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DARE TO FOLLOW YOU

Katie McGarry

RYAN

I'M NOT INTERESTED in second place. Never have been. Never will be. It's not the style of anyone who wants to play in the majors. And because of my personal philosophy, this moment sucks. My best friend is seconds from scoring a phone number from the chick working the Taco Bell counter, placing him in the lead.

What started as a simple dare twisted into a night-long game. First, Chris dared me to ask the girl in line at the movies for her number. Then I dared him to ask the girl at the batting cages for *her* number. The more we succeeded, the more momentum the game gained. Too bad Chris owns a grin that melts the hearts of all girls, including the ones with boyfriends.

I hate losing.

Taco Bell Chick blushes when Chris winks at her. Come on. I chose her because she called us redneck losers when we ordered. Chris rests his arms on the counter, inching closer to the girl, as I sit at the table and watch the tragedy unfold. Shouldn't she be having an epiphany right about now? If not, can she find some self-respect and tell Chris to beat it?

Every single muscle on the back of my neck tenses as Taco Bell Chick giggles, writes something on a piece of paper, and slides it over to him. Dammit. The rest of our group howls with laughter and someone pats me on the back.

Tonight isn't about phone numbers or girls. It's about enjoying our last Friday night before school begins. I've tasted everything—the freedom of hot summer air in the Jeep with the panels down, the peace of dark country roads leading to the interstate, the exciting glow of city lights as we took the thirty-minute drive into Louisville, and, lastly, the mouth-watering taste of a greasy fast-food taco at midnight.

Chris raises the phone number like a referee holding up the glove of the prize champion. "It's on, Ryan."

"Bring it." There's no way I've gotten this far to have Chris outdo me.

He slouches in his seat, tosses the paper into the pile of numbers we've collected over the evening, and tugs his Bullitt County High baseball cap over his brown hair. "Let's see. These things have to be thought through. The girl chosen carefully. Attractive enough so she won't fall for you. Not a dog because she'll be excited someone gave her a bone."

Mimicking him, I shift back in the chair, extend my legs, and fold my hands over my stomach. "Take your time. I've got forever."

But we don't. After this weekend, life changes—my life and Chris's. On Monday, Chris and I will be seniors starting our last fall baseball league. I only have a few more months to impress the professional baseball scouts or the dream I've been working toward my entire life will dissolve into ashes.

A shove at my foot brings me back to the here and now.

“Stop the serious shit,” Logan whispers. The lone junior at the table and the best damn catcher in the state nods toward the rest of the group. He knows my facial expressions better than anyone. He should. We’ve been playing together since we were kids. Me pitching. Him catching.

For Logan’s sake, I laugh at a joke Chris told even though I didn’t hear the punch line.

“We close soon.” Taco Bell Chick wipes a table near ours and gives Chris a smile. She almost looks pretty in the glow of the red neon Drive-Thru Open sign.

“I may call that one,” says Chris.

I lift a brow. He worships his girlfriend. “No, you won’t.”

“I would if it weren’t for Lacy.” But he has Lacy, and loves her, so neither one of us continues that conversation.

“I have one more try.” I make a show of glancing around the purple Tex-Mex decorated lobby. “What girl are you choosing for me?”

A honk from the drive-thru announces the arrival of a car full of hot girls. Rap pounds from their car and I swear one girl flashes us. I love the city. A brunette in the backseat waves at me. “You should pick one of them.”

“Sure,” Chris says sarcastically. “In fact, why don’t I hand you the title now?”

Two guys from our table hop out of their seats and go outside, leaving me, Logan, and Chris alone. “Last chance for hot city girls before we drive back to Groveton, Logan.”

Logan doesn’t say anything one way or another, nor does his face move an inch. That’s Logan for you—unmoved by much. Unless it involves a feat associated with death.

“There she is.” Chris’s eyes brighten as he stares at the entrance. “That’s the girl I’m calling as yours.”

I suck in a deep breath. Chris sounds too happy for this girl to be good news. “Where?”

“Just came in, waiting at the counter.”

I risk a look. Black hair. Torn clothes. Total skater. Damn, those chicks are hard-core. I slap my hand against the table and our trays shift. Why? Why did Skater Girl have to wander into Taco Bell tonight?

Chris’s rough chuckles do nothing to help my growing agitation. “Admit defeat and you won’t have to suffer.”

“No way.” I stand, refusing to go down without a fight.

All girls are the same. It’s what I tell myself as I stroll to the counter. She might look different from the girls at home, but all girls want the same thing—a guy who shows interest. A guy’s problem is having the balls to do it. Good thing for me I’ve got balls. “Hi. I’m Ryan.”

Her long black hair hides her face, but her slim body with a hint of curves catches my attention. Unlike the girls at home, she isn’t wearing marked-down designer labels. Nope. She has her own style. Her black tank top shows more skin than it covers and her skintight jeans hug all the right places. My eyes linger on a single rip in them, directly below her ass.

She leans over the counter and the rip widens. Skater Girl turns her head toward me and the drive-thru. “Is someone going to take my fucking order?”

Chris’s laughter from our corner table jerks me back to reality. I pull off my baseball cap, mess my hand through my hair, and shove the hat back in place. Why her? Why tonight?

But there's a dare and I'm going to win. "Counter's a little slow tonight."

She glares at me like *I'm* a little slow. "Are you speaking to me?"

Her hard stare dares me to glance away, and a lesser guy would. I'm not lesser. *Keep staring, Skater Girl. You don't scare me.* I'm drawn to her eyes though. They're blue. Dark blue. I never would have thought someone with such black hair could have those brilliant eyes.

"I asked you a question." She rests a hip against the counter and crosses her arms over her chest. "Or are you as stupid as you look?"

Yep, pure punk: attitude, nose ring, and a sneer that can kill on sight. She's not my type, but she doesn't have to be. I just need her number. "You'd probably get better service if you watched your language."

A hint of amusement touches her lips and dances in her eyes. Not the kind of amusement you laugh with. It's the taunting kind. "Does my language bother you?"

Yes. "No." Girls don't use *fuck*. Or they shouldn't. I don't care for the word, but I know when I'm being tested and this is a test.

"So my language doesn't bother you, but you say—" she raises her voice and leans over the counter again "—I could get some *fucking* service if I watched my language."

Wouldn't hurt. Time to switch tactics. "What do you want?"

Her head snaps up as if she had forgotten I was there. "What?"

"To eat. What do you want to eat?"

“Fish. What do you think I want? I’m at a taco joint.”

Chris laughs again and this time Logan joins in. If I don’t salvage this, I’ll be listening to their ridicule the entire way home. This time I lean over the counter and wave at the girl working the drive-thru. I give her a smile. She smiles back. Take lessons, Skater Girl. This is how it’s supposed to work. “Can I have a minute?”

Drive-Thru Chick’s face brightens and she holds up a finger as she continues with the order from outside. “Be right there. Promise.”

I turn back to Skater Girl, but instead of the warm thank-you I should be receiving she shakes her head, clearly annoyed. “Jocks.”

My smile falters. Hers grows.

“How do you know I’m a jock?”

Her eyes wander to my chest and I fight a grimace. Written in black letters across my gray shirt is Bullitt County High School, Baseball State Champions.

“So you are stupid,” she says.

I’m done. I take one step in the direction of the table, then stop. I don’t lose. “What’s your name?”

“What do I have to do to make you leave me alone?”

And there it is—my opening. “Give me your phone number.”

The right side of her mouth quirks up. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“I’m dead serious. Give me your name and phone number and I’ll walk away.”

“You must be brain damaged.”

“Welcome to Taco Bell. Can I take your order?”

We both look at Drive-Thru Chick. She beams at me, then

cowers from Skater Girl. With her lids cast down, she asks again, "What can I get you?"

I pull out my wallet and slam ten dollars on the counter. "Tacos."

"And a Coke," Skater Girl says. "Large. Since he's paying."

"Oookaay." Drive-Thru Chick enters the order, slides the money off the counter, and returns to the order window.

We stare at each other. I swear, this girl never blinks.

"I believe a thank-you is in order," I say.

"I never asked you to pay."

"Give me your name and phone number and we'll call it even."

She licks her lips. "There is absolutely nothing you can do to ever get me to give you my name or number."

Ring the bell. Playtime ended with those words. Purposely invading her space, I steal a step toward her and place a hand on the counter next to her body. It affects her. I can tell. Her eyes lose the amusement and her arms hug her body. She's small. Smaller than I expected. That attitude is so big I hadn't noticed her height or size. "I bet I can."

She juts out her chin. "Can't."

"Eight tacos and one large Coke," says the girl from behind the counter.

Skater Girl snatches the order and spins on her heel before I can process I'm on the verge of losing. "Wait!"

She stops at the door. "What?"

This "what" doesn't have nearly the anger of the one before. Maybe I'm getting somewhere. "Give me your phone number. I want to call you."

No, I don't, but I do want to win. She's wavering. I can tell.

To keep from scaring her off, I bury my excitement. Nothing sends me higher than winning.

“I’ll tell you what.” She flashes a smile that drips with a mixture of allure and wickedness. “If you can walk me to my car and open the door for me, I’ll give you my number.”

Can.

She steps into the humid night and skips down the sidewalk to the back parking lot. I wouldn’t have pegged this girl as a skipper. Skip she does and I follow, tasting the sweet victory.

Victory doesn’t last long. I freeze midstep on the sidewalk. Before she can prance past the yellow lines confining an old rusty car, two menacing guys climb out and neither appears happy.

“Something I can do for you, man?” the taller one asks. Tattoos run the length of his arms.

“Nope.” I shove my hands in my pockets and relax my stance. I have no intention of getting into a fight, especially when I’m outnumbered.

Tattoo Guy crosses the parking lot, and he’d probably keep coming if it wasn’t for the other guy with hair covering his eyes. He stops right in front of Tattoo Guy, halting his progress, but his posture suggests he’d also fight for kicks. “Is there a problem, Beth?”

Beth. Hard to believe this hard-core girl could have such a delicate name. As if reading my thoughts, her lips slide into an evil smirk. “Not anymore,” she answers as she jumps into the front seat of the car.

Both guys walk to their car while keeping an eye on me, as if I’m stupid enough to jump them from behind. The en-

gine roars to life and the car vibrates like duct tape holds it together.

In no hurry to go inside and explain to my friends how I lost, I stay on the sidewalk. The car slowly drives by and Beth presses her palm against the passenger window. Written in black marker is the word signaling my defeat: *can't*.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-373-21063-3

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Printed in U.S.A.

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