.

Honor

The roar of engines rattles the stands as the cars fly by on the racetrack. The hot sun sends shimmering waves of heat over us. I curse myself for not better applying sunscreen and can only hope that I escape the day with only a minor sunburn.

“Did you see that?” Dave exclaims, rising to his feet. “Harrelson nearly clipped the wall!”

“Wow,” I say, struggling to inject enthusiasm into my tone. My fingers itch to pull out the book I have hidden in my purse, but even I know that’s not a good look for a date.

When Dave suggested a date at the racetrack, I was game.

I want to try new things, expand my horizons, yada yada yada.

I’ve seen *My Fair Lady* and figured it would be like that—an enjoyable day outdoors with the added excitement of a race.

But it turns out I’m not the racecar type.

What I wouldn’t give to be curled up with a book and a cup of tea or hanging out with Wes at Cup of Swords.

I’m not here to read, I remind myself. I’m here to find myself a potential life partner.

In that regard, Dave is...an interesting choice.

He's reasonably attractive, he's smart, he has a stable job (as far as I know).

He checks a lot of low bar boxes. Even better, he's fun.

In our online messages, Dave was upbeat and always had something to say.

In internet dating, when it sometimes feels like pulling teeth to make conversation, Dave was a refreshing change.

When I finally met him in person, I realized he literally always has something to say.

On our first date, we met for coffee, and I barely got a word in edgewise.

I chalked it up to the fact that it was a first date and he was nervous.

As an introvert, it was even somewhat relaxing.

Women are often expected to hold up the conversation with men, and with Dave, I didn't have to do a thing.

On our second date, I figure that things will calm down. He picks me up in front of my apartment (point for Dave) and we start driving up to the Evergreen Speedway.

"Did you catch the Ironclad Marauders game last night?" Dave asks me. "It was amazing, right?"

"I'm sorry, I don't watch...football?"

"Rugby—and you don't know what you're missing.

I wasn't into it at first, but then I started watching rugby sevens at the Olympics and wow!

The fast-paced action blew my mind. It was like a combination of football and soccer.

I started following the sport here and Beau Matthews is just the man.

He's like a combination of Superman and Arnold Schwarzenegger, but on speed. "

I make affirmative noises during his monologue. "Sounds cool."

"Are you into football? Have you been following Drake Blythe?"

"Who?" I ask, lost.

"The Miami Dolphins QB."

"Uh, no, sorry."

Dave frowns. "You said you like sports, right?"

"Uh-huh." I like sports because there are usually parties associated with those sports, and I like hanging out with friends with delicious finger foods. That's what I like about sports.

"So, what sport do you follow?"

"Umm...golf," I say, crossing my fingers that it's a sport he doesn't follow.

"Oh yeah, I don't watch that as much, but I've watched a little of Matthew Wilkes in the Summit Pro Tour.

His swing is like poetry in motion, right?

I love how cool he stays under pressure, you know?

Can you imagine being watched by millions while you try to hit a ball a hundred yards down the green? ”

My head whirls from the rapid-fire questions. “Uh, yeah, exactly. He’s so amazing.”

“Cool, cool,” Dave says, his head bobbing. “We’ll have to watch together sometime.”

Ugh, or never. “I’d love to,” I lie. I’m already not feeling so great about the chances of this relationship making it past next week, so it’s probably a promise I will never have to be held to.

“Hey, do you mind if we listen to a baseball game on the radio?” Dave asks, his hand already moving to the dash.

“Uh, sure.”

“Great! There’s a new shortstop for the Chicago Street Sweeper, Nash Fontaine, and he’s on fire!

” He turns on AM radio to listen to a play by play of the game.

He pounds the wheel and lets out whoops of excitement as the Street Sweepers make runs and his new hero, Nash, makes a series of stunning plays.

“Can you believe this guy?” Dave exclaims, gesturing to the world at large. “What’d I tell you? Fire!”

“Fire,” I echo with a nod. I stare out the window at the passing scenery, wishing I were back in the car with Wes on my way to the Buhurt fight. We always have a million things to talk about and none of them involve random sports.

Except now he has Buhurt . But that at least is interesting . I love that it’s historically accurate and I can actually picture some of my fantasy book boyfriends in it. Clad in steel and leather, riding into battle with their warrior queen at their side, sword raised to the sky.

I shift in my seat. It’s kind of hot, actually. Okay, Wes doesn’t ride a horse, but I can easily picture him hacking away at his rival, and my belly flutters again.

Why am I so attracted to him in armor? But then I remember that I had also felt attracted to him at Cup of Swords, when he was wearing regular clothes. It wasn’t the armor—it was Wes .

Not only that, but I’ve been thinking about him more and more.

Everything reminds me of him. Even conversations with the third prospect in my online dating—WhiteKnight—makes me feel like I’m talking to Wes.

It’s as though something has woken in me that I can’t just put him back in his best friend box.

I shift in my seat again, confinement in the car suddenly feeling constricting.

“We’re here!” Dave announces, pulling into the parking lot.

I give myself a shake. Pull it together, Honor. You’re on a date. Do you want to be seventy, unmarried, and still hanging out with your best friend?

Suddenly, that future prospect doesn't sound so bad. In fact, growing old with my best friend in the world feels...comforting. I can picture our little house together, my library of books, his gaming room, the kids we would have—

“Ready?” Dave asks.

I jump. “Yep!” I say brightly and open the door.

The hot summer air smells like asphalt and burning rubber, with hints of popcorn and gasoline. We follow the masses of people streaming into the Speedway.

Dave chatters at a million miles a minute, telling me about the racers, their crew, and their records as we make our way through the turnstiles and into the stands. We climb up to our seats, practically in the nosebleed section.

I barely listen, as my active participation in the conversation doesn't seem to be a necessary ingredient for Dave.

The only person who has truly intrigued me from the online dating world is WhiteKnight.

Talking with him feels so comfortable, so natural.

It feels as though we've been friends for years.

He's clever and makes me laugh. Our conversations are just plain fun and seeing another message in my inbox from him makes my heart flutter.

But in reality, WhiteKnight is a stranger. His pictures are obviously fake. I don't even know if it's actually a man behind the messages. The longer that WhiteKnight pushes off meeting in person, the more skeptical I become.

When I imagine the future I want with a romantic partner, it looks a lot like the future I imagined with Wes: a cozy, cluttered house full of books and games, comfy couches, too many pets, and maybe even a little boy or girl who looked just like Wes. My heart aches, wanting that future.

But do I want it because I'm actually in love with Wes? Or because he's comfortable? Maybe all this new attraction to him is some sort of early biological clock ticking. And even if I want that future with him, who says that he wants the same future with me?

Wes isn't interested in you, but you've got a man right here who is interested in you. Think about a future with him!

My internal voice is annoyingly right. I turn to Dave, intent on asking him a question about his future hopes and dreams, when he jumps to his feet, spilling popcorn on me. Dave doesn't even notice, his eyes glued to the action in front of him.

"Look, here comes Ryder Stone! He's making his move to slingshot past!"

I brush the kernels off my clothes, my interest marginally perking up.

Even though I have no interest in NASCAR, my social media feed has been buzzing with posts about the relationship between Ryder Stone and his former archnemesis, Blake.

There's nothing I love more than a good rivals-to-lovers plotline, so I've eaten it up like everyone else.

I stand next to Dave, trying to catch a glimpse of the handsome racecar driver. Of course, it's impossible at this distance and at the speed the racers are going. The cars whiz by and the crowd erupts into a cheer.

“Do you think Blake is here?” I ask.

“Who?” Dave shouts over the noise.

“Never mind,” I shout back.

“They’ve only got twenty more laps to go. So exciting!”

Twenty laps? I sink back into my seat.

“Harrelson’s making a move from the outside!” Dave narrates. “He’s moving up from the back of the pack. He’d better not try his earlier move or he’s going to—”

The sound of screeching metal and a loud bang blocks out Dave’s next words. I cover my ears and leap up to see that two of the cars have collided in a wreck at the back.

“Oh, my goodness, is everyone okay? Are they hurt?” I ask, clutching Dave’s arm.

Dave looks down at me and laughs. “Are you nervous? Look, they’re fine. This is all part of the fun! Let me tell you about the race I saw five years ago...”

And he does tell me. In detail. With every word, my interest in him falters until it’s left dying in the dust. Dave is a nice guy, and I appreciate that he likes sports. But I can’t spend my life with a man who’s clearly obsessed with them. We just won’t have anything in common.

Instead, I yearn to snap my fingers and be back home. The man next to me is not the man I want to spend my time or my life with.

I want to spend my life with a man whose presence is like a warm hug, whose smile lights me up inside like fireworks, whose laughter is the harmonious echo to my own.

I want a man who will love to spend rainy days inside on a cozy couch playing video games and reading books, who's a little goofy and a lot nerdy, just like me.

Who isn't afraid to laugh at himself and who cares deeply about others.

Who knows me inside and out and loves me anyway.

In my heart, I know who I want. Maybe I've known all along. I want the man who's always been my best friend, but maybe, just maybe, could become something more.

I'm starting to think I've been overlooking the man who's been right in front of me this whole time.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

“How’s it going on your catfishing project, Casanova?” Zeke asks. He bops me with the foam bat.

We are at the local park outside the apartment complex where Zeke lives with his mom and two sisters, practicing our moves.

Except for the occasional dogwalker who gives us the side-eye, we have the park to ourselves.

In the distance, children play at a public playground, the sounds of their laughter carrying across the air.

It’s a sunny summer day in Washington, absolutely beautiful and perfect for working out.

Too bad my mind isn’t anywhere near our practice.

“Awful. I’m not cut out for this.” I attack him with a quick one-two strike.

“Cut out for what? Making sweet verbal love to your lady?” He grins as he deflects my blows.

“Gross. Where do you come up with this stuff?” I shake my head.

“TikTok.”

“Ugh.”

Zeke shakes his fist and wheezes, “Kids and that darn social media.”

“Very funny.”

He bops me again. “Two points for me, bruh.”

“I’m distracted,” I grumble.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. En garde! ”

“That’s fencing, not Buhurt, doofus. And I’m distracted by the whole situation with Honor, not your poor attempts at humor. But frankly, I blame you in either case, as you got me into the mess in the first place.” I lunge at him.

He spins, surprising me. I try to regain my balance, but he kicks my leg and I sprawl to the ground. He stands over me, chuckling. “You better hope you get it together before the Midsommer Faire. You’re a mess.”

“You’re right,” I groan, rolling onto my knees. Zeke holds out a hand and I grasp it. Then, with a sly grin spreading across my face, I use the fact that he’s unbalanced to pull him to the ground. Leaping on top of him, I pummel his padded chest with my fists.

Zeke yells and struggles to knock me off.

“Who’s a mess now?” I cackle.

“Okay, okay!” Zeke finally cries, going limp under me. “I give up.”

I laugh as I flop to the ground next to him, breathing harder than I care to admit. The grass tickles my skin, and I take a moment to enjoy the warmth of the sun on my face. “If I can’t beat a skinny fifteen-year-old who lives on mac-and-cheese and Fritos, I might as well quit now.”

“Hey, I’ve been drinking those protein shakes you recommended.” He raises an arm and flexes. “I think they’re working.”

“Sure. You’re practically Thor Odinson, God of Thunder. You should start competing in bodybuilding competitions.”

Zeke smirks. “You’re just bitter because even your alter ego has no game. Don’t take it out on me.”

I chuckle. “Okay, you may be right.” I run my hand over my face. “Argh, what am I going to do?”

“Okay, tell me, what are you so upset about?”

I debate the wisdom of confiding in a teenager. Perhaps it’s a sign of just how at rock bottom I am, but I’m at a loss. “I can’t keep pretending to be someone I’m not and lying to her. It kills me every time. I’m up at night worrying about what she’ll think when I finally tell her the truth.”

“Yeah,” Zeke says, drawing out the word. “Do you have to tell her the truth? Maybe you just let it slide. What she doesn’t know can’t hurt her. No harm, no foul.”

“Okay, that’s a terrible philosophy. Yes, I have to tell her.” I turn my head to look at Zeke. “I obviously need to intersperse my combat lessons with lessons on chivalry.”

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever, bruh. I’m just saying that sometimes there are lies that

don't hurt anyone and stop people from actually being hurt."

"All lies are bad, Zeke," I say. "Not only has Honor been my best friend forever, but let's say we do start a relationship, and she finds out later that I was messaging her on the app without telling her it was me—she'll feel tricked and hurt. Wouldn't you?"

"Me, I'd be flattered any girl wanted to talk to me that bad." Zeke laughs.

"This is why I can't take dating advice from fifteen-year-old boys," I say. "Come on, get up, let's go again."

We get to our feet and start taking turns attacking each other, practicing our defenses and strategies. "You're getting really good," I say to him as I lean over, catching my breath after he winded me with an unexpected attack to my core.

"Thanks, I learned from the best," he says with a wink.

"Aw, that's sweet," I say, proud of his fighting skills, but more appreciative of the relationship we had built.

"I wasn't talking about you," he says, grinning.

I groan and grab my phone to check my messages. There's one from Honor. Opening it, I read, "Want to grab dinner at Gardner's?"

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

I thumbs-up react to her message. "Sure! Just let me know what time."

I toss my phone down, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I've never been to Gardner's, but I know it's a fancy sit down restaurant with white tablecloths and expensive meals.

Why would Honor choose that place? I could more easily picture her picking Chuck E. Cheese for us to eat than that place.

"What's wrong?" Zeke asks.

"Huh?"

"You're glaring at your phone like it's personally wronged you."

I shake my head. "Honor just invited me to dinner."

"Cool," he says, bobbing his head. Then, "Not cool?"

"I don't know. Something is off about the place she picked. It's not the kind of place you pick for a best friend."

"What kind of place is it?"

I frown. "A fancy date place."

Zeke shrugs. "Maybe she just felt like some fancy food."

"Maybe." But it doesn't feel right. The Honor I know doesn't care about fancy food. She's more comfortable in a Chili's than some gourmet foodie haven that charges thirty bucks a plate.

“Hey, I wouldn’t worry about it, bruh. You’re just overthinking.” He bops me with the foam bat. “Get your mind on other things, like the Midsommer Fest. How’s your planning going for Play It Forward Day?”

I engage him with some strikes. “Good, I think. I’ve got fighters lined up to work with the youth. I’ve put up flyers and posted on our local Facebook groups. Did you spread the word around your school?”

Zeke nods. “Should be a good turnout.”

“Great. My only issue right now is that I don’t have enough foam kits for everyone. I’m hoping some local businesses will donate money so we can get some new ones, but we will definitely have to pass around what we have.”

“Better bring your Lysol spray. Your kit’s gonna reek.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Look who’s talking. You could clear out a room with just your sneakers. Those are like weapons of mass destruction.”

“I’ll show you mass destruction,” Zeke says, lunging for me.

Laughing, I put my worries about Honor aside as I focus on demolishing the snarky teen.

Hours later, though, as I’m lying in my bed, I reread Honor’s message over and over.

Is it a joke? A trick? Is there a subtext I should be catching?

As long as I’ve known Honor, she’s never asked me to go to dinner with her at a fancy restaurant.

We go to Cup of Swords to play games or to El Sarape for happy hour chips and salsa or to Buffalo Wild Wings on the rare occasions I can get her to watch a sports game with me.

But never just a straight dinner invitation to an expensive restaurant.

Meanwhile, and perhaps even more worrisome, she's gone silent on the app. She still hasn't responded to my last message from WhiteKnight, which was two days ago. We had been sending multiple messages a day and now...nothing.

It hits me: she knows. My stomach clenches. She has somehow figured out that I'm WhiteKnight and she's going to confront me.

Her lack of communication on the app, the strange choice of location, it all suddenly makes sense.

She's going to call me out. She's probably angry, and rightfully so.

My dinner tries to make a quick escape from my stomach, and I have to swallow it back down.

True, the anxiety of lying to her had eaten at me, so much so that this should be a relief.

But not like this. I wanted to tell her.

To be up front about it. To explain everything. I can only imagine what she's thinking.

The fact that she hasn't directly said anything makes it even worse. If Honor was mad at me, she had never had any qualms about letting me know in no uncertain terms.

The fact that she's silent ...she must be absolutely furious. Honor must be at a loss for words, and she is never at a loss for words.

My fingers start to fly on my phone. "I'm sorry," I start to type. "I wanted to show you..." My words taper off. Show her what? How insane I am?

I shake my head and delete what I have written. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but I thought if I started an online profile and tried to talk to you without you knowing it was me..." Ugh, that does sound crazy. I delete everything again.

"Honor, I've been in love with you for twenty years.

And I tried to tell you countless times, but you never seemed to hear me.

So I thought that if I could get you to see me differently, you might realize that...

"Realize what? She's not in love with WhiteKnight.

Nothing's changed between us, only now I'm a catfishing creep.

I close my eyes. I can't send her these messages. I just have to go to dinner tomorrow and face the music. And hope that she forgives me.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

Okay, so I maaaayyy have tricked Wes into a date. I'm not proud of it. I didn't lie to him. I just invited him to dinner without telling him that I'm evaluating him for potential boyfriend material.

Is that a strange thing to do with your best friend?

Maybe. If I had come straight out and said to him, will you go on a date with me, he'd think I was crazy.

Worse, he'd probably straight up reject me.

After all, we're best friends, right? We've always been best friends.

But maybe the fact that we've been best friends all these years is what's blinding both of us.

I need to see if my attraction to him is real and whether we can be something more than friends.

Having been on several dates recently, I'll know in an instant if I feel anything even close to a spark.

But the only way I know how to do that is to see him in a different environment than our usual. And for him to see me, too.

And if I feel nothing? Then we'll just have dinner, and I'll never say another word about it. But the way my heart races as I wait inside the restaurant, I already know this is going to be different.

I shift on my feet, feeling more nervous than I ever have before. The straps of my wedge sandals bite into my feet, unused as they are to anything other than comfy flats. The discomfort is almost a welcome distraction.

I twist a fold of my skirt between my fingers, debating my choice of outfit.

Is it too obvious? I'm usually a leggings and stretchy dress kind of girl.

This dress is a grown-up dress, with a scoop neck and an A-line structure that gives me the illusion of a waist. I had seen it in the mall a year ago, tried it on, and bought it without having any idea of where I'd ever have the opportunity to wear it.

But now I know: I was saving it for Wes.

"Are you ready to be seated, miss?" the host asks me.

I shake my head. "No, I want to wait for my friend...I mean, my date." I gulp. Is that weird to call Wes my date? It feels weird.

I check my phone. Wes is late, but no messages await me. Usually, if Wes is going to be late, he texts me. The butterflies explode into panic.

"I'm sure he'll arrive soon," the host says with a smile.

I stare at him. He's trying to reassure me.

Oh, my goodness, he thinks Wes isn't coming.

What if Wes doesn't come? My mind spirals.

What if an emergency came up? What if Wes got in an accident on the way here?

I would never forgive myself. Or what if he realized I was asking him on a date and he freaked out?

My finger is on the button to call Wes when I see him jog up. I let out a relieved breath, which catches in my throat as I fully take him in.

Wes strides toward me, looking more like a GQ model on the catwalk than the dork known as my best friend.

His broad shoulders strain against his navy-blue blazer, which is stretched so tight around his biceps, it's like a second skin.

Underneath, he wears a dress shirt and— gasp —a tie, which I have only seen Wes wear on infrequent celebratory occasions like graduation.

His hair is gelled into a casually messy mop on top and the light scruff across his jaw makes his cheekbones look sharp and angled.

He stops in front of me, and I almost want to look around to see what other lucky girl he's come for. Me. He's come for me. I have to force down the sudden zing of excitement.

"Sorry I'm late," Wes says, running a hand through his hair. "I should have texted. I thought about texting, but then I waited too long to text, and I was driving anyway..." He clears his throat. "I'm sorry."

I frown at him. Wes is rambling. Wes never rambles. Is Wes...nervous? Almost

instantly, my own discomfort lessens. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Wes stares at me.

“What?” I ask, looking down at myself to see if I accidentally got a stain on my dress.

“You look beautiful.”

“Oh,” I say, heat crawling up my face. He’s looking at me like he’s seeing a sunrise for the first time. “Thank you. You’re, uh, looking pretty good yourself.”

Up close, his outfit looks even better...and tighter. One more breath and Wes is about to hulk out of his clothes. Either he’s gained a lot of muscle or...“Is that the same outfit you wore to prom?”

The redness on his face now matches mine. “Just the jacket. I haven’t had a reason to buy a new one.” He grimaces. “It’s a little tight.”

I take pity on him. “It looks like it’s about to bust a seam. You can take it off if you’d like.”

“Thank goodness.” Wes struggles to get out of it, and I have to help him by tugging it down his arms. Standing so close to him, I can smell a hint of cologne, and I again have the disorienting sense of being with a stranger. Since when does Wes wear cologne?

Wes pulls at his tie to loosen it, then unbuttons the top few buttons, stretching his neck as he takes in a deep breath.

“Better?” I ask, trying to stifle the butterflies in my belly.

“Much better,” he says with a lopsided grin. “You might have just saved my life.”

“You didn’t have to dress up,” I say, looking down. “It’s just me.”

“Yes, I did,” he says, catching my gaze. “Because it’s you.” His unwavering stare and the firmness of his tone make the butterflies in my belly worse. The silence between us feels heavy and meaningful, and I don’t know how to interpret his cryptic comment.

The host thankfully saves us from the awkward moment. “Your table is ready when you are.”

Wes gestures for me to precede him and I follow the host to the table.

Inside, the tables are adorned with crisp white tablecloths and flickering candles.

The low buzz of conversation by the diners mixes with the clink of tableware and the soft sounds of instrumental Italian music.

A waiter passes with dishes that make my mouth water with their scents of bubbling marinara sauce and buttery garlic.

We take a seat as the host hands us menus and tells us the specials. My eyes widen at the prices.

“Dinner’s on me,” Wes says once the waiter leaves with our drink order, as though reading my mind.

“You don’t have to do that. Why would you buy me dinner?”

“You deserve it.”

I purse my lips. “Not that I don’t appreciate a free meal, but you’re being weird.”

“Weird? How?” He frowns but the way he runs his hand through his hair again tells me he’s anxious about something.

“Like suspiciously nice.”

“Suspicious?” Wes asks. “I’m just being a good friend.”

“What if we weren’t friends?” I ask, jumping straight into the deep end.

He blanches. “What do you mean?”

“What if we met now? Do you think we’d be friends now?”

“I’d hope so. Or else I’d be missing out on a very good friend.” He pulls at his collar like his shirt is strangling him.

Being a good friend is not the answer I wanted. “I mean, what if we met on SwipeRight and just started messaging?”

His gaze bounces from mine to the table and back. “What are you accusing me of?”

This time I frown. “I’m not accusing you of anything.”

“Then what’s with the third degree?”

“Do you think we’d date?”

His head whips back. “What are you talking about?”

“If we weren’t friends and we just met on SwipeRight, do you think we would date?”
I ask, speaking slowly to enunciate each word.

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“Maybe?” I ask. Now I am the confused one. How could he honestly not be sure?
“We have a million things in common, we like all the same games, we watch the same shows. How can you just say maybe?”

“Are you saying you’d want to date me?” I have his full attention now.

I shift in my seat. It’s the million-dollar question, and yet I’m not quite ready to say it. Making that admission would mean crossing a bridge and I don’t know what awaits me on the other side. “I’m saying we would make sense as a couple.”

“Make sense?” I can’t read his expression.

“Yeah, from a logical perspective. We like hanging out with each other, we know each other’s families and friends, and we have similar interests.”

“You think we should be a couple because we know each other’s family,” he repeats slowly. He’s looking at me like one would look at an alien.

“I didn’t say ‘should’ be a couple,” I say, backtracking since this conversation is obviously not having the positive impact I had hoped. “I said it would make sense. You know, we’re like friends who make a pact to get married by the time they’re thirty if they haven’t found anyone else.”

Something flashes in Wes’s eyes— pain . I swallow hard.

“Let me see if I’m understanding you,” Wes says. “You would want to date me

because it's logical and you'd then marry me because you hadn't found anyone else by the time you're thirty."

I let out an awkward laugh. "Okay, the way you're saying it makes it sound terrible."

"I'm just repeating what you said." He bites the words out and I realize Wes is angry. Wes is never angry at me.

"It didn't come out right. Just forget I said anything."

"I don't think so. I think this is exactly the conversation that we need to have."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, crossing my arms. I sit back in my chair, unsure how to walk myself back out of whatever I said to anger Wes.

"Don't you think you're missing a critical ingredient in a relationship?"

"Like what?"

"Like love, Honor!" he says, his voice almost shouting. His hands curl into fists on the table. I've never in my life been scared of Wes, but this might be the first moment.

"Shh," I say, looking around uneasily at the other patrons who are starting to stare at us. "I don't know why you're getting so upset. It was just a dumb thing that I said. Forget it."

"So being in a relationship with me is dumb now?"

"You're twisting my words," I say, starting to get angry myself. "Calm down. You're being ridiculous."

“I think I’m finally hearing your words for the first time. I just need to know one thing.” He takes a breath, then enunciates each word. “Do. You. Love. Me?”

I frown, uncertain at this change in direction. I’ve clearly missed a turn somewhere. “Where is this coming from?”

“Answer the question.”

What is going on? “Of course I love you, Wes. You’re my best friend.”

That should be the right answer, but Wes huffs a laugh, his face twisting in a bitter expression. What other answer could there be? I spread my hands, pleading with him to return to the Wes that I know. “I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal over this. Did something happen? Are you okay?”

Wes shakes his head. “I don’t want to be your backup plan, Honor. I deserve more than that.”

At that moment, the waiter appears with our drinks. I hold back my retort, my head whirling as I stare at him.

“Ready to order?” the waiter asks.

Wes pulls out his wallet and throws a twenty on the table as he stands. “I’m sorry, but I’m leaving.”

“Wes, don’t do this,” I say, panic flooding me as I realize that whatever has happened in the last ten minutes, it’s far more serious than I realized. “Whatever I said to upset you, I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not your fault. It’s mine.”

“I don’t understand.” Tears gather in my eyes. It feels like we’re breaking up, and yet can you break up with your best friend? “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“Wes—” I say, but he turns and leaves.

My head whips around as I take in the wait staff and restaurant diners who are trying to hide their stares. I grab my purse and race after Wes. By the time I reach the parking lot, he’s already opening the door to his car.

“Wes!” I call, racing toward him. “Come on! This doesn’t have to be a big deal! I love you!”

Rather than resolving anything, my words hit him like a blow.

He braces against the frame of his car, his head dropping slightly as he seems to gather himself.

He turns to me, and his expression is as confused and broken as how I feel.

“I think I need a break for a while, Honor. I’ll text you later.

” He gets into his car and shuts the door.

I stand outside, mere feet away, watching him through the glass of his car door window, and never have I felt more distant from him. I watch him drive away before making my way to my own car, my feet feeling like I’m dragging cinderblocks. I sit in my car as tears slip down my face.

What just happened?

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Wes

Did I overreact? Possibly. But it doesn't change the fact that the love of my life, the one whom I would do anything for, tried to make me her backup plan. What I heard loud and clear was, if she doesn't find anyone she likes better, she'll settle for me. Ouch.

I can already figure out her likely thought pattern: No one online is working out, so I guess I'll settle for reliable Wes. Double ouch.

What hurt the most was knowing that she doesn't feel anything near to what I feel. She didn't even understand why I was upset.

One thing is clear: I need to separate myself from Honor.

Just the thought feels like I'm cutting off a limb, but it's the only way I will ever be able to free myself from the infatuation.

I hope one day I'll be able to truly just be friends with her, to not feel the same yearning ache within my heart, to not be jealous of anyone she dates. But that day isn't today.

So, I ignore her. I ignore her texts and her calls.

I sent her one response, telling her that I needed some space and time, and ignored the rest. Even though it tore me up inside to see how upset she was.

I wanted to be the hero and to go back to the way things were and tell her everything was fine between us.

But that wouldn't have been true to myself and my own feelings. It was time to move on.

Then her texts stopped. And I couldn't say which situation felt worse.

Luckily, I have a major distraction in the form of the Play It Forward Day event at the Midsommer Faire, which is taking far more time to coordinate than I ever imagined. I've got so many things to do, I barely even think about Honor or wonder what she's doing. Much.

Zeke and I arrive at the Midsommer Faire at the Thurston County fairgrounds early the morning of the event.

The day is shaping up to be beautiful. Weather is always a chancy thing in the Pacific Northwest, even in the summer, but today's forecast calls for a temperature in the high seventies and sunny skies with a bit of cloud cover.

"You ready for the big day?" I ask Zeke. He cracks his knuckles and nods, but I can see the uncertainty under the bravado. "You'll do great, don't worry."

"I'm not worried," he says. "I was trained by the best and, yes, this time I do mean you."

"Thanks, buddy," I say, holding out my fist. "Hit the rock."

He bumps my fist with his and grins.

This morning is cool, and Zeke and I work with a couple other guys from my team on

setting up the list, which is the rectangular wooden structure that establishes the boundaries of a fight, similar to a modern-day octagon ring.

Mike drives in the truck with the materials and we unload it, making quick work of it.

After the list, we set up a number of tents to house our gear and supplies, including one for a staging area for fighters to get ready.

We unload food and water from another truck, stacking it inside the tent.

As events are full-day affairs involving a lot of exertion under hot padding and steel armor, we need a lot.

Then we set up the sound system and distribute the event schedule with all of the duels, pro fights, and melees listed. By the time we're finished, it's already midday. I chug water as I watch some of my teammates warming up.

"Hey now, this looks like fun," I hear to my side.

I turn to see a man in his mid-forties, lanky and with a slightly receding hairline and a small paunch. He wears a windbreaker over a polo shirt, khakis, and a fanny pack. He sticks his hands on his hips as he surveys the area like a king looking out over his domain.

"Can I help you?" I ask. "The fighters are getting ready, but the events don't start for another hour." For that matter, I didn't think faire attendees were going to be let in for another half-hour. I scratch my head, wondering how he got in.

"Do you mind if I give it a try?" he asks. He holds up his arms like he's wielding an imaginary sword and makes some chopping motions. "I've always been a big Excalibur fan."

“I’m sorry, who are you?” I look around to see if there are any faire officials who are supposed to be monitoring for early trespassers into the fairgrounds.

“Miles O’Donnell, at your service,” he says, holding out his hand. As he shifts his stance, I notice that his windbreaker says “Play It Forward” on the front of it.

“Oh, you must be Milo!” I say, grasping his hand. He shakes it with a surprisingly strong grip. “Thanks for coming all the way to Washington.”

“Wherever Play It Forward is, there I am,” Milo says, bobbing his head.

I clock the slightly strange statement, but let it go. “I need to introduce you to my mentee.” I call Zeke over. “Zeke, meet Milo, the Director of Play It Forward.”

“Cool,” Zeke says, and holds up his fist for Milo to bump.

“Well, pleasure to meet you, young man,” Milo says. He reaches out and instead of bumping Milo’s fist, he shakes it. “I’m looking forward to seeing your sport.”

“Uh, yeah, cool,” Zeke repeats, looking slightly puzzled by Milo’s fist-shake.

Milo steps forward to the list, his eyes darting around as he takes in the fighters practicing. “I sure would like to give it a try.”

“Have you ever done anything like this before?”

“Nope, but I’ve always wanted to.”

Normally I would never in a million years put a rookie in the ring, but it’s the Play It Forward Director and since he’s mentioned it more than once, it seems like a pretty strong desire. “Uh, sure. I’m sure you could borrow some armor from someone and

give it a go.”

“Really?” Milo asks, his eyes lighting up like a kid at Christmas. “That would be swell. Definitely something to write home to the gang about.”

“Yeah, I just need to find you someone’s armor. How tall are you?”

“Five eleven.”

I frown. I’m six feet tall and I can see over his head. There’s no way this guy is 5’11. But asking him if he was sure about his height seems insulting, so I go with it. “You can borrow mine, then. Zeke, can you help him get into it?”

Twenty minutes later, Milo is standing in my armor, which is clearly too big for him. He looks like a kid dressing up in an older brother’s costume. The armor practically stands up on its own and he can barely see out of the eye slits in the helmet. If he trips, he’s just going to topple over.

“This is great,” Milo keeps saying. He passes his phone to Zeke. “Here, take a picture. Martha’s gonna love this.”

I don’t know who Martha is, but pretty sure she’s going to think he looks ridiculous. But I don’t say that to him as he lifts a sword to pose for the picture.

I lift up the slat to the list entrance when he’s done. “Okay, head on in. Mike and Terry are in here. Guys, this is Milo. He’s a newbie who wants to try it out. Go easy on him, okay?”

“Sure,” Mike says. He gestures for Milo to step forward. “Feel free to come at me and I’ll show you some basic defensive moves.”

“You ready for me?” Milo asks. He bounces from one foot to the other like a boxer. The oversized steel suit clangs with each bounce.

“I’ll do my best,” Mike says, winking at me. He doesn’t even get into the preparatory crouch, clearly expecting Milo to take one swing at him and bounce off.

With a sudden roar, Milo charges Mike. Mike’s eyes widen and he takes a step back, but it’s too late.

Milo’s sword strikes at Mike’s helmet before Mike can get his sword up.

Mike stumbles backward. In a storm of swinging steel, Milo knocks the weapon out of Mike’s hand and then uses some sort of ninja move to trip Mike, knocking him to the ground.

Dust billows up from where Mike hits the dirt. He sits stunned for a moment before getting back up.

I stare at them in shock. Mike was no expert, but he just got owned by a forty-something newbie who looked like he didn’t work out a day in his life.

“Uhh, what just happened?” Zeke whispers to me.

“No clue.”

“Wowee,” Milo says, doing an awkward shuffle dance in the armor. “That was awesome.”

“You sure you’ve never done this before, Milo?” I ask.

“Nope. Beginner’s luck is the best kind of luck,” He spins around and does a

moonwalk in the armor, then pop and locks like a professional.

Terry snorts. “You hear that, Mike? You got beat by a beginner.”

“Hey, you! Want to try that again and see what happens?” Mike asks, his face red.

“No, thank you,” Milo says. “Once was enough for me.”

Mike looks around at the grinning spectators. “Well, it wasn’t enough for me. Try it again. Bet you won’t get the same luck twice.”

“Come on, Mike,” I say, stepping in to what looks like a brewing situation. “It was harmless. He’s just the director for the organization I volunteer for.”

“Sorry, young man, but I never do anything twice,” Milo says. “As they say, life’s a jukebox, don’t ever play the same song twice.” While we all stare at him, befuddled, he turns to me. “Thanks for letting me have a go, but I imagine you need this armor back.”

“Er, yes,” I say, and follow him to the tent, Milo whistling the whole way. Inside, I help him remove the armor. “How did you do that? The fight, I mean. How did you disarm Mike so easily?”

“Easy,” he says, “the same way I do everything else: One step at a time.”

I shake my head, mystified. “Do you want to stay to watch the youth fight? Zeke has been training for months.”

“Of course. That’s my whole reason for being here.” A digital beep interrupts us. “Oops, I’ll have to excuse myself for a minute.”

“No problem. We’ll be out here all afternoon. And if you want to try out my armor again, just say the word.”

Milo excuses himself and exits the tent. I focus on putting on my armor so that I can join in the scheduled melees later, buckling on the brigandine and fastening the sabatons.

The flaps to the tent open. “Did you forget something?” I ask without turning around.

“No,” a voice says. “But it seems my best friend has forgotten me.”

I spin around. Honor stands in the entrance to the tent, looking as lovely as ever. But on her face a storm cloud brews, and I have a strong feeling she came to bring her own fight, one that I’m as unprepared as Mike for.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Honor

This past week has been one of the hardest of my life. I texted and called Wes so many times, but he never answered. I was almost on my way over to his apartment to demand answers when he finally responded, telling me to leave him alone.

I didn't understand at first. It was when I realized that WhiteKnight was also not responding that I finally put it together.

At first, I couldn't believe it—even as it was staring me in the face.

The fake photos, the username, the shared interests, the way he seemed to know so much about me.

I had marveled at how talking to WhiteKnight felt just like talking to my best friend—because they were the same person.

At the same time, I couldn't understand it. Why would Wes sign up for SwipeRight and message me? I reread all of our messages, seeking clues.

But it was the memory of his stern question, "Do you love me?" that finally made the pieces click into place. Not the whole puzzle, because part of me still couldn't quite grasp why Wes did what he did.

I replayed our conversation, and every conversation before that.

I remembered our conversation in the car ride back from his friends' fight, when he

had told me he loved me, and I hadn't understood.

I remembered when he told me again outside the symphony that he loved me, and I again hadn't understood.

I think maybe he's told me he loves me a million times, and I just could never hear him.

My heart trembled at the enormity of what I was considering. Could Wes truly love me? Could he be in love with me? And am I in love with him ?

I don't know and with our current separation, all I can do is spiral in my thoughts.

Luckily, I remembered he had the Midsommer Faire coming up and I drove out here, my anxiety ratcheting up with every mile.

I imagined a hundred scenarios, but I still didn't know what I was going to say when I marched up to his tent, Zeke having pointed the way with a suspicious smirk.

"What are you doing here?" Wes asks me. He slowly stands from where he had been crouching, his armor half on.

I swallow. Not the most encouraging start. "You haven't answered any of my texts or calls." I'm too chicken to demand answers or make any declarations of love the way I had imagined on my way over here.

"That should have been answer enough," he says. "I asked you to give me some time."

"But I don't understand for what. You didn't even tell me what I did." I struggle to keep the tremor from my voice, but it's a battle I lose.

Wes sighs. “You didn’t do anything.”

“I don’t understand.” I move closer to him.

“You’re not making any sense. I must have done something to upset you.

Was it what I said about the marriage pact?

We don’t have to do that.” I want him to say something, anything, that will give me an indication of what he’s feeling, and whether I’m right that he loves me, truly loves me. I need to hear him say it.

He turns away. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not you, it’s me, I promise.”

“You know, when people say that, they really mean it’s the other person.” I step closer to him.

“Okay, fine, it is you,” Wes says, still not facing me. “And I need you to leave.”

That hurts to hear, but at least now we are getting somewhere—maybe. I step closer to him again. “Not before you tell me what I did wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I take another step, only an arms-length from him now. “You’re not making any sense. First you said it wasn’t my fault, then you said it was, now you’re saying I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“It’s not about right or wrong.”

“Then what is it about?” I ask. I reach out, my hand trembling, to touch his shoulder.

He stiffens under my touch. “Tell me.”

He turns to me. “It’s not your fault that you don’t love me. I just need some time and then everything will go back to normal. I promise.”

The prospect suddenly sounds more bleak than appealing. “What if,” I say, my words almost a whisper, “I do love you?”

He huffs a laugh and steps back. “You’re just saying that because things haven’t been working out on the app.”

“Speaking of the app, this may sound crazy but...are you by any chance WhiteKnight?” I watch his face closely.

Wes turns bright red, which is all the confirmation I need.

“You are!” I say, pointing an accusing finger.

“I’m sorry,” he says, holding up his hands in defense as he steps backward. “It was a mistake. You have every right to be mad at me. I never should have done it.”

“I can’t believe it. Why did you do that?”

His lips thin as though he’s physically holding back the words. I reach out to him again, touching his arm. “Tell me.”

“Because I wanted you to finally see me as more than just a friend,” he says, the words flowing fast as though released from a dam. “I wanted you to see me as a man, as someone you would date.”

“Why?” I ask, needing to hear the words again.

“Because I love you.” He says the words almost angrily. “I’ve tried to tell you so many times, and you never wanted to hear it.”

I step closer to him, so that only an inch separates us.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest with joy at hearing the words from him and knowing the truth behind them.

Wes loves me. I look up into his face—a handsome face that I have known and loved almost as long as I’ve been alive. “I’m sorry I didn’t hear you before.”

“It’s not your fault if you don’t love me,” Wes says.

I hold up my hand to cut off whatever he was going to say next. “I love you.”

He tries to shake me off. “No, you don’t. You’re just saying that because you’re worried you’re going to lose me as a friend. But you wouldn’t be happy like that, trapped in a marriage to someone you don’t really love. And I want more—for you and for me.”

“Listen to me,” I say, wanting to shake him. “I love you.” The words echo in my heart, and I know that they’re not just something I’m saying to make things right with Wes, they’re what I feel. They’re real.

“No, you don’t,” Wes says, trying to step back again. “You’re just saying—”

I have had enough. I grab Wes by the arms and pull him into me, planting my mouth on his.

“Mmf,” Wes says. He tries to pull away for another second, but as I hold him in my arms, he finally relaxes, until he’s holding me right back.

I pull back. “Does that feel like I’m kissing a friend?” I ask, out of breath.

He stares at me, breathing just as hard. “I’m not sure. I think, uh, that we should try it again. For science.”

I laugh. “For science, huh? You’re such a nerd.”

He shrugs. “Maybe, but I’m the nerd who’s in love with you.” Then he pulls me to him for another kiss.

I melt into him, my head whirling as he kisses me.

He cradles my head in his hand, his mouth moving skillfully over mine, and this is most definitely not the kiss of a friend.

Wait a dang minute here. I was expecting to feel love—because I have always loved Wes—but this is so much more . This is hot.

I stare at him when he finally releases me.

“What?” Wes asks, his eyes searching mine.

“You’ve been holding out on me all these years.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a good kisser—a really good kisser. Maybe you should have tried kissing me instead of just telling me you loved me, and you might have gotten a different response,” I tease.

Wes laughs, a new light in his eyes. “A really good kisser, huh? I’ll take your advice

next time.” He drops his mouth to mine and kisses me again, a sweet and gentle touch that speaks of so much more.

I sigh with happiness as we break apart again and hug him, aware of just how precious the gift of his love is. “So, how long have you known you wanted to be more than friends?”

Wes sighs, pulling me close to rest his chin on top of my head. “I think, if I’m truly honest with myself...since kindergarten.”

“What?” I screech. I try to push him away, but his arms cage me. “You’ve been in love with me since kindergarten?”

“Okay, maybe middle school.”

“Middle school?!”

He nods, a rueful smile on his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I mock pound my fist against his chest.

He laughs. “Believe me, I tried—an embarrassing number of times. But you never seemed to hear it.”

“Well, I’m hearing it now. And by the way, it still doesn’t excuse you for making up a fake profile.”

“I know. I just...didn’t know what to do or what to say. And I was worried that I was going to lose you.”

“You’ll never lose me,” I vow. “Even if all we could ever be is friends.”

He freezes. “I don’t want to be friends, Honor. So, if you’re doing this out of some misguided notion of pity or friendship...”

I reach up to cover his mouth with my hand, sensing how much this idea must have haunted him over the years. “I’m not. I promise. I really do love you, too.”

“Do you mean it?” he asks, tenderly tucking the hair back from my face as he looks down on me.

I feel like I’ve seen every expression on Wes’s face, but I’ve never seen this expression before—full, tender, unbridled love.

It’s as though he has hidden a part of himself away from me, and now he has released it to shine forth.

I nod. “I mean it. Forever.”

Wes leans down to kiss me again.

“Wes!” Zeke calls as he enters the tent. He catches sight of us and stands stock-still, as though electrocuted. “Oops. I will, uh, just come back later.” He trips over his own feet as he turns to go and almost hits the ground.

Wes and I laugh. “Don’t worry about it,” Wes says. “What did you need?”

“The guys are all out there waiting on you so we can get started,” Zeke says, his eyes bouncing from me to Wes and back. “So, uh, are you two a thing now or what?”

“We’re a thing,” I confirm, squeezing Wes. “A good thing. A forever thing.”

Zeke lets out a celebratory whoop. “I knew it! See, I told you making a fake profile

would work out!”

“You knew about this?” I ask, appalled. I turn to Wes. “You involved a teenager in this?”

Wes turns bright red again as he opens his mouth, but Zeke beats him to it. “What can I say, I’ve got mad skillz,” he says with a cocky smirk. “All the ladies love me.” He points a finger gun at me, fires it, then blows the smoke off.

“Ew, gross,” I say, stepping away from Wes. “Both of you. Gross.”

“Wait,” Wes says desperately, “he just helped me come up with the profile. He didn’t have anything to do with anything else. He never saw the messages. That was all me. He wasn’t involved at all.”

“Let’s just pretend that this never happened,” I say. “And maybe this guy will step out from behind the app and ask me on a real date.” I jerk my thumb at Wes.

“Absolutely,” Wes says, a smile spreading across his face. “Any time, anywhere you want to go.”

“Not Gardner’s. Pretty sure we’ve been permanently banned.” I grimace at the memory.

“We’re more on an Olive Garden level anyway,” Wes says. “I don’t care where we go as long as we’re together.” He pulls me closer to him.

“Okay, I’m outta here,” Zeke says. “When you two are done playing kissy-face, come on out so we can show Milo what we’ve got.”

He might have said something more, but I wouldn’t know, because I’m too busy

kissing Wes, my best friend and the love of my life. Who would have ever thought? Oh, that's right, Wes did. And I'm so happy he did, because this is definitely a love worth fighting for..

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:58 am

Three years later...

Honor

The crash and clang of metal against metal intermixes with grunts.

“Shh, keep it down!” I scold the men. Wes and a dozen of his teammates have gathered with me in a small room outside the main ballroom with the stage where Zeke will be crossing to collect his diploma and officially graduate from high school.

It hasn’t been an easy path to graduation; Wes has had to do as much cajoling and threatening as Zeke’s mom to get him to this day.

But Zeke finally passed all of his requirements, and we are all so proud of him.

Wes has even planned for a little surprise.

“Just practicing,” Wes says with a grin as he flips up his visor.

His smile never fails to set my heart alight, even after three years and a wedding.

After we had finally admitted our feelings to each other, Wes had barely taken a breath before proposing.

We were married in—what else—a Renaissance-themed ceremony, complete with minstrels, a court jester for entertainment, and, of course, knights in armor.

Zeke had been a groomsman, pleased as punch to finally be wearing armor.

The whole wedding had been nothing short of magical. In fact, our ceremony had given Wes his inspiration for today.

“Practicing? You’re expecting to break into a melee in the middle of a graduation ceremony?” I put my hands on my hips and give him a look.

He shrugs. “You never know.”

I roll my eyes. “I think you’re good,” I say, walking over to him.

“You do, huh?” he asks, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me into his side. “How good?”

“Very good,” I say, laughing even as my heart beats faster.

“The best knight you’ve ever seen?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Well, I don’t know that I’d go that far,” I tease, bopping him on the nose.

“Hey!” He frowns, even as his eyes twinkle.

“What about Zeke? He is, after all, the reason that we’re here,” I say, gesturing at the building around us.

“Considering I’ve taught him everything he knows,” Wes says gravely, “I’ll accept that.”

“That’s very generous of you,” I say, my tone droll. “What a gentleman.”

“Do I deserve a prize?”

I narrow my eyes. “What kind of prize?”

Wes steps back and bows with a flourish. “Fair maiden, wilt thou bestow a kiss?”

I laugh, shaking my head at his nerdy silliness. It’s all part of his charm. “Since you asked so nicely, how could I resist?”

He pauses, still bent over. “I’m not hearing a yes.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes again. “Yes, you crazy person.”

“I’ll take it.” Wes stands up and sweeps me into his arms, gently pressing me to his steel-clad chest as his mouth covers mine. In three years, I’ve been the lucky recipient of a thousand Wes kisses, and somehow, they only get better each time.

“It’s time!” a voice calls from the doorway. Wes and I break apart, both of us a little red in the face and breathing hard. We turn to see Zeke’s mother, beckoning for us.

Wes’s Buhurt team gathers together and walks out of the room in single file, the sound of their steel suits occasionally clinking. We open the doors to the ballroom where graduates are being called up on the stage in order to receive their diplomas.

Eyes turn to watch as the group of armored fighters enters the room. The principal, with whom we had arranged our little surprise, gives us a nod and a thumbs up.

“And now, may we present this diploma to Ezekiel Sanders,” the principal’s voice booms, amplified by the sound system, “who is also receiving the Sword of Valor for demonstrating exceptional teamwork, leadership, and dedication in sports.”

Zeke’s mouth drops open at first as he catches sight of his crew waiting for him, then gives a whoop. He takes his diploma and shakes hands with the principal, then half-jogs down the stage toward us.

The Buhurt team lifts their swords to create a tunnel and stomp their feet, cheering on their youngest teammate. Zeke, with the world's biggest grin on his face, walks through the tunnel, bumping fists with each fighter as he passes.

At the end of the tunnel stands Wes, who is holding a sword flat in his hands. He had had the sword specially made for Zeke by an armorer in Ukraine and it sports an intricate carving of a dragon holding a gemstone in its maw on the hilt.

"I can't believe you did all this," Zeke says to Wes, his voice barely above a whisper as it cracks.

"You deserve it," Wes whispers back. Then, lifting his voice for all to hear, he says, "Olympia Onslaught presents this sword to you in recognition of your achievement today. Do you accept?"

Zeke nods. He dashes one hand against his eyes as he reaches out with the other to take the sword that Wes is offering. He lifts it high as the Buhurt team yells, "Huzzah!" and the whole auditorium erupts in cheers.

I can't hold my own tears back as Wes embraces the teenager.

I am so proud of Zeke and so proud of Wes, who has been the best Play It Forward mentor anyone could ever ask for.

Not many men would have volunteered to mentor a troubled teen, and even fewer would have built the kind of lasting relationship that these two have.

Pride overfills my chest until I could burst from it. I have married a man with a good and pure heart, and that is the best kind of man. I may not be a princess in a high tower, and I may not have any dragons to slay, but Wes is still the knight of my dreams and always will be.

I hope you fell in love with Wes and Honor. I had so much fun writing their story!